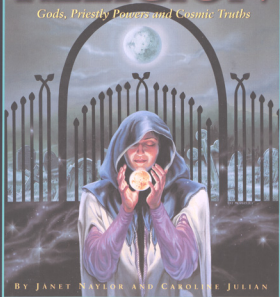# GURPS®

# RELIGION

*Gods, Priestly Powers and Cosmic Truths*

By Janet Naylor and Caroline Julian

## STEVE JACKSON GAMES

# G U R P S

# RELIGION

*Gods, Priestly Powers and Cosmic Truths*

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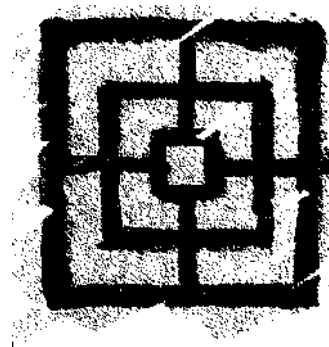Richard Gilson, David Gross, David Haren,
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# INTRODUCTION

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.

# THE COSMOS

**1**

A cosmology is an attempt to explain the origin and structure of the universe, by creating a system of belief from the myriad of details known about the world. Each religion defines cosmology according to its worldview, drawing from everyday experience and divine revelation. (Even those which refuse to speculate are inferring that the cosmology of the world is beyond the hope of mortal understanding.) Often it is a need for a cohesive cosmology that draws people to religion, to help them answer questions they cannot deal with on their own.

Defining a cosmology is an important step in developing a religion. But before doing even that, a GM should decide *why* he needs to add a religion, myth or cosmology to his story line. The myth or religion can impart the morality system the GM intends to use, or provide a "map" of locations the PCs will need to visit. It can introduce powerful NPCs whom the characters will eventually meet, fight, help or ask for aid. It can describe some great wrong that the heroes will be called to right, or simply act as a parallel story highlighting the impact of moral choices.

It is important that the GM decide from the beginning if the gods truly exist. If they do, then the religions that develop will be influenced and molded by the gods' actions. The gods may tell worshipers precisely what to do by influencing prophets or instructing specially chosen priests. If gods do not exist - or if they do and for some reason remain silent - then the religions that develop are social constructs. People create myths to explain the puzzles and problems of the world. Both of these views are valid and might have a basis in "truth," but the religions that result will usually have different flavors.

# Creation Myths

Myths are stories - "historical" stories of the cosmological and supernatural traditions of a people. They define the belief system of a people - where the people came from, how they began, who their gods and heroes are, and what they believe is important. Myths define a worldview which is most often conveyed to the people through their religion.

Creation myths discuss beginnings - the beginnings of the universe, the beginnings of the gods, the beginnings of life. Such myths are the basis for everything which comes later. When defining a cosmology, they are the foundation, the obvious place to start.

## Building a Creation Myth

The first thing the GM should consider in designing a creation myth is the scope and relative truth of the myth. Does the myth recall absolute truth, or is it filled with symbolic allegory? Is the myth common to every culture on the world (perhaps with minor variations) or does each culture group have a different version? Is there more than one set of gods involved, or are they the same gods with different names? If the GM is focusing the campaign on a small portion of the world, deciding that the myth is specific to one culture allows other myths to be developed later for other parts of the world.

The second thing the GM should consider is the type of culture he is dealing with. Some types of myths are more common to some cultures than to others for instance, "awakening" myths (p. 11) are common in aboriginal cultures. If the society is advanced, the creation myth might be a remnant of an older, now forgotten culture. In this case some aspects of the myth might seem odd or out of place. A fertility goddess who reigned in an older culture might be relegated to a lesser position - perhaps as mother of the new gods - in a later one.

The next thing the GM should decide is what kinds of questions the creation myth will answer - or just as importantly, will not answer. If the myth asserts that people were specially created, it might give the people who believe in it a sense of divine purpose. Sometimes a myth will set dividing lines between the gods, explaining the reasons behind long-existing grudges and conflicts. If the gods have been fighting since the beginning of time, their people will not expect a cease-fire anytime soon. In any case, the GM can decide whether a question is one that adventurers might be able to find out the answer to, or one of the unanswerable mysteries of the universe.

Creation myths allow the worldbuilder to set the stage for many further developments, and can open the door for many roleplaying opportunities.

How *did* it all begin?



## Deus Faber

The universe was built by a *deus faber,* a divine artisan or craftsman. It may have been crafted, as the Egyptian god Ptah of Memphis was said to have created the entire world and the other gods upon his potter's wheel. Or it may have been spun or woven, as the Greeks pictured the goddess Nemesis sitting at the center of the cosmos, with the world spinning about her womb like a spindle. Or the universe may have been forged out of some primordial chaos, as the Lithuanians believed Teljavelik forged the sun and placed it in the heavens.

Deus faber myths require active deities with needs and desires. Most often these deities are anthropomorphic and are limited in what they can and cannot do. Though they might shape the cosmos, even they are governed by the laws of nature. Their religion may glorify craftsmen, considering them closest to the gods of all humans.

## Sexual Myths

The universe and/or the gods were born of a sexual act. The parties involved in the reproduction usually have mysterious origins, or no origins at all. The Mayans of Yucatan describe the sudden appearance of Puma-snake and Jaguar-snake who took human form, united sexually and created the world. Other myths involve the widespread concepts of Father Sky and Mother Earth. Such myths usually ignore the question of where the couple came from, and concentrate on what happened afterward. Some myths do not require a sexual union at all: one Egyptian cosmology holds an example in which the god creates four other gods and the world through masturbation!

Deities who beget the world often have many other offspring. They are often pantheistic in nature and quite anthropomorphic. Followers of sexual mythologies tend to view the actions of the gods in terms of human motivations, thereby reducing the psychological distance between people and deities. Birth and birth motifs will always be important to them, as well as ties of family.

## Creation as Byproduct

The act of creation is a byproduct of a greater occurrence. When Cronus, the Greek Titan, castrated his father Uranus, the blood that fell upon Mother Gaea created the Furies, the giants and the Meliae nymphs. When the primordial goddess of the Aztecs, Tzipactli, was torn apart by two rival serpent-gods, her lower body fell through chaos to form the earth, while her upper body rose to form the heavens. The Father Raven of Eskimo lore pushed a seed he found into the ground, and was most surprised when a man stepped forth from a pod of the resultant plant. When the Chinese deity P'an Ku died, his remains fell apart and formed the mountains of China.

Byproduct creations provide a chance for the worldbuilder to make mythic legends of the gods, which can spawn heroic quests or prophecies to seed future adventures.

### First Victim

Creation arises from the sacrifice of some protodivini-ty. For example, an Indian myth tells how the primeval giant Purusha was cut up, each part of him then transforming into a specific part of the universe: his head becoming the sky, his navel the air, his feet the earth and so on. The underlying theme here is that the act of creation balances an act of destruction, personified by the death of a single indi vidual.

Or it may simply be the demise of an earlier order. The Mesopotamia!: dragon mother-goddess Tiamat was killed by her son Marduk, the hero of the newer gods. Half of her body became the dome of heaven, the other half the wall which contained the waters. Similarly, when the Norse gods Odin, Vili and Ve slew the giant Ymir, the world was formed from his flesh, the hills from his bones, the trees from his hair and the sphere of heaven from his skull.

Religions based on a first-victim cosmology will tend to carry a strong underlying theme of sacrifice in their teachings, whether it be in terms of personal sacrifice for personal gain or in actual offerings to appease the deities.

### The Second World

When the first world had cooled off, Sotuknang purified it and created *Tokpa,* the second world. Then he thanked the Ant People and called the others out of the earth. Again he warned them to remember to respect the Creator. They multiplied rapidly, and while this world was not as beautiful as the first, it was still a wonderful place. But now the animals were wild and did not talk to them. So they bartered and traded with other people and then the trouble began. They wanted more than they needed and they began to forget the Creator. So once more Sotuknang spoke to those few who remembered, and asked the Ant People to open up their underground world. When they were all safe, he commanded the twins to leave the poles. The earth teetered off balance and spun around crazily. It froze into solid ice. So ended Tokpa.

### The Third World

For many years those who remembered were safe in the underground world. In time, Sotuknang sent the twins back to their posts. The world began to melt and life awoke again. Sotuknang put everything in order and then called the people out again, into the third world, *Kuskurza.* Again they were warned to remember, and again some forgot. Those who remembered lived and sang praises to the Creator from the hilltops; those who forgot made big cities, and soon the third world was full of corruption and war. This time Sotuknang went to the Spider Woman and said the world would be destroyed by water. So she took the people who remembered and sealed them up in hollow reeds. When the floods and rushing waters came, the reeds floated on top. Then the people looked for land; it took them a long time, but at last they found *Tuwaqachi,* the fourth world.

### The Fourth World

Once more Sotuknang spoke to the people. This world was not all beautiful and easy to live on like the others. There were hot parts and cold parts, ugly parts and nice parts. Sotuknang told the people to separate, each group following their own star until it stopped. He promised to send them good spirits, and warned them to remember. And that is how the present world, the fourth world, came to be.

## Multiple Creators

The cosmos is created by the combined efforts of several entities.

### Division

The universe is created by the division of a single entity into separate, distinct parts. In many Native American cosmologies, the first couple, such as Father Sky and Mother Earth, existed in a continuous embrace, so close that nothing else might be created. Creation occurred when the divine couple was separated, allowing the creation of light and darkness and the establishment of time. Often this separation of heaven and earth reveals what had previously been hidden, such as plants, animals and people.

Multiple divisions are sometimes linked with the concept of direction. Sioux lore tells of the creation of four men, who are in reality the four winds and the god's main helpers. Another four brothers are sent to the four poles of the universe, to support humanity.

### Twin Creators/Opposing Forces

The act of creation is a combined effort of two creators. They may be completely opposite in nature, one evil and one good, for example. Or they may simply bear each other enmity. The positive creator of the Iroquois was Maple Sprout, who created and taught humanity, and brought maize and other good plants into being. He was in constant battle with his twin Tawiskaron, who could only bring forth crocodiles, mosquitoes and other horrible animals.

In other cases, the two creators have few differences. Perhaps one is a bit more dexterous, the other more inventive. In this case, often the second creator either elaborates upon the efforts of the first, or fails to participate and then later attempts to destroy the creation. Both Coyote and Silver Fox were formed from cloud and mist and cooperated in forming a boat in which they could live upon the endless waters. But after Silver Fox created the earth out of Coyote's hair while he slept, Coyote awoke and, out of pique, immediately gobbled up all the fruits and crickets within reach.

The act of creation might also be nothing more that a contest of one-upmanship between the two different creative forces. This may result in religions and beliefs based on dual (and often opposing) principles.

### Triples

A trio of deities creates the cosmos. In South American cosmologies it is a trio of gods who created the world. Triple-aspect deities such as Ishvara (Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva) abound in Vedic mythologies. Sometimes each member of the trio is responsible for a particular phase of creation; other times they act in concert. For example, Ishvara's three aspects, Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, are responsible for creating new things, maintaining things created, and destroying to make way for new creation, respectively!

## Abortive Attempts

The current cosmology is the latest in a series of aborted attempts. The creation myth of the Hopi (sidebar, pp. 8-10) is a good example of this. Sometimes even the divine does not get it right the first time. Such motifs tend to focus upon the creation of humanity as opposed to the creation of a cosmos. The creating force may simply abandon its failures, or may attempt to destroy them. If they still remain, these previous attempts can develop into powerful or twisted

entities which then plague the newly-created beings. Occasionally the god creates something that is a little *too* good before a happy medium is struck and humanity results. But in most cases the previous creations of the god are still seen as possessing some hidden or supernatural power.

According to the Edda, before the gods there were the giants. The gods created the innumerable dwarves before finally deciding to create the first people.

Abortive myths are an excellent way to explain widely differing races in a world. Centaurs, elves, twisted gnomes, all might be earlier creations of the gods.

## Awakening

There is no act of creation - the world simply exists, as it always has. One day the gods awoke, unaware of what may have created them, or any reason for their existence. There may even be no gods, just a world that exists without direction or purpose, continued survival being the highest law. Or the divine might be insubstantial and undefined, considered beyond the ken of mere mortals. The first life may have come through a cave or a hole in the ground. This rationale is especially common in tribal cultures with strong shamanistic traditions. Religions based on awakenings may be highly philosophical, seeing themselves as cogs in a greater machine.

## Common Motifs

Motifs are common threads that run through creation myths, symbolizing various aspects of the creation.

### The Cosmic Egg

One of the most common motifs used to represent the cosmos is that of the egg. This view involves both transformation and division, and is usually associated with light and sunrise.

In some cosmologies, the divine is an eternal force; in others it dwells within the egg itself. Usually this egg is not the ultimate origin of the cosmos, but the material from which it is created. Both Phoenician and Egyptian cosmologies use this symbolism. Chusoros ("the opener") broke the egg apart, creating the heaven and earth of the Phoenicians. Predominant in Egyptian belief was the belief in the creative spirit personified by the god Thoth. From him came four godly couples who represented the eight divine principles. Then creation began with the manufacture of a great egg, from which sprang the sun god Ra.

Transformation is the important element of this motif, incorporating the idea that what now is may not always be. There may even be a further stage of which this world is simply a precursor.

### Chains and Patterns

In some myths, creation is a long chain of small steps, each following from the one before, covering the span from the divine to the mundane. This is particularly apparent in cosmologies where the gods diminish in power and glory to walk upon the earth. Semi-divine or divine ancestors are commonly cited in royal lineages. The *Enuma Elish,* the creation epic of Babylon and Assyria, ends with a long list of primordial kings. This type of creation myth forms an excellent basis for "the divine right of kings," where the society is led by those with a true calling or gift for ruling.

### *From Beginning to End*

Some myths tell not only how the world was made - they tell how (and sometimes when) it will end. This can have a strong effect on the culture, giving people a sense of where they are going as well as how they came to be. Such a sense of purpose can become a driving force in both the individual and cultural sense. Such myths continue ancient conflicts until a final battle - and sometime even beyond, to a new cycle of creation. Norse myth is a classic example.

#### The Beginning...

In the beginning was the vast abyss. Ginnungagap. To think on its vastness would overwhelm the mind, sending it spiraling down into the depth of terror. There was no light, no darkness, not a single sound, twig or even grain of sand. Yet despite all this, Ginnungagap was not truly empty, although only the gods knew this secret.

In other cosmologies, these chains and patterns define the order of creation in minute detail, listing each small plant and animal by name. In Hawaiian cosmology, from the Night came the Abyss and Darkness, then were born the worms in crawling swarms, then the mites, the smaller worms, then the eggs which live in the sea, then specific sea eggs and shells and so forth. Ordering the cosmos so exactly gives its people a sense of knowing and belonging that spreads out into every aspect of their lives. Often these chains continue into recent history and look forward into the future, laying out a precise and orderly sequence of events that leads ever forward.

### Numbers

Numbers often have important, sometimes almost mystical significance. One is the single, the indivisible. Two create a duality, two halves of a whole. Three form a triangle, or pyramid, a balanced shape. Four is a pair of pairs, and is often closely associated with nature in the number of elements, winds, etc. Five is the number of fingers to a hand, the most convenient way of counting. Six is two times three, gaining the powers of both. Seven is an oddity, often associated with luck. Eight doubles four. Nine is three threes. Ten is the highest one can count using fingers alone, and thus forms the basis for most counting systems. Zero is a fascinating concept - something to represent nothing. All can be used to bring additional meaning and flavor to a cosmology. A system of mystical belief built around numbers is called *numerology.*

## Endings

Everything must come to an end, or so the saying goes. Yet in many cosmologies the ending is but another beginning. The concepts of renewed creativity or creative-destructive cycles are also often tied both to prophetic and divine elements in many myths. These are usually combined with other motifs: a final battle or judgment, the return or resurrection of a cultural hero, a natural cataclysm or unexplained divine retribution.

Endings are a common theme in heroic or fantasy literature, and can make spectacular splashes even in far-flung galactic empires. Final battles can be fought on scales varying from the personal to the universal. Cycles of societal birth, growth, death and rebirth can be played out in any milieu. Prophecy is often used by the gods to warn humans of impending doom, or to help them escape a tragic fate.

### Final Conflict

Common to many cosmologies is the concept of a final great battle between opposed forces - good versus evil, light versus dark. In Teutonic mythology, this great conflict is called Ragnarok. More than a final predestined battle between the gods and the forces of evil, Ragnarok is the complete destruction of the universe, followed by its rebirth (see p. 15).

In other mythologies this conflict is continuous, and the outcome is not necessarily predestined. Often a final judgment or reordering of the universe is implied. Zoroastrian traditions speak of continuous warfare between good and evil, as personified by various spirits of both natures, until the final prophet conquers Angra Mainyu and all existing evil (see p. 52).

### Creation Renewed—Recurring Cycles

Creation may be a cyclic event, a repetitive rhythm of creation and destruction. These cycles usually begin with a wondrous and beautiful world which

## From Beginning to End (Continued)

For within Ginnungagap was Muspellheim, the Land of Fire that was the home of the world's destroyers. So fierce and hot was this land of flame that even the gods, the Aesir, stayed away. Upon its borders stood Surt, fiercest of the fire giants, and in his hands was a great sword of fire. From the beginning he had watched there, and he would be there at the end, at Ragnarok, the doom of the gods.

Also hidden within this void was Niflheim, a realm of ice, snow and freezing fog. At its center there surged and roared a mighty geyser called Vergelmir, the Roaring Cauldron, source of all the rivers that ever were. Elivagar was another fountain within the realm of Niflheim. From Elivagar flowed great rivers of ice which exploded and spread as great glaciers across the face of Ginnungagap. And from it also flowed a dark sludge, that formed great masses of black ice.

slowly decays as time passes. Slowly, dark, decadent and destructive forces gain power and influence, and spread throughout the world. Helplessly the world tumbles toward a final catastrophe, after which it is created anew, and life begins again.

Some worlds are continuously recycled, their creative divinities renewing them after each destruction. These cycles are incredibly long, and yet are some-times precisely defined. The world of Brahma will endure 2,160,000,000 years - a mere night and day in the god's life. Then the world is consumed in flames, destroyed by the world-serpent Sesha and recreated by Brahma. This process will be repeated, until a hundred years of such days are gone, and then the whole universe, gods and all, will revert again to its primeval substance.

The destruction of the world in fire is also a favorite theme. This fire may be caused either by the falling sun or a fragment of the moon, by demons, by a mysterious spark from the sky, or by a trickster-god. In most versions, however, a few people remain alive to repopulate the earth (see *From Beginning to End,* pp. 11-15). Other traditions foretell spells of cold weather and onslaughts of ice and snow, which later melt and cause great floods.

# Basic Forces of the World

Part of developing a cosmology is determining the role that the divinity plays in the world. In some cosmologies, gods are tied strongly to the forces that bind the world, and are subject to the whims and laws of natural forces. In others, these forces are actually depicted *as* gods. Or there may be no gods at all, the laws of physics being the only underlying principle. In this last case gods may still be worshiped, but they are cultural constructs, aiding humanity in understanding themselves and those forces of the world they do not understand.

## Nature

The mysteries of nature are a continuing source of both fear and wonder. Most cultures have myths explaining weather, earthquakes, floods and other natural phenomena in terms of divine myth or legend. Earthquakes are com-monly thought to occur when the gods or heroes who support the earth shift their position. The Burmese Shans held that the earth was a great sleeping fish which occasionally awoke and bit its tail, then writhed in pain, shaking the earth. Often specific aspects of nature are held to be the responsibilities of a particular deity. Norse Thor. governed thunderstorms, the Irish Manannan was concerned with forecasting the weather, Greek Poseidon was originally called Enosigaois ("earth-shaker") and was armed with lightning flashes. Chalchihuitlicue, the goddess of flowing waters, was the spouse of Tlaloc, the rain god of the Aztecs; Susanowo was the Japanese god of the winds and thunder.

Nature is often viewed as either a deity or a mysterious force. Frequently it is seen as a feminine force, an extension of a divine earth mother. The cycles and seasons of natures are explained by a variety of myths and legends which usually involve some type of vegetation deity who is regularly slain and later reborn. In Greek legend, Persephone, daughter of the earth goddess Demeter, was sentenced to spend a third of the year beneath the earth, during which time all plants withered due to her mother's sorrow.

After countless eons Niflheim's ice touched Muspellheim's flaming air. A great explosion rocked the void. The fire of Muspellheim scorched the dark sludge from Elivagar, and from this the body of a giant formed. For long ages this giant, who was called Ymir, or Aurgelmir the Mud-boiler, slept. A male and a female grew beneath his armpit and one of his feet mated with the other, creating a six-headed son. From these creatures were born the frost giants.

The scum that flew from Elivagar did not poison all the ice of Niflheim. Where the ice was still pure, yet melting from the fire of Muspellheim, a vast cow appeared in the thawing ice. Four rivers of milk flowed from the udder of this great cow, who was called Audhumla, the Great Nurse. Upon this milk was Ymir suckled.

Audhumla began to lick at the great masses of ice about her. In time she licked a complete man into shape. This was Buri, for he was beautiful and bright. Buri had a son called Bor. Bor's wife was Bestla, the giant Balethorn's daughter. And Bor and Bestla had three sons: Odin, Vili and Ve. Humans they made from the roots of an ash tree and an elm tree - the first man was Ask, and the first woman was Embla.

In time Odin and his brothers argued with old Ymir, but this was so long ago that no one really knows why they fought. But after a great battle they killed Ymir, hacking him to pieces. So much blood flowed that almost all of the giants drowned. And still the blood continued to flow, forming all the oceans, lakes, pools and streams.

The sons of Bor hacked and chopped at Ymir's body; from his flesh they formed rolling hills and wide plains. From his bones they made the mountains and from his hair they made the trees and bushes. From the soil of his flesh the dwarves crawled forth like maggots. The brothers threw Ymir's great skull into the air where it formed the high heavens. Four dwarves were made to hold it up. And when all those labors at last were done, they threw Ymir's brains into the air to make the clouds. Sparks and cinders from Muspellheim they threw into the sky also, and so the stars came into being.

## Time

The ability to quantify time is important to any civilization. The movement of the sun, moon and stars, the continuing cycle of the seasons, the aging of humanity - all these involve the concept of passing time.

Aeon represented ages and epochs in the history of the world, and was often depicted as a winged lion-headed human entwined in serpents. The Greeks saw the lord of time as a primeval god, called Kronos (Cronus).

In Indian thought, Kala personified time as a cosmological force. Kala was his own father, and hence his own son. Kala was also associated with the god of death, a motif found in other mythologies. Thoth, an ancient Egyptian god of the moon, chronology and the calendar, is another example of a temporal god associated with death: as the protector of Osiris he was a guide and helper of the dead. Tai-sui-zing was a Chinese god of time; he was also "the star of the great year" - the planet Jupiter with its 12-year orbit.

The concept of time eternal is often expressed in vibrant symbols: the phoenix rising perpetually from the ashes of its own burning, the world-serpent continually biting its own tail. Both of these legends personify the concept of eternity, a process which has no beginning or end.

## *From Beginning to End*
## *(Continued)*

Ages passed, with many arguments between the gods, and many battles against the giants and trolls and other evil creatures. Then one day Balder, Odin's son. began to have nightmares of doom and death: but none of the gods could explain why. Odin traveled to Niflheim to seek out the ghost of a seeress in Hel's great hall. Even she spoke of Balder's inescapable doom. Frigg, Balder's mother, refused to accept this. She searched out every living thing, making each swear never to harm Balder - all except the mistletoe, which she thought too small to be dangerous. The gods began to play a new game - they threw things at Balder and laughed when they did not harm him, Loki, the trickster, was angry and jealous, so he made a dart of mistletoe. He gave the dart to blind Hod. When Hod threw it, it pierced Balder's heart, killing him.

Frigg sent Hermod to Hel to beg for Balder's release from death. Hel agreed if everyone and everything in the Nine Worlds wept for him. But one evil giantess - Loki in disguise? - would not weep, so Balder had to stay in Hel's halls.

The gods mourned for a long time, but eventually decided to have a feast. They did not invite Loki, but he showed up anyway, throwing insults. They hunted him down, and despite his trickery they caught him. They tied Loki across sharp rocks in a deep mountain cave and placed a great snake above him. His wife sat by him, holding a bowl to catch the venom that dripped from its fangs to torment Loki. When she moved the bowl to empty it, he writhed in anguish, shaking the earth.

## Entropy

A common theme of many cosmologies is that the world (and all that exists) was created from a sea of undefined chaos, and will ultimately return to it. Entropy, or this return to chaos, is generally considered inevitable in these cases.

As a chaotic and destructive force, entropy is often associated with evil or malevolent deities. Many cultures develop rituals designed to appease these chaotic forces, staving off their final destruction. Fear of entropy can be a strong opponent to change.

But there is always hope. Most cultures believe that faithful devotion will ensure at least spiritual salvation.

## Fate

The idea that the outcome of one's life (or at the least, life's major events) has been predetermined is common to many cultures. Often this concept is personified, and the agencies responsible for destiny are named *Fate*. Fate is generally seen as a supernatural, often capricious entity responsible for all that one finds unsatisfactory in life. Illness, misfortune, early death - all of these are explained and justified in terms of predestination.

Interpretations of fate vary greatly from culture to culture. Sometimes a distinction is made between a fate determined by an impersonal force and a fate impressed upon a person by a deity. Further distinctions involve the belief that one's fate may change: some cultures think one's fate is determined at birth, or that it is fixed annually, usually at the new year. Some hold that the pattern of the stars at birth determines one's destiny. Other forms of divination use physical signs, such as birthmarks, to reveal one's fate.

With the question of fate and destiny comes concern about free will and self-determination. Some cultures accept the loss of personal will, and develop a fatalistic world view. Others embrace the idea that their fate lies in the hands of the gods, believing that their life serves some greater purpose.

## Karma

Karma is the belief that all of a person's acts have spiritual consequences, influencing the cycle of deaths and rebirths which an individual endures until he finally achieves liberation. Differences in social status, fortune, well-being and lifespan are all the result of past karma. Karma is both impersonal and inevitable, and often mental acts and thoughts are held to be as important in determining karma as physical ones. Some believe that karma falls under divine control and that devotion to the god may bring release from the cycle. Others believe that study, knowledge, works and discipline will allow one to achieve purification and eventual release.

Another interpretation holds that karma itself is a material substance, albeit a supernatural one. This matter becomes attached to the soul of the individual who is overly concerned with worldly matters. All actions causes some karmic matter to gather about the soul, but evil deeds produce a different type of karma which is harder to eradicate. Liberation and release are achieved through a combination of penance and abandonment of action. Inaction prevents the further buildup of karma, while penance removes that which has already accumulated.

Yet another concept of karmic interactions suggests that attempting or achieving something particularly good, evil or important to or with someone else can form a bond of karma which the souls must work out *together* in a

## From Beginning to End (Continued)

### The end...

Balder's death and Loki's evil acts herald the end of the world - Ragnarok, the doom of the gods.

With the coming of Ragnarok the quarrel between the gods and the giants worsens, and there is constant war on earth. Midgard freezes and all humans (except for two who take shelter in the branches of the world-tree Yggdrasil) die. The dread wolves Skoll and Hati swallow the sun and the moon, and the world falls into darkness, for even the stars go out.

Loki and the great wolf Fenris break their chains and join the giants, fighting against the gods. Hel brings the dead to fight on Loki's side; they attack Asgard. On the vast plain of Vigard, the gods face their enemies and destroy each other. Odin is killed by Fenris. who is killed by Odin's son, Vidar. Loki and Heimdall kill each other, and Thor slays the great world-serpent Jormungand, only to die from its venom. Thousands die in gruesome battle. The fire giant Surt throws flame in all directions, destroying Asgard and Midgard, and the earth sinks into the sea. All life perishes.

### And beyond...

Yet there is still hope. For while the Nine Worlds are destroyed, the world-tree Yggdrasil survives. A new green Earth rises from the sea. Lif and Lifthrasir (who hid in the branches) climb down from Yggdrasil and begin the human race anew. And before Skoll swallows the sun. she has a daughter who will light the new-world.

There are even survivors among the gods. Odin's sons Vidar and Vali survive. as do Thor's sons, Modi and Magni. Balder, Nanna, Hod and Honir revive and begin a new race of gods that will live and rule in peace.

## The Fated PC

The GM might wish to involve the party in some fated or predestined event directly. Sometimes the best way to do this is to make a character an instrument of fate. While this option might reduce the free will of the individual, it brings up several interesting roleplaying opportunities.

Fated characters usually come from Unusual Backgrounds. Often they are abandoned at birth in an attempt to avoid some prophecy. Sometimes their parents know of their child's destiny and send the infant PC away to a safe place, or foster him in isolation with a mysterious teacher or hermit.

This teacher or stepparent might know nothing of the child's true past or parentage but often teaches him special skills that will be of great use later in life.

Fated individuals are often marked by circumstance, or bear an unusual birthmark. He might be the seventh son of a seventh son, or be born upon an auspicious day. All these things distinguish him in some way, and may warn others that this person is somehow *special,* predestined for some great purpose.

A fated character is destined to complete some action which will have long-lasting campaign effects. Often such a PC will have important, and possibly unknown, enemies who work against him. If the individual is fated to oust a tyrant from power, then that tyrant will watch him very carefully.

In some cases, the hero might even be fated to fail! Struggling against fate itself can be the most difficult, yet rewarding, type of adventure.

As an interesting twist on this theme, the GM might arrange an adventure that has the group working *against* a prophecy. Loyal PCs might not wish to see some star-touched upstart overthrow *their* lord.

The GM must be careful, however, to find out if the players are willing to put up with such a heavy hand on the part of the GM. Some players may become resentful if it appears that one player is "benefiting" too much from such GM attention. The GM must also consider what happens to a plot-line or adventure if a key PC is killed or otherwise incapacitated. Many epic quests end abruptly when a player quits, removing the PC from the game.

future life. A GM can use such bonds to bring or keep together a party with diverse interests, or to motivate a group to take on a particular quest. A bond between the characters and the primary villain can be particularly powerful!

## Divination

Divination is the act of foreseeing the future. More generally, it is a means of determining the significance of future or present events and the role the individual may play in these events. Often divine forces may not be involved at all, if the culture believes that fate and destiny lie outside the influence of the gods.

Common to all cultures in one form or another, divination is notoriously subject to interpretation. A culture may use several means to obtain insight. Dreams, hunches, ordeal, tranced possession, augury, mechanical manipulations such as the casting of lots - these are but a few of the methods used.

Many forms of divination are systemized and mechanical, involving complex series of diagnostic symbols: the tarot, *I Ching* and astrology are examples of this type of divination. But it may also result from accidental signs and omens. For example, in some cultures, if twins are born, calamity will follow; if a person trips, or sneezes, or meets a cross-eyed woman first thing in the morning, then something momentous will occur later in the day. While this type of divination lacks an ordered arrangement of symbols, it still suggests a causal relationship between a minor event and a later, major occurrence. Many believe that all signs point to future events: if the signs are complicated, then a specialist or trained divinatory reader must be consulted. But it is from these smaller, personal instances of divination that superstitions of good and ill luck arise.

## Prophecy

Prophecy is a specific type of divination, in which the will of the gods, or some force which supersedes them, is revealed. These prophetic pronouncements are often of grave importance, involving sweeping consequences that will result from the actions, or inactions, of a particular individual. Often, prophecies describe events which will affect the very gods themselves.

One of the most common themes involving prophecy is that of the "fatal child." Prophecies, before birth or at the birth itself, reveal that the child is destined to slay parent, grandparent, or even king. Although the child is abandoned or condemned, he manages to survive, usually by the intervention of a kind, humble person. Unaware of the prophecy, the child grows up in obscurity and proceeds to fulfill his destiny.

Other prophecies warn of calamity and punishment - but only if the warnings are ignored. Some great challenge or opponent must be met, and if it is defeated, great rewards will result.

# Creation of Life

Along with the world and the forces that control it, the existence of life itself must be explained.

## Substance

From what substance did life come? This is more than an interesting detail - it often gives important insight into the nature of all creation.

### Deity's Image

The idea that man was made from a piece of, or at least in the image of. the prime creator deity is a common one. This associates life closely with the

divine. Some myths grant only humanity this divine link, considering animals an integral part of the world's creation that need not be explained directly.

This belief can greatly empower people. As they are to the gods, the world is to them. They might even aspire to the power of the gods, since their forms are so close.



### Lump of Clay

People and/or animals are made by breathing creative force ("life") into an existing element such as earth or clay. This associates life more closely with the earth and its elements, rather than with the divine.

African myths say that humanity was created from the five elements (stone, iron, earth, air, water). The Mayans held that men were first made of earth, but they were mindless, and thus were destroyed. Then they were remade of wood, but they lacked souls and intelligence, and were ungrateful to the gods, and so were drowned in a great flood. Finally the gods remade them of a maize gruel, and they grew and prospered.

This belief makes people a part of the world, rather than set above it. No matter what their eventual fate or powers, they can never reach beyond the elements which give them form.

## Purpose

Central to humanity's self-image is the purpose for life's creation. The GM should consider the answer carefully.

### To Amuse

Birds, plants, animals and people were created simply to make life more interesting for the deities. As such, people and animals are continually subject to divine whims, allowed to triumph or suffer, live long, or die young by the gods' choosing. The deities are worshiped in the hope that this will appease them, so they will decide to rain delights rather than disasters.

### To Glorify

People are the ultimate achievement of the gods, created to express the divine will and power at its finest. Cultures with this belief tend to be arrogant, viewing themselves and their actions as reflections of the deity's will.

### To Serve

All life forms, and people in particular, were created to perform certain rituals which ensure the continuance of the world and the deity in particular. Humanity alone is given the ability to choose how to serve, its position being the most important and complex. This belief tends to glorify the priesthood, as it is their task to interpret just what the proper rituals are, and to ensure that these are correctly performed.

### Designing the Afterworld

Not all mythologies express a concrete belief in an afterworld. If the GM wishes to include one, it is important to match the afterworld and the culture rather than to create one at random.

If the religion stresses hard work and obedience in this life and a reward in the next, then the afterworld will often be a wonderful abode where food and luxuries are abundant and everyone lives happily ever after. There usually will be a place of punishment for the less fortunate. Sometimes the afterworld is simply a place of rest, where weary souls can sleep after their long lives.

Often the world of the dead is divided into different realms for different people. The manner of death might determine where the soul ends up. Souls of people who committed suicide might wander forever in limbo while warriors who died fighting may move on to some reward.

The realm of the dead might be a place where things go on just as they did in life. In Fijian belief *Nai Thombo Thombo* is a real place. A real road leads to it, and those who live in the villages that the road passes do all they can to make things easier for puzzled souls; all doors are built exactly opposite each other, and sharp implements are never left out where traveling souls might step on them.

Some souls might be reborn into the world after a suitable wait. Some afterworlds are transitional areas where souls wait before continuing on. The GM might decide that necromantic spells work only on those spirits that remain in this transitory realm - souls that have passed beyond are lost to the touch of the living.

Shamanistic societies believe in a number of otherworldly realms, only one of which is the realm of the dead. This land of the dead might be closed to all living persons other than special shamans guiding the dead. Or it could be a place to visit after a long hard journey.

Some afterworlds are nebulous, ever-shifting places. Others have great palaces and tombs, where kings still rule and servants still serve. Afterworlds often echo the organization of the culture that describes them.

## Revenants

Common to most cultures is the belief that the dead can return to the realms of the living. These lost or restless souls have been somehow trapped in the mortal world. In some cultures this is because of violent death, or death before the "proper" time. In others, a bungled or missing funeral ritual will cause this. Or a soul might be trapped by an object or area that held great significance to the living person.

One common belief is that the soul has some final task which it must complete before it can continue on to the rest (or rebirth) which awaits it. Usually this is a task that the person felt strongly about. It might be avenging his own death, or that of another for whom he cared deeply. It might be the completion of a task that was interrupted by his death, especially if this task has religious or other deep significance. Or it might be a time of penance, which the deity has assigned the spirit before it can pass into the next world - a sort of "purgatory-on-earth."

### Byproduct

Life just happened. Either the writers of the myth admit to ignorance, or they chalk it up as being an accidental byproduct of the rest of creation. People are no more or less blessed than any other element of the world.

## Different Forms of Life

Plants, animals, and intelligent beings may have been created by different methods. In a fantasy world the origin of each of the different magical creatures (dragons, demons, etc.) should be considered, along with the different intelligent races.

### Intelligence versus Animal

In almost every creation myth, people are considered superior to all other forms of life (probably reflecting the fact that man made the myth). Animals may be earlier creations, or they may be derived in a completely different way. untouched by the divine's special favor.

Alternatively, animals may be considered to be closest to divinity, in their instinctive understanding of the world, while people must attempt to reach this state on their own initiative. Even here, however, humanity's potential reward upon reaching this state of simple purity is much greater than that of an animal that was born to it.

### Different Races of Intelligent Life

Some worlds will have multiple intelligent races. Perhaps each race will be the special child or product of a different deity, or they may form a progression of creations, each different, until a final form was found (usually humanity). Sometimes different races are thought to have been created for a particular purpose or task. Dwarves might be the remnants of an army of divine carpenters. Evil races might have been created as minions of darker gods, or for the express purpose of punishing or testing a "greater" race. In science fiction worlds. aliens might simply have been adapted to their world's habitat.

Some Eskimo tribes developed a myth to explain the different human races that entered their territories following the discovery of the New World. Their deity, so they say, shaped earth into humanoid forms and baked them in a great kiln until they were ready. The first batch she left in too long; these were burned, giving them blackened skin and hair. Worried, she didn't leave the second batch in long enough, and they turned out all pasty white. But on the third and final batch she left them in just the right amount of time, and they had the proper golden brown shade of skin.

Similar myths might separate the races of a traditional fantasy world.

### Man versus Woman

The difference between the sexes can also be considered. Historical myths vary widely on the issue of whether man and woman were created together as equals, or one came first. The Bible speaks of Adam (created from the earth). with Eve created later from his rib bone. An earlier Jewish tradition says that Lilith was the real original woman, created at the same time as Adam. But she took umbrage when Adam required her to submit to his will, and she left Eden to explore the rest of the world. Eve was then created as a replacement. Greek myths say that woman was sent as a curse to men after they had angered the gods. Other mythologies suggest that woman was created first, with man coming later to serve her.

Whatever the GM decides is likely to have a strong effect on any difference in the roles that society ordains for the sexes.

## Fall from Paradise

A common motif among first creation myths is that humans were created in a paradisiacal state, which they then lost through their own actions, bringing evil and suffering into the world.

Eve's run-in with the snake in the garden is a well-known example. The early Greeks also spoke of earlier ages of humanity, beginning with the Golden Age when everything was plentiful, devolving through the Silver, Brass, and finally Iron Ages. In each age, life became harsher and mankind became more wicked and greedy. Another Greek myth depicts Pandora (the first woman, in some versions) loosing the ills of the world from a vase given to her by the gods as a wedding present.

If there was once a paradise to fall from, where is it now? It may be the home of the gods, or it might prove to be a magically-protected place whose location is lost to memory.

## Death/Transition

Once life has been explained, one must come to terms with death. In a mortal world, all living things die. The nature of death, whether it is to be feared or gladly embraced, may depend on a culture's views about survival of part or all of the person. If the culture believes that the individual continues to some new state, then how he gets there and what, if anything, he needs once there are important considerations.

Beliefs about death and the transition into some other world strongly affect funeral and burial customs. Some religions believe the body must be burned to free the spirit. In others the body must be returned to the earth, often earth specially prepared and sanctified to the deity, for the soul to begin its journey. Some cultures hold that wealth buried with the dead will gain them extra consideration in the afterlife. They created fine tombs which glittered with their earthly possessions. In other cultures the bodies of the dead are consumed by their living relations in a ceremony believed to transfer the power and wisdom of the deceased ancestor to the next generation (see p. 137).

There are two predominant views concerning the path of the soul.

### Single Path

A new soul is born. It lives and dies. After death it travels to a distant realm where it is judged by its actions, wealth, or whatever other criteria the gods might set forth. This judgment determines the fate of the soul. Common motifs are a paradisiacal existence in the dwelling place of the god for the pure of heart, a wretched place of great suffering for the sinner, or an intermediary existence in which one must work off the evil deeds of life before ascending to the divine realm.

Believers in the single-path motif will often be more afraid of death, and more likely to seek personal immortality. They might also place more importance upon the judgment, since it will determine the fate of their souls throughout eternity. Some believers, of course, will long for death as an opportunity to enter Paradise.

## Revenants (Continued)

Sometimes the revenant seems so life-like that it is virtually impossible to tell the living from the dead. Only when the ghost or vision disappears before their eyes do the living understand just what they were dealing with. Irish folk tradition teaches that a corpse will rise from its coffin to take part in its own funeral.

Some apparitions are characterized by a wraith-like appearance. These spectral ghosts sometimes appear over the places their bodies lie, remaining until the body is properly interred. At other times ghosts appear with objects that have never been alive, like a favorite car. Visions of death coaches are common.

Ghosts and other revenants seem to be capable of most activities of the living. They frequently are very noisy, shouting, moaning, banging shutters or playing musical instruments. Often they wildly rearrange or even destroy the interiors of the buildings they haunt.

Religious rites can generally, although not always, put revenants to rest.

Ghosts and hauntings can provide classic adventuring. The party might be hired to rid an area of a ghost - but end up on the ghost's side, avenging a treacherous death. Or a party member might be haunted by dreams telling him of something he must do before a deceased relative can truly rest.

## Judgment Day

Where a soul ends up in the afterlife often depends upon a divine judgment. Different religions define different criteria upon which a soul might be judged to determine its status in the afterlife.

*Karma* is the sum of an individual's actions. In most cases it is considered a negative quality. Deeds of avarice and greed that harm other individuals accumulate karma; deeds of selflessness and moral goodness dissipate karma. When a soul dies and is judged for its next life, the accumulation of karma determines whether the soul improves its lot in life, or finds it worsened.

Some religions judge purely on the faith and belief of their followers. Accepting the word of the deity as law and living accordingly will grant greater status in the afterlife, no matter what else the person may do. The greatest status is given to the truly fanatical and zealous. Cults of dark deities who require their followers to perform gruesome acts in the deity's name will often judge on this criteria.

## Judgment Day (Continued)

Religions which hold personal achievement, wealth and prosperity highly may judge the soul by the wealth which it took to the grave. This will invariably result in larger and more ornate burial customs, such as those of the late-dynasty Egyptians.

Other religions, particularly those of ancestor veneration, judge the deceased by the sorrow, grief and piety of those left behind to lament. Thus, to slight the funeral customs or lessen the periods of mourning may have profound effects on the eventual disposition of the ancestors. Some religions teach that the prayers of the living can help the dead - or vice versa, depending on how the soul was judged!

## Playing the Dead

If the gods have other plans for their faithful followers, death may be just another beginning.

Valhalla, for instance, might seem like the ultimate reward for the brave warrior - fighting all day, feasting all night, wounds healed at nightfall, the dead revived again in the morning. Yet there is a underlying purpose to all this repetitive activity - the gods are training an army to aid them at Ragnarok. Other gods might have similar plans for the souls that dwell in their afterworld realms.

When the realm of the dead is closely attached to other realms of the gods, adventuring could continue after death. A deity could reunite the deceased for one last grand adventure. Or they might wake up in the afterworld and then have to struggle to escape to the lands of the living!

Shamans rely upon the advice and help of spirits sent to them by the god. The GM, as that god, could send the spirit of a deceased adventurer to aid them. This would be an especially valid ploy if that person died with information the party needs. Animistic priests calling for divine inspiration might be haunted - or even possessed! - by friendly ghosts or ancestors. Magical clerics might manage to enchant a holy item with the spirit of a lost compatriot.

Another possibility is the unfulfilled quest. The ghosts of deceased companions might refuse to leave the party alone until the quest ends or until they are restored or laid to rest. And anyone betrayed by the rest of the party might have good reason to haunt those who failed them.



## Recurring Cycles

Each soul repeats a cycle of existence. It is born, lives and dies. After death it travels back to the place it existed before its "birth," where it may be judged. This judgment may determine the circumstances of its next life. If the previous life was a good one, it moves "upward," the circumstances of its next life being better than the last. If the life was spent poorly, then the soul moves downward, perhaps even taking animal form. The soul is eternally reborn on this "wheel of life," though often a religion will promise eventual release from the cycle.

Believers in the recurring-cycle motif often have less fear of death. Their primary concern is usually to accomplish enough in this life to improve their next one. They often view advantages of birth as laurels earned in past times, while suffering is simply punishment for past misdeeds. They are, all in all, more fatalistic.

The notion of recurring cycles also brings up questions of access to information gained in past lives. Some religions view this as impossible - the soul goes through a cleansing which rids it of all past memories - but others strongly believe that these memories can be tapped and retrieved. A given soul may be marked or fated by its actions in prior lives (see sidebar, p. 16).

## Immortals

Though in the "real" world all living things die, in many game worlds this is *not* true. Some fantasy creatures are thought to live forever unless killed. Often their ending is quite different from that of their mortal counterparts. Immortal races almost always have the "single-path" view, with the soul returning to a more primal state of existence upon its death. Or perhaps, having been granted immortal life on earth, when it ends they simply cease to be.

## Afterlife

An integral part of the question of survival after death is the nature of the afterlife - where the souls of the dead go, how they travel, and what they do once they arrive.

### Journey

Almost every culture that believes in survival pictures the transition as a journey from this world to the place of the dead. In some cases this journey is a simple transition, while in others it is a long, arduous task. Some cultures believe that articles buried with the deceased can aid them on this journey, perhaps making the difference between success and eternal unrest. Those who could *not* complete the journey often wander this world as ghosts (see sidebar, pp. 18-19).

Another common motif is the ferryman - a gatekeeper whom the soul must pass in order to complete the journey. The ferryman usually requires some token payment, a coin or some other item of value, before the soul can continue.

## Judgment

The concept of judgment is also universal. One of a variety of fates befalls a soul according to its previous life. Generally those who deserve some sort of punishment suffer it, whether until they have atoned for their misdeeds, or for eternity. Those who have lived well may gain a life of splendor and happiness for eternity, or they may be reborn into a better existence. An exceptionally deserving soul might be lifted to a semi-divine state, either achieving oneness with the deity, or becoming a trusted servant.

## Final Resting Places

In the single-path model, the soul must have somewhere to rest once life is done. The nature of these final resting places will often serve as the ultimate reward or punishment, even in the "real" world. For those souls who have lived a good life, or who have proved their worth by navigating the tortuous pathways to the afterworld, this is a paradisiacal place. For those who have failed in some way, their final rest might be a place of great suffering and torture, or it might be a return to the earth itself - forever excluded from the wonder of the true afterlife.

Even those religions that believe in a continual cycle of lives often have a final exit for those souls who achieve true enlightenment.

## Final Service

Some mythologies incorporate the notion of a valued cleric or servant being taken to the land of the gods upon death, and being bound to some final service. In a world of many deities, it is possible that the different gods will draw their most faithful followers to them.

One example of this is the Norse Valhalla. Some warriors of great prowess were chosen by Odin to live in Valhalla until Ragnarok, when they would fight again, this time beside their lord. Others were chosen by Freya, who began her career as a goddess of battle; neither the Eddas nor the sagas discuss her purposes or criteria!

## Reincarnation

If souls are reborn, then the method of reincarnation should be considered.

Generally the gods assign an individual to his next life, basing their decision on his actions in previous lives. But in some cases the soul itself is allowed to choose its next existence. Or the selection may be completely random.

## Multiple Destinations

Depending on the cosmology of the world, it is possible for a soul to have a multitude of potential destinations. In a world of different races or faiths, each faith may have a different answer, and all may be perfectly valid. The will and belief of a soul may even be enough to impose its own choice. Some deities may reincarnate their followers, while others retire them after a single life, or call them to their sides. Deities may even compete over the final disposition of the dead, leaving little or no control in the hands of the individual.

## Journey of Death

Many gaming opportunities arise if the GM decides that the afterworld is physically accessible to the living. Long journeys through dark and treacherous caverns might bring the party to the underworld. Egyptian belief, for example, holds that the underworld lies beyond a maze of passages and well-guarded doors, across a diversity of watercourses. Items entombed with the dead could aid the party on its quest. Those doomed souls that wander helplessly could either oppose or help the seekers.

Or the party might find the Isles of the Dead after a rough and dangerous sea voyage. They might accidentally come across the land of the dead and have to escape. Or they might seek it to recover a lost companion, speak to the dead, or regain (or return) a lost artifact.

When designing an afterworld adventure the GM can choose a motif from myths and legends that matches the flavor of the campaign. In one Greek legend, Aeacus, Minos and Rhadamanthus judged the dead in a meadow and consigned them either to Tartarus or to the Isles of the Blessed. In Tartarus they remained until they had atoned for the sins of their previous life. In the Isles of the Blessed they drew lots for their next incarnations and drank from Lethe, the river of oblivion, to forget all they had previously known. Those particularly favored retired to the Elysian fields to enjoy an eternity of bliss.

The Irish Celts believed in an Otherworld, sometimes imagined as being underground, and sometimes as islands beyond the sea. Their afterworld was believed to be a country where there was no sickness, old age, or death, where happiness existed forever and where a hundred years were one day.

The Inca believed that those who obeyed the Inca dictum "Do not steal, do not lie, do not be lazy" went to live in the sun's warmth. Those who did not conform spent their days in the cold earth. Those who remained in the earth were in reality still living, but had become invisible, implacable and invulnerable; hence a great preoccupation for the comforts of the dead arose. Eventually the great tombs became so large that they occupied more space than the habitations of the living.

# DEITIES

Deities 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, ?.* 153.

# 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.

## Belief

Deities are created by the true faith and belief of their worshipers, or are personifications of an idea they hold to be true. These deities are completely dependent on their believers, their very natures sculpted by the fabric and substance of faith or thought. (See pp. 33 and 38.) But although they depend upon their followers, their powers and existence are still quite real.

A GM could make this the test for sentience - the ability to create and power a god!

## Abstract Representation

Deities do not exist in any separate form, but occur rather as abstract representations of the forces of the world - time, the wind, the sun, the flow of a river. Their strength lies in the raw force of their particular element. The god, River, is an abstract power representing the wild fury of a raging river, the slow, irresistible force of the spring floods, and the life-giving nature of all water. Quite different from the God of Rivers, a supernatural entity who rules over the rivers of the world and their inhabitants.

These deities are created by the creation of the world, since they *are* the world.

# Attributes

The purposes of the deity in the game world, the deity's powers, strengths and weaknesses, how the deity views its followers, what it asks of them, how actively it interferes in the "real" world - the GM must decide all of this and more for each of the major powers he creates.

## Archetypes

Deities are frequently built on archetypes: primordial images, characters, or ideals of a society common enough to be considered universal. These may be elemental forces such as fire, water, earth or air, or facets of nature, embodying the characteristics of animals, plants, rivers, the sky, the sun, the moon, etc. Other archetypes are more abstract, concepts that represent the variety of human experience, such as mother, father, truth, justice, beauty, heroism, ferocity, or death. The true measure of an archetype is its ability to provoke the same feelings or reactions from a wide variety of different people. Listed below are some common archetypes, grouped roughly according to level of abstraction. These are presented as examples designed to stimulate further thought. Under no condition should this be considered a complete list of archetypes, nor a listing of necessary forces. Various archetypes might easily be combined in a single deity. Even the lines between categories are blurry at best.
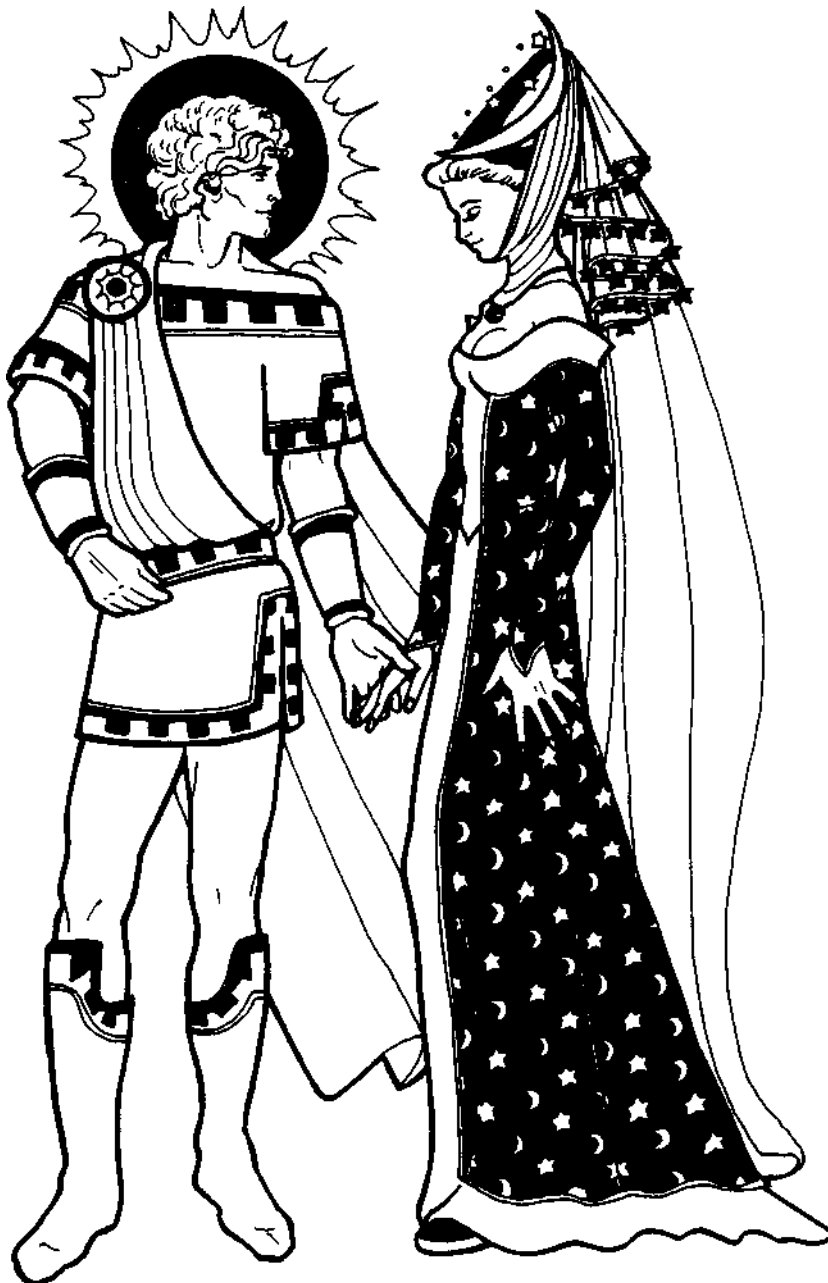
*Primal Forces:* Creation, destruction, order, chaos, fate, prophecy or oracles, destiny, time, luck, death.

*Abstract Natural Forces:* Birth, death, undeath, light, dark, air, fire, water, earth, sky, sea, nature, animals, plants, spring, summer, fall, winter.

*Specific Natural Forces:* Dawn, twilight, day, night, sun, moon, stars (especially morning or evening star), north, south, east, west, wind, rain, weather, thunder, lightning, rivers, lakes, mountains, volcanoes, trees, forests, flowers, deserts, snakes, dragons, birds, insects, magic.

### Divine Roleplaying

A twist on the standard party adventure is to allow each player to draw up one deity of a pantheon. Assign each one a particular area of influence as well as a general set of abilities, interests, etc. Deities can be drawn up as *Supers* characters, with 1,000 or more points, and fleshed out using the rules in this book. Additional advantages and abilities can be created at the GM's discretion. Or they can be drawn up as ordinary characters, but all damage they take or give is divided by 10. Or the GM may decide not to use dice at all!

The focus of this sort of roleplaying is on the interactions between the deities as they try to accomplish whatever goals they set themselves. The GM (or other players) can play the high-level clerics and followers, with maps drawn up to represent the areas of the world in which the gods hold sway. Battles can be fought, demigods created and destroyed, even gods killed as the pantheon goes at it. Or the GM can create outside influences that force the deities to rely upon each other and interact in new ways.

This can be used in the initial development of a world to create the basic mythological elements which later generations of player characters might worship or investigate. A GM might even have one group of players roleplaying the gods, while another group runs the followers, trying to understand and implement the desires of the first.

Many different variations on this theme can be tried, depending on the interests of the players and the GM.

*Abstract Societal Concepts:* Art, beauty, smithing, carnage, crone, dance, disease, famine, fertility, guardian, handicrafts, harvest, healing, home and hearth, hunting, illusion, judgment, justice, law, learning, love, maiden, mercy, messenger, midwife, mother, music, oath or pledge, poetry, politics, peace, pestilence, prosperity, revenge, sickness, trade, victory, victim, war, warrior, wealth, wine, wisdom, witch.

*Historical Personages:* Deified historical persona, most often with associated myths and legends of their deeds. Ancestors, heroes, kings, saviors, saints, representatives of state and nation.

### The Symbolism of Form

The physical forms associated with a deity are often symbolic in nature, helping to reinforce the deity's attributes in the minds of its followers. The GM should think carefully when selecting forms for deities. Strong associations can help players make the proper connections, and the symbolic aspect can enrich and enliven the game world. The symbolism commonly associated with a variety of forms, in a variety of religions and cultures, appears below.

*Bull* - A common symbol in Near, Middle and Far Eastern religions, most gods in Semitic religions are likened to, and represented as, a bull. The bull was prominent as an incarnation or attribute of Egyptian gods and kings. People have variously associated the sun, the moon, and the constellation Taurus with the bull. The Hittites associated the bull with thunder. It embodies divine rage.

*Cat* - The cat was sacred to the Egyptians because it was the primary form of the Egyptian mother-goddess, Bast. The goddess Freya rode to war in a chariot pulled by cats. Cats are commonly associated with dark magics and various forms of luck or chance.

*Cow* - Sacred still in India and once in Egypt and Greece as well, the cow, a symbol of life through the rich bounty of its milk, embodies divine beneficence. In Egypt, Isis-Hathor was the divine cow whose udder produced the Milky Way and all the stars. She personified the night sky, being named also Nut or Neith, with the stars appearing along her belly. In Greece, the white cow-goddess called Io, the moon, who wore the three sacred colors red, white and black, was the precursor to Hera, frequently called "the cow-eyed." Another of her Greek names was Europa, mother of the continent of Europe. Her name means "full moon"; she wed the father of gods while he wore the form of a white bull.

*Coyote* - The tribes of the North American Indian groups see the Coyote as trickster and sometimes creator. The Coyote is pictured alternately as a trickster who releases impounded game, imparts knowledge of arts and crafts, secures fire, daylight or the sun, and as a bullying, licentious, greedy, erotic, fumbling dupe.

### Extent of Power

In some cosmologies, deities are all-powerful entities who control the very fabric of the universe. In others, deities have very specific powers that they may only use in limited circumstances. The definition of exactly what each deity can do is important in determining what powers they can then pass on to their clerics and worshipers.

*Dove* - A symbol of peace and purity, the dove is sacred to early divinities **of** love and fertility such as Ishtar and Aphrodite. In some places doves are used as sacrifices for divination and love charms.

*Eagle* - The king of birds, commonly associated with royalty. In Greek mythology the eagle was closely associated with Zeus and his lightning. In the Indian Vedas, the sacred soma was brought to man by an eagle. Everywhere the eagle is noted for the speed with which it flies, the keenness of its sight, the marvelous height to which it soars, the inaccessibility of its nests, and the many years it lives.



*Falcon* - A funerary symbol, the falcon is sometimes associated with the souls of the dead flying away to the lands of peace.

*Fox* — Commonly associated with slyness and cunning, the fox is a common Shapeshifter in many different mythologies.

*Hawk* - Ancient Egyptians recognized the hawk as a totemic form of the god Horus. In Greece the hawk was sacred to Apollo and hence, like the eagle, a sun bird. The hawk god Khu-en-ua was a conductor of souls, sometimes serving as the divine boatman ferrying the dead across the underground river.

## Omnipresence

The deity is everywhere, capable of influencing all things. Omnipresence is common in deities representing primal forces (such as fate or time) that are universal. It is a common characteristic of a monotheistic divinity. Omnipresent deities have a great sphere of influence, but often their power is relatively weak in any one place or time. They tend to choose breadth over depth, and can often be overcome by more vital (although limited) deities for short periods of time. But they generally prevail in the end. Their power is an inevitable part of life; there is no place to escape it.

## Omniscience

The deity knows all, sees all. This "all" may be just what is currently occurring upon the world, or it may extend into the past and the future, allowing the deity to know all possible outcomes of any given event. Omniscience is common in deities who represent truth and knowledge, as well as those who embody the primal forces of fate, prophecy and luck. Deities of light are often portrayed as omniscient, since part of light's symbolism is the shining brilliance that reveals all.

Omniscient deities will always know what their clerics and followers are up to. They are often approached for guidance or wisdom, though they often choose to veil their knowledge in riddles or ambiguous prophecies.

## Omnipotence

The deity is all-powerful. Omnipotent deities are relatively rare in mythology, for a deity who can right any wrong must answer for all that he leaves undone. Often omnipotent deities are seen as harsh, cold and uncaring, with concerns that reach far beyond the humble lives of their worshipers. Indeed, a truly omnipotent deity may not need worshipers!

Generally, an omnipotent deity is seen as a fundamental force - creator, destroyer, and all that falls in between. Omnipotence does not necessarily mean solitary, though many omnipotent deities are the only supernatural forces in their respective cosmologies. A cosmos with multiple omnipotent deities can be quite interesting, especially if they choose, for whatever reason, to limit their interactions with their followers and concentrate upon one another. (Omnipotent gods who concentrate on vexing the followers of *other* omnipotent gods can also make life very interesting - especially for the followers!)

## Limited Potency

Some deities are limited to a given area or locale, unable to extend beyond it. Others can touch any part of the world, but only in limited ways, usually related to the aspects they govern. For example, a god of wind can go anywhere, but his power may be limited to puffing and blowing, whipping up storms and mighty gales, carrying people or objects from one place to another. and so on. But he couldn't start a fire, build a house, or heal the sick. Other deities may be powerful at particular times, such as during the day, or in the winter, spending the rest of the time in a weakened state.

These limits might be natural, or self-imposed, or imposed from without. In some cosmologies even the deities must follow rules, particularly when interfering in the lives of their worshipers. This may be an absolute dictate that the deity may never violate, or a less-binding promise that tricky deities may seek to flout. Usually such restrictions aim to preserve some balance or primal force.

with the understanding that deities who meddle too much can throw things greatly out of kilter. Deities may even be subject to limitations placed upon them by others of their kind, in the form of curses, geases, or binding oaths or laws (see *Divine Laws,* p. 37).

## Physical Form

Once thought has been given to the extent of the deity's power, its physical form or manifestation should be considered. Does it have one constant form that it always takes? A variety of forms that it can choose between? Or is it completely mutable, taking whatever form it wishes at any moment? The more powerful the deity, the more likely that it has several possible forms. Static forms are generally found in the weakest of divinities (who don't have the power to change themselves), in those who represent some physical object from which they derive their form (such as the sun, a tree, or a mountain), or in the most powerful . . . where it might be said that the deity has no true form, but is found in all things. A deity's powers may change with its form, giving it good reason to switch from one to another.

### Humanoid

The "made-in-the-image-of-god" concept is relatively widespread. Many deities have a form mirrored by that of their worshipers, and the gods may often reveal themselves in this form. An anthropomorphic form can make the deity much less intimidating to its believers, creating a common ground. Deities with strong personalities, or who represent particularly human archetypes or motifs, will almost always have a humanoid form. Certainly it would be hard for a human to see anything but an extremely beautiful woman as a goddess of love and beauty!

### Animal

After humanoid, deities most commonly manifest physically in animal form. All of the Egyptian gods roamed the earth in animal forms. Animals are often seen as being closer to nature (and so the divine) than man is. Deities who take animal shapes also assume animal characteristics (see *Symbolism,* p. 66, and sidebar, pp. 25-29). Frequently the animal form is but one of many possible forms the deity might take (Zeus was notorious for taking animal forms during his amorous pursuits).

### Archetypal

Another common thought is that the divine essence infuses the material which it represents. Thus a sun deity *is* the sun, rising each morn and setting each night. The spirit of the river lives within the rushing and roaring tumult. A volcano's eruption is a physical manifestation of the anger of the deity that lives within. Once again, the archetypal form might be just one shape the deity can choose to assume.

### None

It is also possible that the deity has no shape whatsoever. This is especially true if the divine force is particularly abstract. Shamanistic divine spirits can affect the material world, but since they do not dwell on the physical plane, they have no physical bodies.

## The Symbolism of Form (Continued)

*Panther* - The panther or leopard was a totemic symbol of Dionysus, whose priests wore panther skins.

*Phoenix* - A symbol of rebirth, the phoenix is originally associated with a god of Phoenicia. The sun, who flew on wings through the heavens, was constantly immolated and reborn from the fires of sunset and sunrise. Egypt's phoenix was associated with a heron-like bird sacred to Osiris, symbolizing both the human soul and the god's cycle of rebirth and resurrection. Sometimes the bird represented the morning star.

*Ram* - Rams are commonly associated with male virility and fertility throughout the world. The Egyptian god Amon was symbolized by the ram, which also holds a place in the zodiac under the name Aries.

*Raven* - In almost all cultures ravens are considered to be birds of ill-omen, harbingers of death and pestilence. The raven was considered a battlefield bird in old Irish mythology, and several goddesses appeared on the combat field in this form. The Morrigan in particular invoked war by simulating the raven's harsh cry. A Russian epic identifies the raven as the symbol of the enemy, and in Lithuania the raven is considered a bird of battle. However, in Yukaghir folklore, in the tundra and scrub zones of Arctic Siberia, as well as in the traditions of Northwest Pacific Coast tribes from Alaska down through British Columbia, the raven is a trickster.

## Domiciles

If the deity has a physical form in this world, then that form may live in one place all the time, or may move to different locales. Supplicants may have to travel to address the deity, or it might come to them.

The GM must also decide if the domicile is the only place the deity has power, thereby limiting its sphere of influence. This may be true if the god lives within a volcano or a river, for instance. Or the residence may simply be the place where the deity has the most power, and thus chooses to settle.

### Within the World

The divinity might be one and the same as the particular aspect of the world that it represents. The goddess of the river may reside completely within the banks that bound her domain. The sun god might live in the sky, the volcano deity in his fiery pit of lava.

The deity may live in all instances of its aspect, only in some of the largest and most spectacular, or in one particular place. This decision may affect the deity's sphere of influence.

### Remote Locales

Another idea is that the deity resides in some remote location of the world. Mountains are perhaps the most popular, but at the four corners of the world, beneath the earth or the sea, and in the sky are all common locations. Anywhere that is particularly inaccessible will do, especially if it happens to be subject to powerful and inexplicable forces (earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and so on).

Once again, having placed the deity, the GM must decide just how inaccessible its dwelling truly is. Epic quests which require direct dealings with the divine make great fodder for high-fantasy campaigns.

### Wandering

Some deities don't live anywhere in particular, but rather roam hither and yon, according to duty or whim. Their particular aspect might require this wandering (disease, war and trade are all aspects that would suit itinerant deities), or it might just be the nature of the divine to be everywhere and nowhere at the same time. Many myths speak of deities who change shape into people or animals and wander the lands for purposes ranging from seduction to the completion of some goal or task.

If the deities wander, the GM should give some thought to how he will handle their direct interaction with characters. Most often those who see a god in physical form will have no idea that it is indeed a deity. (This is a good way for deities who are not omniscient to test the faith of their followers or clerics.)

### Holy Places

Deities may reside in certain icons, shrines, temples, or other objects particularly holy to themselves. This is most common for deities whose scope is limited to a particular geographic area, and who depend upon their worshipers for their power. Believers are charged with tending the repository of the divine essence, and in return they are granted boons and special powers. The power of the god might be tied directly to the form or structure which houses it, or it might be much more resilient, simply choosing to take up residence in this place for convenience or some other reason of its own.

## Other Planes

Another common thought is that some or all of the deities reside in some special area or plane beyond mortal ken. This might be the Greek Mount Olympus, the Egyptian underworld, the Hindu *Tap Loka* (Sphere of Penance), or the Immortal Plane.

If the deities live in another sphere or realm, what impact does that realm have on our own? Is it possible for a mortal to move from one to another, or can only a god make the trip? Myths are full of long, arduous journeys to the realms of the gods to ask some favor or gain some reward. Often there are a series of obstacles to keep out the unwary, a river or other "natural" boundary that must be crossed, and various other tests that only the truly worthy can overcome. Or perhaps the journey requires a special magic, like the ecstatic-trance of the shaman, to pierce the realm of the divine - a journey made in spirit or soul as opposed to body.

Note also that different deities may control different realms. The concept of a deity whose task it is to supervise the souls of the dead is almost universal. And Mother Earth is almost always thought to reside within the earth itself.

## Immortality and Death

In most cases, deities cannot die. Certainly they can ignore most, if not all, threats from mortals. Most deities are immortal - once created they will continue to exist until the end of time. Their full powers are far beyond those that any mortal can muster - so giving them have numeric attributes or hit points is rather futile. They are not affected by normal weapons or magics. At best they might be bargained with, or weakened by disrupting the lives and worship of those who give them power. However, there are some exceptions to this general rule. The following sections cover instances in which deities might be weakened even to the point of true death.

### Fading

Those deities who gain their powers directly from their worshipers can be weakened to the point of "fading" if all who pay them tribute are destroyed. A faded deity still exists, but does not actively manifest in the material world. Should its worship be resumed, the deity can be brought back, but this is a long, costly process that will take years, if not generations (see *Faded Gods,* p. 32).

### Physical Deaths

Lesser deities (often little more than spirits) might be bound to some physical entity such as a shrine or holy object. Depending on the nature of the binding, destroying the object may destroy the deity. On the other hand, this might just set the deity free, possibly dissipating its powers until it can find another such object to reside in.

In other cases, a deity might choose to manifest a great deal of its power in a single form in order to complete some mission or task. This form, sometimes called an *avatar* (see sidebar, p. 38), will have but a fraction of the deity's true power, and is