The Agnostic Paladin: Belief and Ontology in Fantasy

In June 1963, Thích Quảng Đức, a Vietnamese monk belonging to the Mahayana school of Buddhism, burned himself to death in the streets of Saigon. At the time of his death, Đức had been an ordained monk for over 40 years. This act of self-immolation was far from the first of its kind in Vietnam, but it was, and still is, one of the most ardent examples of protest in the modern world. When one examines the infamous photograph that immortalized Đức's death—a static, monochrome portrait of roiling flames—it's not hard to understand why: The monk is marked by poise, composure, and utter defiance of what must have been agony. He is unmoved by the fire. Unwavering in his final moments.

When audiences around the world heard and witnessed this story, the reaction was overwhelming. It was not regarded as an act of suicide or despair, but rather as a renunciation of his life to serve a greater cause, a moment of martyrdom against a repressive Catholic regime. Đức's monastic appearance and manner are at the very center of this perception. Much of his life is still shrouded, perhaps romanticized, by the mystical "otherness" of Buddhist philosophy and meditative practices. Was he in pain? Did he expect to be reborn? What were the final thoughts of such a stoic man? Whatever the answers to these questions, there is an irreducible conclusion: Đức's beliefs and commitment to Buddhism transcended his fear of death.

I mention this example, in part, because it contrasts so sharply with the way in which modern society approaches the real-world interplay of religious identity and decision-making. After all, most Christians aren't prepared to sacrifice their own children on the basis of a divine command. The vast majority of us, whether atheist, agnostic, or devoutly religious, turn to the pillars of secular logic and secular laws when functioning in the secular world. When we buy groceries, we are preoccupied with coupons rather than whether or not God approves of buying three boxes of Wheat Thins. When we eat a burger and fries from a drive-through, we rarely pull over and set our napkins aside to ask God to bless our meal. Over time, the chasm between secular activities and religious spheres of influence has widened considerably. No longer infused in daily life as it was in medieval times, religion—at least in the west—has become a segregated aspect of living (often confined to a day of the week in a designated setting) rather than a moment-to-moment, lifelong, inescapable process of self-sacrifice to a deity or deities. This shift could be due to our pronounced reliance on science in the modern world, or perhaps due to cracks in the foundation of belief that once underpinned humanity's devotion, but the result is the same.

When Đức burned himself to death, it's doubtful that he was thinking about impressing the audience around him or envisioning what he'd do that evening. His commitment to the present moment, embodied in his stillness despite imminent suffering and death, was nothing short of religious surrender. One of Buddhism's most misunderstood yet fundamental teachings relates to anicca, or impermanence, which defines our lives in minor and drastic ways. Đức was prepared to abandon his connection to his body, which is impermanent and subject to decay, despite every pressure of the modern world assuring us that pain must be avoided at all costs to preserve our sense of self. To reach this point, Đức surely lived a life that was infused with religious education, practice, and diligence. Most of us cannot say the same. Even if a deity appeared in this very moment, enveloped in divine flames and speaking directly to you in a booming voice, you would be wracked with the uncertainty and logical coldness that modern society has fostered.

Whether this is objectively good or bad is not the point, however. It is an illustration of how belief, or lack thereof, holds sway over the way in which we live our lives. In our world, we are, however justified, highly skeptical of those who claim to have a divine connection to heaven (or any other supernatural realm). We are dismissive of the idea that sacrificing an animal or person is a surefire way to influence an event's outcome. Even our most earnest beliefs about the ways in which a Judeo-Christian God might function, such as healing a child with an incurable disease, are tempered by a secular curiosity about whether anything is listening at all, particularly when our worst fears comes to fruition. If one prays for something and does not receive what they want, they are prone to writing off their prayers as an ironic, even childish, effort.

With this in mind, there are three discernible categories of religious thought among those who believe in divinity. The first group of believers are entirely authentic in their beliefs, and live their lives in accordance with their belief system. Đức would fall into this category. The second group describes those who are somewhat sincere, but take their own beliefs with a grain of salt. They might attend church once or twice a week, but ignore the idea of divine retribution against themselves when cutting somebody off in traffic or spreading rumors. The third category, then, are believers who are believers in name only. There is little to no thought of God or gods in their daily inner monologue, and religion is a box to be ticked on annual polls.

But what does this ontological gradient have to do with fantasy? The answer lies in moral agency. In the aforementioned examples, the three arbitrary gradient shades of belief (and, in practice, sincerity of belief), there is a sense of how prevalent religious thought is in a moral agent's mind. Conceptions of divinity and its eminence in the world are a fervent factor in human behavior. The most devout human beings are willing to self-immolate or sacrifice their children for their beliefs, while the least devout consider the popular notion of God to be more of a mental concept than a feature or inherent property of reality. For some, religion is largely symbolic, and for others, it is the alpha and omega of everything in existence. This schism has produced a stew of competing ideologies that has, in turn, produced an unimaginably complex and sprawling tapestry of worldviews. In fantasy, we tend to approach religion—and in turn, the logical actions of characters within fantasy worlds—as something with extreme and polar states. The intricacies of belief are glossed over, reduced for the sake of digestible worldbuilding and readers' mental categorization. Belief is opposed by nonbelief; zealotry is opposed by flippancy.

This plays out in blunt yet familiar ways across the realm of fantasy. The genre's characters, for the most part, fall into the dualism of being either atheists or heathen-sacrificing cultists. Religious champions are fanatics; the nonreligious are sardonic, nihilist malcontents. The middle ground exists in some high-concept works, such as Bakker's Second Apocalypse or Erikson's Malazan, but for the most part, religion in fantasy is treated as a high-octane character ornament rather than a gradient of belief for followers. If there is a warrior culture with a belief in a war-based afterlife, you can bet that >90% of that culture's population is going to embrace death in combat and pursue that end like one of the chrome-painted War Boys in Mad Max: Fury Road. If there is a pantheon of forest, river, and desert gods, there will be shrines aplenty. The issue with this approach, when used throughout an entire series as opposed to a basis for one or two religions, is that it presents a universal religious culture that is fantastical in all the wrong ways.

This all-or-nothing approach to belief is typically a stand-in for Earth's religious belief, but it is not modeled after reality. It is, like much of fantasy's other tropes, modeled after a facsimile of reality—namely a pastiche of textbooks about ancient mythology, past depictions of religion in fantasy, and the vestiges of Judeo-Christian ideology in the way we approach religion.

In that sense, fantasy religions are a caricature of a caricature. They are shadows of shadows. Because we have few historical sources about agnostics or atheists before the modern era (which is already assuming that agnosticism and atheism existed as we understand it today), we tend to assume that these outlying groups simply did not exist, and furthermore, that they were happily cheering on the Aztec priests during heart-extracting ceremonies atop the step pyramids.

Instead, I would submit that the existential crises that arise in the gulf between direct knowledge of divinity and our own uncertainty are what make us conscious beings. Some eras of history, such as the Reformation or Renaissance, are marked by a head-on confrontation with our inability to grasp, let alone make sense of, ultimate reality. What could we ever hope to know about God, or gods, in any real sense? Yet this struggle, this seemingly unwinnable battle against bottomless ignorance and chaos, has produced some of our world's most vivid expressions of consciousness: tragic art, ecstatic music, breathtaking literature, glorious speeches, actions (such as Đức's) that transcend the human dimension and elevate our existence to something that defies, however briefly, the march of time.

This dimension is absent in much of modern fantasy, and I find myself wondering why. All art is a reflection of its makers, granted, but even this cannot account for the missing depth that ought to stir these imaginary worlds. There are untold peaks and valleys to be explored in the search for moral truths and absolute reality. Our own history is a mélange of these cycles: crusades, genocides, charities, all coexisting against the backdrop of faith and doubt. Even with the science of the 21st century, we are utterly devoid of leads in the search for meaning that defines our existence. We are all seeking, grasping, probing for something that we cannot yet define. And if such texture can arise among humanity in our (ostensibly) bland world, the possibilities for this ongoing drama exist in even greater concentrations in fantasy realms, where the author is free to dangle religious truths and prophecies and miracles before fictional populations.

Part of the genre's shallow approach to religious identities and ideas is evident in the certainty of worldbuilding. When authors present gods (or God) in their full, omnipotent glory, complete with a physical form and blessings, there's a silent death in their universe. A death of the mystique and wonder that accompanies not knowing. For the inhabitants of fantasy worlds, there is no painful floundering with the beautiful burden of consciousness. There are seldom philosophers or religious critics to challenge these pantheons and the extent of their influence. And yet, returning to the concept of an author's own beliefs shaping the fantasy world, we must entertain the notion that it is a desperate cry for truth. An author's clear-cut stance on whether their universe is empty (lacking in gods) or divine may be an attempt to control that which is beyond our grasp in the "real world."

In spite of this, or perhaps because of it, it seems that the role of truth and divinity is waiting to be excavated in fantasy. It is a safe ground from which we can explore the driving, often maddening quest behind our entire lives as finite beings. We are all seeking a state of permanent happiness, an escape from fear, a retreat from pain. We are seeking the attributes or shelter of a permanent being. The answers to life's design may or may not be apparent to fantasy characters, but as soon as questions of existence begin to arise, there is no way to bury them. Fantasy offers us a chance to experiment with how a conscious moral agent can make peace with their own conception of reality, and in doing so, to understand how these characters are a mirror for our own quest. There's ample drama to be found in characters who recognize the faults in their own beliefs and connections to a monotheistic God. There are untold terrors and triumphs associated with characters coming to grips with—or denying—the direct influence of fate in their

world. There are, true to our own experiences, vast abysses full of doubt and cosmic horror in worlds that place humans beneath the thumb of tangible gods.

These concepts are nuanced, and difficult, and even frightening when faced beyond the silkscreen of fantasy, but they have the potential to introduce tremendous richness into fictional realms, as well as the world of the reader. Existential doubt is a dimension that moves beyond the interplay of time, space, and matter (including dragons), and instead serves as meditation on the nature of eternity for all beings, no matter their universe. And while fantasy may have once been a stomping ground for parades of leather armor, princesses, and horned helmets, it has become a vessel to understand who and what we are. It is a running commentary on the certainty and simplicity we crave in our strange, mundane existence.