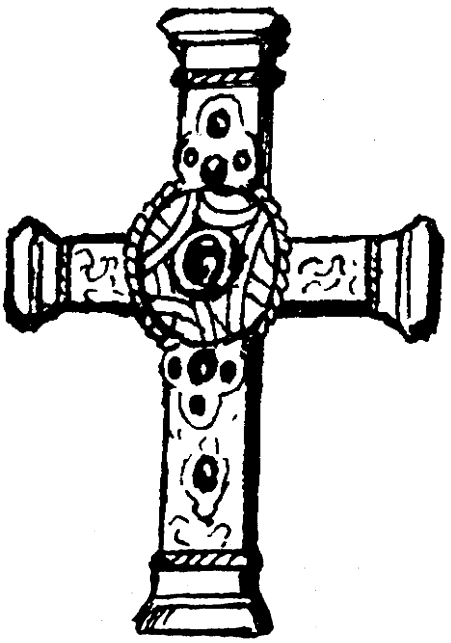
Reflections of a real-life Cleric



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Even though clergypersons are supposed to teach people how to be a "light to the world," there are times when one is tempted to go incognito and hide one's light under the nearest bushel basket. I am an ordained minister in the United Methodist Church, and yet there are times when I prefer not to be known as one.

And why should a minister ever wish not to be known as one? For instance, when he (or she) is playing *Dungeons & Dragons*. It's difficult enough to explain my hobbies to my congregation—but then, most of them figure that ministers are kind of spaced-out anyway. After a while, they come to accept me as "normal," because they see in my life the fruits of a healthy mind and heart, and we establish a relationship which enables us to appreciate each other.

However, when one is happily talking about fantasy gaming with a group of fellow hobbyists, sooner or later one is bound to ask you what you do for a living, and it's then that things tend to get awkward.

Like, after the initial shock, one will tend to say to you, "I bet all your characters are Clerics (or Lawful Good, or whatever)." In order to disabuse them of this stereotype, I generally tell them about the group of ministers and theologs I play with: My specialties are Bards and Druids; one fellow plays the most astounding Assassins you have ever seen; another is enamored of weaponless combat ("watch me pummel that displacer beast!"); and so forth.

Others assume that playing a fantasy game with a minister would be a crashing bore, and thus would feel awkward sharing their hobby in my presence. Again, this is stereotyping. In fact, I find the reverse is often true. The men and women I play with are of varying ages, all very well-read, with a breadth of imagination, a contact with real life with its sorrows and raw deals (and also its triumphs), and a feel for fantasy that I find very hard to duplicate elsewhere. After playing with them (or people like them), I find other groups less sophisticated and harder to get used to.

Another problem is that for many people, clergypersons are seen as *inhibitors of fun* rather than *sharers of fun*, and this brings me to the point of this essay. The non-churched population generally views the Christian faith (and religion in general) in terms of a body of rules and regulations designed to keep one from enjoying oneself. This is a false view, but a prevalent one, and voices in the Christian community have been raised of late saying that such things as Dungeons &Dragons are questionable at best (damnable at worst). The double effect of misunderstanding and misguided righteousness on either hand have made fantasy role-playing games a hot topic in the religious community. It is my purpose to lay out a Christian understanding of the uses of fantasy, and then speak from a pastoral perspective on the value of role-playing games. Others may disagree with me, and they are welcome to do so. But for all those who feel that the real-life Clerics are after them the bubble of fear and resentment needs to be burst.

The Uses of Fantasy

When I was in Seminary, I heard endless exhortations from accomplished preachers on the art of preaching. And one of the most oft-repeated statements I heard was "You gotta preach with the Bible in one hand and today's newspaper in the other." Now, I understand what these princes of the pulpit were tying to say, and I have tied to heed their advice. They were basically saying that the task of one who preaches is to address the very real concerns of very real people and connect their needs with the resources that the Christian faith offers: matching hatred with love; corruption with justice; brokenness with healing; sin with forgiveness; turmoil with peace; apathy with commitment. But what was often left out of their exhortations was the need of every human being to not only *manage* his life well, but to find fulfillment in it. And where fantasy comes in is when we realize that fantasy is part of a very deep level of the human soul—a part of us that also aches to be filled with the wholeness offered by religious faith.

In his magnificent essay *On Fairy-Stories*, J. R. R. Tolkien spoke a definitive word about *why* human beings contrive make-believe. He writes,

> *"The magic of Faerie is not an end in itself, its virtue is in its operations: among these are the satisfaction of certain primordial human desires. One of these desires is to survey the depths of space and time. Another is . . . to hold communion with other living things."*[1]

These desires are part of what make us human, and if they find not their object in God, then they will seek satisfaction elsewhere. Likewise, a faith that does not touch these deep recesses will fail to really satisfy human beings and cheat them of their hope for wholeness.

For Tolkien, fantasy is a natural imitation of God, and the gospel a realization of the dim longings of countless generations. On the one hand, he views the making of fantasy milieux as a part of what it means to be made in the image of God. He is the Creator; we are Sub-creators, given the grace to enrich his world with imaginary worlds; to add to his creatures creatures that never were. As Tolkien writes,

> *"Dear Sir," I said— "Although now long estranged,*
> *Man is not wholly lost nor wholly changed.*
> *Dis-graced he may be, yet is not de-throned,*
> *and keeps the rags of lordship once he owned:*
> *Man, Sub-creator, the refracted Light*
> *through whom is splintered from a single White*
> *to many hues, and endlessly combined*
> *in living shapes that moue from mind to mind.*
> *Though all the crannies of the world we filled*
> *with Elves and Goblins, though we dared to build*
> *Gods and their houses out of dark and light,*
> *and sowed the seed of dragons—'twas our right*

(used or misused). That right has not decayed: we make still by the law in which we're made."[2]

And on the other hand, Tolkien sees the natural bent for human fantasy caught up, epitomized, and redeemed in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. As usual, he puts it best:

"The Gospels contain a fairy-story, or a story of a larger kind which embraces all the essence of fairy-stories . . . But this story has entered History and the primary world; the desire and aspiration of sub-creation has been raised to the fulfillment of Creation . . . There is no tale ever told that men would rather find was true, and none which so many sceptical men have accepted as true on its own merits. For the Art of it has the supremely convincing tone of Primary Art, that is, of Creation. To reject it leads either to sadness or to wrath."[3]

In the same essay, Tolkien also notes three particular functions of fairy-stories (and by extension, of fantasy games): Escape, Recovery, and Consolation.

Escape is a legitimate exercise. Too many "realists" condemn fantasy as "escapist." But what is wrong with escape (or vacation, if you will)? Life presents us with certain hard facts, such as a limited amount of money, a comparatively short lifespan, and our social environment. Why should one be condemned for experiencing second-hand, as it were, things that he cannot afford, stretches of time he could not live to see, or a mode of living impossible in 20th-centuy America (such as fighting with edged weapons in real combat)? And if Life has dealt you a weak hand, who says it's your duty to enjoy it? Can't a person living in the depths of a ghetto fantasize about drinking from a pure mountain stream he cannot realistically get to?

Recovery means seeing things from a new angle, recovering a proper sense of things. Fantasies and faery-stories of undying love help us to suddenly see our spouses and sweethearts in a new light, recovering a fresh appreciation for who they really are, and for what they mean to us. Fantasy vehicles involve moral implications that also sharpen our focus: Fantasized nobility helps clean out the shabbiness and cheapness which often clothes the world and its inhabitants for us; fantasized villainy awakens us to the potential Faust in each of us.

Consolation centers on the Happy Ending: not as a contrived, gimmicked, sugar-coated result with no bearing on reality or relation to previous events; but rather, fantasy vehicles involve us in joy through the resolution of their conflicts. And the greater the terror, the dreariness or the hassles, the greater the joy that uplifts us when the moment of triumph arrives. I always try to make my dungeons as challenging as possible. That way, when a player character emerges victorious, he has really accomplished something. And more than that—more than the satisfaction of having played well—he or she has experienced a joy that belongs only to those who have faced great odds and hopeless situations, and then seen deliverance won by a hair's-breadth. *That* is what keeps bringing 'em back to play again and again.

Thus, for me (and for many others) fantasy is an important and natural human activity: It is a function of the human soul which brings me fully alive. The pleasure I get from walking out of doors is greater because I have walked in the sweet shadows of Lothlorien and upon the high valleys of the Fixed Island on Perelandra.

Pastoral Perspectives

Of course, I do not mean to make this essay one long paean to fantasy. Fantasy heals the mind; it can also be used to rot the mind. Humanity is a two-edged sword: Nothing that can be used for good cannot also be used for evil. And so, let me lay a few patented pastoral profundities on you.

First, as to role-playing as a gaming device. Role-playing is fairly new to gaming, but it has been around in the counselling room for quite a while. Many self-destructive patterns in behavior and emotions can be linked to early psychological conditioning in the family, so often a person in counselling will be asked to assume the role of a

parent or someone else deeply involved with his own psyche, and speak to "himself" in an empty chair, telling himself the healing messages that he needs to hear. For instance, a person with workaholic tendencies instilled by his upbringing might assume the role of his "parent" and tell his "child" that it's okay to have fun, too, and that you're important for who you are, not just for how much work you can crank out.

Role-playing is also used to train people in the caring professions. When I was doing clinical work in a major hospital, we seminarians would take turns playing ministers and patients with various concerns and personalities. Then we would evaluate how we had perceived each other, and both the "minister" and the "patient" would emerge with a deeper knowledge of the dynamics of the situation.

Role-playing is a liberating exercise. It frees you from the pretense of trying so hard to be what you want others to think you are. Instead, by assuming a role, you can be whatever you want to be, and in the process you grow in your understanding of human behavior (your own, not the least). One of the geniuses of *D&D* and *AD&D* is the identification of a player with a continuing, developing character. A good character, well played, involves particular aspects of your self-image and allows you to plumb their depths. Each of my most-favored characters contains within his personality some seed of myself. I get a different enjoyment and grow in different areas from playing each one.

Second, as a pastor, I find that playing D&D with others is an incredible tool for informal diagnosis. I am trained to understand the motives and makeup of people: It is part of my calling to understand what makes them tick, in order to understand and affirm who they are, and minister to them. I have never found anything like fantasy role-playing for revealing who a person really is. And that enables me to effectively care for that person and affirm him or her even more.

Third, role-playing gives us a sanity break. People ask me why I play *Dungeons & Dragons.* One reason is for my emotional health. Aggression and anger, for instance, can be dealt with constructively or destructively. Destructively, you unload on people, or yourself. Constructively, you have the option of unloading on objects (e.g., a racquetball), or you can assume a role and unload on a bunch of hapless orcs with no guilt and no restraints.

Unfortunately, the fourth note in this chord is a sour one. I said that fantasy, like all that is human, is a two-edged sword. Each of these benefits of role-playing games has its pathological counterpart. It is possible to become obsessed with fantasy vehicles and lose contact with the real world, rather than returning to it refreshed. It is often seen that player characters are used as a means of relating to people dishonestly: Rather than assume a role, a player with emotional problems merely changes his name to "Siblfurd Yorgenmiddling" or whatever and plays out his destructive behavior in a non-healthy way, inviting rejection and disrupting the enjoyment of others. There are those for whom magic and demonology cease to be conventions of the game and become real-life pursuits. The list of possible perversions is endless.

It is this which elicits the questioning response to fantasy role-playing games on the part of the religious community. Healthy people fear their kids/friends will become unhealthy; responsible people fear their charges will become irresponsible; believers fear that fantasy role-playing games produce non-believers, or at least provide a seductive arena for unhealthy commerce with hostile values.

On the whole, I think these fears are ungrounded. It is possible to misuse fantasy, role-playing, and any other hobby, but the great majority of people who dabble in them are healthy persons. And almost always, what comes out of a person who plays games like *D&D* is merely a distillation of what that person brought to the game to begin with.

C. S. Lewis made a useful point in his book, *An Experiment in Criticism.* Rather than calling a book (or in this case, a game genre) *good* or *bad* on the basis of what we think of it, we ought to judge it by how it is used. Any book (or game) which *can* be used for healthy enjoyment (what Lewis called *healthy castle-building)* is a good work, even if poorly written or conceived, and even if some do misuse it. On the other hand, only those works which can *only* be used for what he called *morbid castle-building* should be condemned by critics.

As a pastor called to care for people and help them to find wholeness for their lives through God, I am as deeply concerned as any about those who misuse fantasy vehicles. As a convinced believer in the supernatural (and in the supernatural conflict between good and evil), I am a vocal partisan for my Lord against all other claimants to primacy in life. As a Christian, I believe the statement, "Bad company ruins good morals."[4] But at its most fundamental core, I find that games such as *Dungeons & Dragons* provide immense enjoyment in a healthy way, and are even useful in personal growth. A healthy group of gamers can be a tremendous environment for a person to thrive in. It is not for everybody, of course: Some don't have the taste for it, and some should not play it if they are going to become compulsive about it. But on the whole, I say "Roll those dice!"

Notes

[1]"On Fairy-Stories," *The Tolkien Reader,* Ballantine Books, New York 1966, p. 13
[2]*Ibid.,* p. 54
[3]*Ibid.,* pp. 71-72
[4]I Corinthians 15:33