

## **Religion and World of Warcraft**

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When I started interviewing people on World of Warcraft, trying to find out what, if any, religions they held, I didn't expect I would receive such a great range of answers. Some would politely whisper to me their answer, others would ask me what it was for, and some were very hostile. One player, Cavpaladin, was very suspicious of me and thought I was going to make fun of him when he told me his religion. He said, "I have already had someone pick on me because of my religion and I had them booted." Unfortunately, I believe this story to be true and think that it is sad that some people would tease others on a basis of their beliefs. I was met with constant resistance when performing my in-game research. People in my own guild even had a hard time believing that I was doing the research for an actual study. One member harshly made fun of me for suggesting that such a study would be taken seriously. Despite these hindrances, I was able to get a solid amount of data that would assist in my research of the correlations between religion and World of Warcraft. It is important to note, however, that although our research was significant, it is still extremely small and limited considering the millions of players who play the game. Because of this, any conclusions drawn can never be said to be concrete and covering all situations. In order to gain a full understanding of these correlations, it is important to research three main topics: in-game religions, the effect of real-life religion on race and class choices, and the effect of real-life religion on Horde vs. Alliance choices.

In order to get a better understanding of World of Warcraft and religion's role within it, it is important to analyze the religions that exist within the lore and history

written by the makers of the game. These fictional religions, that often comprise a significant piece of the race's individual histories within the game, may have a significant impact on the faction, race, and class choices made by players. Therefore, an analysis and explanation of the major religions within the game is necessary before the analysis of the effect of religion on in-game choices can be performed. A player posting on a forum in WoWwiki.com presented a great entry into this analysis. He was posting on a forum regarding religion when he asked questions that showed he was seeking information on in-game religions. He asked questions such as, "Do the races in the World of Warcraft worship gods? Are they Christians? To whom or what do they pray to?" (WoWWiki 2008). To answer these questions, significant amounts of research had to be performed on the forums concerning religions within World of Warcraft so that a foundation of understanding can be laid. Without proper understanding of the religions within the game, the correlations to real-life religions may not be as clear.

The Alliance seems to have the most structured religion in the game: the Holy Light. This religion includes a church, basic teachings, and something to worship (the Light). Humans, Draenei, night elves, and some dwarves follow the Holy Light. In addition, users of the "Light" include classes such as priests, paladins, and blood knights. (WoWWiki 2008). The Holy Light is very similar to Catholic and Protestant Christianity; however, Bizzard does not base it on any real religion in order to avoid lawsuits. Humans follow the Holy Light to gain spiritual awareness and guidance. Thus, the humans don't pray to any "gods" (if the "Light" is to not be considered a deity itself). However, they do pray to this "Light" as a force. This religion allows them to lead others throughout their journeys. Humans used to worship this Light in a church based in Lordaeron. They now worship in the Cathedral of

Lights located in Stormwind. This almost makes Stormwind a World of Warcraft version of the Vatican City. While all humans worship this Light, the core location for their religion is in this city (WoWWiki 2008).

Humans value the three teachings of the Holy Light, also known as the three virtues, which are respect, tenacity, and compassion. These three virtues are highly similar to the core foundations on which Jesus based his message to the Christian community. Respect is the first and foremost virtue. Practitioners of the Holy Light believe in the “betterment” of the universe and strive to bring happiness to others. They have to respect the world in which they live and must continue on the tradition of the Light and its followers. The second virtue is tenacity. A follower of the Holy Light spends years trying to truly affect the universe in a positive fashion. A great amount of tenacity is required to devote one’s self to the religion and to the betterment of the universe. It is easy to positively affect a person or a small group of people, but much time is needed to affect the world. The Holy Light’s followers need tenacity in order to successfully execute with the first value. The third virtue is compassion, which is arguably the most important of the three virtues. One’s connection with the universe and his surroundings is key to the betterment of himself and his ultimate happiness. His compassion must be in an ever-present state of growth in order to fulfill this connection. Too much compassion, however, can lead to excessive helping of others when help isn’t needed and doing more harm than good. Humans learn this virtue last because it allows those who are able to grow, to grow on their own. Once they learn this virtue, they are able to truly help those around them. Only the most intelligent followers have mastered this attribute (WoWWiki 2008).

The Horde does not utilize this Holy Light. They appear to have much more obscure and ill-defined religious practices. As one could guess, members of the Horde do not believe in the three virtues, as they do not believe in the Holy Light as a religion. The religions of horde are scattered and lack any significant form or structure. The closest one thing that the Horde has to an established religion is Shamanism and the act of nature worship. Those who follow these virtues include Tauren, Trolls, and Orcs. Being one with nature is a priority in Shamanism. Anything that has ever lived owns a distinctive and enduring spirit. Unlike the human race, Tauren, Trolls, and Orcs who practice this mysticism follow the spirits and the goddess Elune (WoWWiki 2008).

It's hard to say if the Horde races believe in the "after-life". It appears that most races do not. However, during a quest within the game, it is indicated that a dying Troll begins to see a "blue light" as he is dying. Whether this is indicative of an after-life, or simply of a greater being, is unclear. Typically, the Horde races do believe that anything that has lived, or is alive, is associated spiritually with nature. One exception to this is the Trolls. Tauren, for example, live their lives in honor of their ancestors' spirits, through which they meditate. Although they do worship trees, water, and earth, they hold ancestral worship with much higher esteem. Tauren are highly dedicated in their worship, whereas the Orcs are not so diligent. They are, however, slowly learning and gaining a greater appreciation of the spiritual world due to the cruelty they have seen through the scourge. Trolls are also gaining a much greater appreciation for Shamanism and nature worship after giving up their cruel practices of cannibalism and sacrifice. The goddess Elune, or Mu'sha to Tauren, plays a major role in the Horde's divine nature worship. She protects all living things in the world and believes that all of nature should be surrounded by peace.

Trolls, however, have trouble with peacekeeping because of their dark past. Although it is clear that Elune does her best to calm the violent race, their progress is much slower than that of the Orcs and Tauren. Arcane magic is considered evil by Elune, yet her followers do not always agree. Arcane magic is ever-present in Azeroth, and is a power that Elune believes brings evil to the world. She has tried many times to drive away the power, but it has corrupted far too many individuals to be completely silenced (WoWWiki 2008).

The followers of Shamanism and nature worship do not totally disagree with the alliance's worship of the Holy Light. Worshipping The Holy Light resembles a holy association with something, much like Shamanism. In spite of this, Shamanism and nature worshipers believe that spiritual power comes from countless spirits that unite all; while followers of the Light believe that the light is from lone individuals and their connections with their surroundings and the universe. These various forms of Horde religion are often assessed as evil, because in-experienced players may assign this quality to the Horde as a whole. The Tauren, for instance, are clearly not an "evil" race; just like shamanism, the religion they practice, is not an "evil" religion. It is simply non-Christian/institutionalized. There are larger examples of "darkness" within the Horde faction, however. The Undead, the Trolls, and the Orcs, for example, clearly meddle with cruelty and display a dark and somewhat "evil" past. The characters themselves are designed with more hardened, sharp, and "evil-looking" faces. Although there are exceptions to the rule or Horde equals evil and Alliance equals good, such as the Tauren and Warlocks (who always meddle with the demonic world regardless of faction), it seems to be more accepted by players that this be true.

Now that a thorough understanding of in-game religions has been achieved, analysis of the actual decisions made by players within the game can begin. The first method of researching the way religion has an effect on the decisions made within World of Warcraft is through an analysis of the correlations between real-life religions and the choice between Horde and Alliance for gamers. Researching a topic of this nature brings with it a set of logical hypotheses that can be made by those who understand the game on a basic level. The first hypothesis, from what I thought to be a reasonable standpoint, was that among players whom are *religious* and play on American servers, those of institutionalized and mainstream religions would typically chose Alliance characters, whereas those of non-mainstream religions would choose Horde. The second hypothesis was that there would be a much greater number of those who consider themselves “religious” playing for the Alliance faction, and subsequently a greater number of atheists and non-religious individuals playing for the Horde. I delved into my research with these two hypotheses. What I discovered through in-game research and assessment of related forums was that there is indeed evidence of religious influence on the choice between the two factions.

The first hypothesis is based on the fact that the Horde races, environments, in-game religions, histories, lore, etc., are typically dark and embrace that which is evil, cruel, and demonic. This is certainly not always the case. This is clear with the Tauren race, which displays no signs of evil or cruelty. However, one needs only to spend some time talking to undead NPCs, or take a stroll through Undercity, to realize why some players may generalize the entire faction as embracing the “evil”. Non-mainstream religions, such as cultic, Satanist, and idol/symbol based, have much greater similarities to what Blizzard has created in the Horde cities and environments. Most mainstream religions, however, strive

to achieve good, try to honor value systems, have gods that are often represented by light, and typically embrace that which is good. These religions are much more similar to the races, lore, environments, and in-game religions that Blizzard has created for the Alliance faction. The second hypothesis based mainly on the fact that those who are believers in mainstream religions may find it slightly difficult to choose some of the Horde characters, such as the trolls or undead, who have their racial basis in savagery, cruelty, and paganism. Because some of the races such as these are clearly evil, players will often-times associate the entire faction with “evil” characteristics, regardless of whether this is true or not (which it truly is not). Therefore, I assumed that there would be more atheists in Horde and more Christians, Jews, Muslims, etc. in Alliance. What I discovered through in-game research and assessment of related forums was that, however slight, there is evidence of religious influence on the choice between the two factions.

The results, in a quantitative sense, found these assumptions to be mostly correct. I say “mostly” because the data shows that like almost all online, unregulated, social communities, there is no perfect pattern to the racial, religious, and gender make-up of contributors. However, there were majority trends that led me to believe that religion may indeed play a significant role in the decision of faction affinity. Firstly, there is the issue of mainstream vs. non-mainstream religions. Of the twenty-one Alliance gamers interviewed, playing a variety of race and class combinations, sixteen were Christian and from a variety of denominations therein. Of the remaining five, two were agnostic, one was atheist, one was Wicca, and one was Shinto. Of these remaining five, two were still religious in some way. Of the twenty-one Horde gamers interviewed, also playing a variety of race and class combinations, only seven were of mainstream religions. The rest consisted of a variety of

non-religions and small religious sects such as agnosticism, atheism, Satanism, Nazism, Wicca, etc. From the data I collected at random times throughout the day, in random areas, and from a variety of servers, it is clear that a vast majority of Alliance players have Christian and mainstream religious affinity. It also shows that only a minority of Horde players polled in the same circumstances, affiliate with mainstream, institutionalized religions.

Secondly, there is the assumption dealing with the likelihood of religious players choosing Alliance and non-religious players choosing Horde. In this particular case, the data speaks entirely for itself. Of the twenty-one Alliance players interviewed, eighteen had faith in some form of religion, leaving only two Agnostics and an Atheist. Of the twenty-one Horde players interviewed, only nine were religious in some way, leaving twelve Atheists and Agnostics. This proves the assumption that more non-religious players would choose to use characters on the Horde faction to be entirely true. It is clear, that more often than not, a player with a religious faith will be more inclined to choose a character who is a member of the Alliance faction.

Another important method for researching the way religion effects choices in World of Warcraft is to analyze the way in which gamers allowed their religious beliefs to affect which race and class they chose. The question that needs to be asked is, "Does a player's religion have an effect on the choice as to what races, and more specifically, what classes, he chooses to use?" Based on a logos mindset and a logical set of presumptions, I drew some conclusions as to what the answer to this question may be. Firstly, I assumed that due to the aspects of the Human race in the game, such as the fact that they look very similar to

knights and crusaders (typically found in Christian history) and that they rely most heavily on the Holy Light, which has strong similarity to the Christian faith, that the majority of Human players would be of Christian religion. Secondly, I assumed that because the Christian and Muslim institutions stresses so strongly the characteristics of nobility, strength, and honor, that the races and classes that are strongest and seem to stress most highly these aspects would be played most heavily by people of these two faiths.

I went about researching this question mainly through the Alliance faction in the cities of Ironforge and Stormwind on both the general channels and trade channel. I also did some research on the Horde in the Undercity, but mainly focused on the Alliance due to my previously stated conclusions. My research process was simple, but effective. I started by sending the following text over the city's channel: "WSP (whisper) me with your religion in real life and your race/class in WoW. It's for a research course." Most people asked me why I was asking the question and I just reiterated that it was for a research project and not intended to judge anything or anyone. A majority of people who responded were of a Christian denomination, but other religions that were mentioned included Atheism, Shinto, Wiccan, Nazism, Deism, witchcraft, Agnostic, and non-religion.

Of the 42 players interviewed, 24 of them were of a Christian denomination. Of those 24 Christians, 14 chose to play with a human as their main character. The classes these Christian humans chose were varied, with 6 warriors, two paladins, three mages, one warlock, one priest, and one who utilized several different classes. Of those Christians that remained, 8 were night elves, one was a Draenei, and one was a Dwarf. This means that of the 24 Christians interviewed in the city of Ironforge, 22 were either a Human or Night Elf. This is a convincing percentage that would seem to suggest that there is an attraction of

Christians to these races. The Christians probably wanted to see themselves as humans fighting evil in the game. The human and night elf races most resemble human beings. I would assume that these Christians like the idea of being a warrior because of its similarities to historical Christian heroes (knights and crusaders). This allows them to more “physically” fight evil in World of Warcraft due to the warrior class’ emphasis on strength, power, and physical attacks. In the real world, this is similar to the battle of morality and the constant struggle with the Devil and his temptations. The next highest chosen class by Christians within the game was paladin, which is similar to the warrior class in abilities and strengths with a greater reliance on the Holy Light. In fact, the paladin class originates from the knights who fought for the Holy Roman Empire and the Catholic faith. Therefore, the paladins have the greatest Christian connection of all the classes.

What conclusions can be drawn from this information? It is clear that when considering the assumptions made, most Christians did choose to utilize human-like races, and the classes chosen by those of the same faith were ones that utilized strength and knight-like characteristics. Unfortunately, no other religions had strong enough representation within the game (and within our research) to draw any conclusions as to their particular affinities to race and class options.

Of the 21 horde members interviewed, 9 were atheist, 3 were agnostic, 5 were Christian, and the rest were a minority of Satanist, Buddhist, and scientology followers. The race and class choices made by the players of these religions had no particular pattern or recognizable thought process. As for class choices, there was a pretty even sampling of religions represented. As for race choices, the only real pattern to be drawn from all the data is that Atheists often choose undead characters. 5 of the 9 chose this race. This is

hardly a majority, and doesn't bode any significant thought process within those of this belief. This is an area where it is clear that the data collected was not large enough to draw concrete conclusions within "smaller-majority" situation. Considering that there are currently five faces to choose from within the Horde, it is clear that if 5 out of 9 atheists do choose undead, it is a pattern of at least small significance and is worthy of noting. This could be significant in that atheists may have an easier time accepting the fact that something could roam the earth as "undead" due to the fact that they typically do not believe in an afterlife. By playing an undead character, they are celebrating the potentials of their belief system. All pieces of data were taken during different times of day and therefore did not consist of solely outliers (those who play early morning or late night). In general, one should be very aware of the small proportion that tends to be used in surveys like the one I employed. This is evident in the analysis of character and race choices within the Horde. Even though a fairly large number of Horde characters were interviewed, no strong patterns arose. But, as you can see in the Alliance data, the information recorded supports the conclusions drawn before research began, and even helped create some new conclusions.

By assessing in-game religions, class and race choices, and Horde vs. Alliance choices, a thorough understanding of the effect of religion on the World of Warcraft environment can be achieved. In some cases, the data seems to show that religion may not affect the choices made within the game with any real force. However, in most cases, there are clear signs and patterns that prove that religious standing may indeed be a key determinant as players face the many decisions and options presented by the game. More

often then not, there appears to be religious groupings that suggest that religion guides and affects the tendencies of online gamers in the complex, and in the simple, dilemmas.

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