

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

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How Many Hidden Cults Is Too Many?

By Ed Greenwood

*How and where and when did the **Forgotten Realms** start? What's at the heart of Ed Greenwood's creation, and how does the Grand Master of the Realms use his own world when he runs **D&D** adventures for the players in his campaign? "Forging the Forgotten Realms" is a weekly feature wherein Ed answers all those questions and more.*

his is one of those questions with many correct answers, depending on who's trying to answer it.

Let me narrow it a trifle. I really mean: "How many hidden cults is too many *within your campaign*?"

In my Realms campaign, the short answer is that there's no such thing as too many hidden cults. I LOVE hidden cults.

You might hate them. You might not want religion to play so large a part—or any part at all—in your **D&D** games. That's fine. Tolkien gave us a rich fantasy world that had great struggles between clearly defined good and evil, but nary a temple or adorned priest in sight.

Yet if you do use cults, particularly in a bustling city and where struggles for power ebb and flow among royalty, nobility, rising-in-wealth commoners, and perhaps immigrants, they can prove a rich addition to a campaign that spurs characters' adventures and investigations.

Which is why my longer answer to the question we began with would be: You only need to have more hidden cults than your players can pin down, unravel, and understand. That way, there's always confusion, mystery, and intrigue—the root material of any urban, heavy-roleplaying campaign, and useful in all forms of ongoing **D&D** play.

Simply put, hidden cults represent change, the growth and renewal of all living faiths—and one of the spookiest ways of reviving old, dead faiths (Moander, anyone?). They often involve skulking deception, and exclusivity in the form of a secret society of initiates who want to gain special powers or status and keep nonbelievers and the ignorant out—relegated to lesser standing, not favored by whatever the cult worships.

The object of that worship might well be a sleeping (or skeletal) dragon, a floating skull, a talking hand, a ghost beholder, or The Crown That Flies by Itself (and unleashes deadly magic, or animates zombies and skeletons by momentarily settling around what's left of their heads). Any of these could be an aspect of a known deity, or a new, "true" way of envisaging and venerating a deity. ("Know you that Tempus has been this deadly flying-by-itself sword *all along*, and we blessed few who realize this will now be favored before all others, because those others worship Tempus in mistaken, lesser ways.")

There are false cults, in which the gullible are deceived by a rogue priest or a wizard or even a few miscreants who wield some magic items to create "holy" manifestations and effects. In some cases, such deceivers get a terrifying surprise when a deity or a divine servitor takes notice of their doings and steps in to provide "real" holy effects and commands.

There are cults that are rooted in, or are covers for, efforts to overthrow a current ruler, or to avenge a secular injustice. Such a group might be started by nobles who hate the king and want to take him down for what he did to their ancestors; so, to gain dupes or aid for their personal revenge, they cloak their campaign as a "holy cause" that others may genuinely believe in.

There are also cults founded on misunderstandings of scripture, or disagreements over details of doctrine. Sects and schisms develop when some worshipers turn to a different path from that of the wider faith, or spurn the authority of their superiors within the established priesthood. The "official" churches may well seek to hunt down, root out, and punish or slay members of these "heretic" cults. Adventurers might be hired or commanded (as a demonstration of their faith) to defend such a cult or to hunt down and expose or eradicate it.

Even if what's being worshiped isn't sinister, cultists might be asked to steal or murder or kidnap as part of their worship, or to fulfill the requirements of a ritual ("The Sleeping God can come to us only if we open the gate, which means we must spill the blood of a particular sort of victim on this stone, as the light of the full moon falls upon it, in the presence of the Stone of Opening, which happens to be the largest sapphire adorning the High King's crown. And if he won't willingly part with it, we must steal it, or just lop off his head and bring it, crown and all, to sit upon the stone as we perform the Chant of Opening.")



Cults are cults, no matter what they worship or how they conduct themselves. Which of course means They Must Be Stopped. Usually by PCs who have to figure out what's going on, in great haste, without a helpfully explaining cultist to guide them. (Remember, it's hard to get anything but cryptic answers out of a cultist that's dying on the end of your blade, or one that took poison when you stormed in, or one that's raving mad thanks to something imbibed during an earlier ritual—or one that's in the midst of transforming into or out of a monstrous, scaly, serpentine body that could rend your limb from limb if unfettered.)

And perhaps They Must Be Stopped over and over again. As in, whenever the moon is full and the queen is overtaken by the madness that then afflicts her. Or because the dark heart worshiped by the cultists is apt to flit (in the form of a ghostly, murky, darting cloud) out of the mouth of the evil high priest you just beheaded and on into someone else's mouth—an unfortunate someone who will become the next maniacal leader of the cult.

Perhaps there is a family curse, or a hereditary mark that one of the characters bears and doesn't know the significance of—and when the heroes try to find out, the "lucky" individual comes to the attention of the cult as the long-sought Accursed One or the New Dark Lord or the Chosen Sacrifice.

If some of these elements seem too extreme, or seem to be forcing your players into involvements they don't want and will see as DM railroading—well, none of them need be true.

Overused, cults can be too much of a good thing. Gorging on a favorite dessert can be too much of a good thing, too, but few fans of that dessert would want it eliminated forever because overuse can sicken.

Yet there's nothing juicier, to some players, than to have their characters enter a certain town or city again, and have them look at each other and murmur, "That's where the cult of the Blood-Drenched Bat keeps rising. *How* many times have we put it down, now? They've had less than a year to rebuild, but I wonder . . ."

What form will the cult take this time? Lord So-And-So was its Hooded Head last time around; will there be higher nobility involved now? Perhaps even the princess? Or the queen?

If that thought brings a delicious shiver, you know you haven't had too many hidden cults yet.

Bwaahahahah, and oh, yes: Enjoy.

About the Author

Ed Greenwood is the man who unleashed the *Forgotten Realms* setting on an unsuspecting world. He works in libraries, and he writes fantasy, science fiction, horror, mystery, and romance stories (sometimes all in the same novel), but he is happiest when churning out Realmslore, Realmslore, and more Realmslore. He still has a few rooms in his house in which he has space left to pile up papers.