

Should Christians buy into Halloween?

October 28, 2011

Q. Halloween is upon us again, and with the annual traditions of trick-or-treating and pumpkin-carving in the air, many Christians are looking to alternate ways of celebrating the holiday.

Because of its pagan origins and emphasis on death, celebrating Halloween is out of the question for many, but many are finding some use for it. JesusWeen, a creation of Pastor Paul Ade, aims to knock on doors come Oct. 31 and instead of shouting "trick-or-treat," hand out Bibles to the occupants. "JesusWeen is a God-given vision which was born as an answer to the cry of many every October 31st. The dictionary meaning of Ween is to expect.... We therefore see October 31st as a day to expect a gift of salvation and re-think receiving Jesus," says the group's website.

Other Christians say they have a hard time explaining to their children why there are suddenly skulls and vampires on display, and that the kids are disappointed when they're not allowed to join in the fun. Others use it as a chance to celebrate the harvest, or hold a fundraiser for the church or church group, or just stay at home and make pumpkin pie.

But ignoring the holiday is difficult when almost every item in stores is orange and black and racks of costumes take up all spare space in Targets and Walmarts and other stores. Halloween is massively profitable for retailers, with forecasts for this year putting the amount spent on candy, gifts and costumes at \$6.8 billion – about \$72 per person, a rise on last year's figure. Some argue that Halloween has been so stripped of its pagan origins that it's become just another excuse to sell cheap toys.

Can Christians come to an agreement with celebrating Halloween? And has the holiday lost its pagan roots?

Answer:

As a Unitarian Universalist minister who does not find her primary spiritual path in Christianity, I cannot really answer the question. There are a great many different views among the Christians I know about the holiday. And I don't expect, or even need, their coming to some sort of unanimity. The holiday arose from pagan roots but also finds resonance in All Saints and All Souls days, Christian holidays that honor those in history and the community who have died.

My concern, however, is about those who seem to need their negative ideas about Halloween embraced by non-Christians through handing out Bibles on October 31st, or by using scare tactics about the holiday on children. Death is a reality among human beings, something that many seem afraid to acknowledge. At Halloween we can recognize that reality and demystify it in harmless and enjoyable rituals such as trick-or-treating and other revelry. The Mexican celebration of Dia de los Muertos, or Day of the Dead, is another way in which the fear of death can be exorcised through honoring, in festive ways, the lives of relatives who have died.

Once again we are being asked to accept one understanding of life and death over another. Why can't we just accept the fact that our religious perspectives about these subjects may be different, but not frightening? My hope and belief is that we can find mutual respect for views that may not be our own, and not try to demonize the thinking of others.

Amen and Namasté

**The Rev. Dr. Betty Stapleford**  
**Unitarian Universalist Church of the Verdugo Hills**  
**La Crescenta**

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Oh, for God's sake. Let the kids dress up and have candy. They will not become Satan worshipers, cast death spells, or begin to sing the praises of necrophilia. They'll pretty much just dress up and have candy, and come home sweaty, happy and tired — costumes a little worse for wear but souls still intact and fit for heaven.

The fact that we have to explain, every single year, what the word "Halloween" means — it's the night before what used to be called All Hallows' Day (which we now call All Saints' Day, which may or may not be about people who have died, depending on whether you also celebrate All Souls' Day on Nov. 2) so the name has evolved from All Hallows' Evening to Hallows Even to Hallowe'en to Halloween. The fact that we have to explain all that every year shows that no one connects it anymore with pagan rituals of the dead.

Ask any kid you know: They'll say it's about costumes and candy, about staying out late and giggling at scary stuff. They will not mention the devil (unless you do).

Parents, being parents, have to make decisions about all that candy, and how much of it can be collected and consumed. They might make decisions about just how gruesome the costume can be, or whether or not their child is ready for the jump-and-scares at the haunted house.

But honestly, of all the big bad things in the world that parents have to be wary of on behalf of their children, I think they can rest easy that their children won't become devil worshipers if they're allowed to go trick-or-treating.

Worry, if you must, about them selling their soul to the devil to get the latest iPad — that glowing once-bitten apple is a far greater adversary, in the war for your children's soul, than whatever forbidden fruit you imagine the devil might be offering on Halloween.

Relax. Let them dress up and eat candy.

The Rev. Amy Pringle  
St. George's Episcopal Church  
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Most people on a spiritual path agree that the celebration of Halloween has no foundation in spirit. What spiritual principle does Halloween actually teach? I can't come up with anything.

It seems that the best response is to make light of all the Halloween promotions, teach our children to laugh at their fears and not take the spooks, goblins and vampires seriously. Laughing at any situation that evokes a fear response in us is actually a good life skill.

Over the last 25 years or so, churches and schools have become involved with Halloween by providing a safe, family-friendly place for parties. This started because sick individuals were putting illegal drugs into home-made popcorn balls and brownies as "treats" when the little ones were going door to door.

This one example shows a positive response to a negative situation. Surely, we can be creative and choose additional positive, supportive responses to a holiday that celebrates fright, danger and death, all of which are forms of limitation and not part of God's divine plan for our lives.

The Rev. Jeri Linn  
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Halloween does indeed have ancient origins. It has always been understood as a thin space in the year — a time between light and dark, between warmth and cold, between the abundance of summer and the scarcity of winter, between life and death, and between this world and the next.

When Christians co-opted it, we didn't deny the thinness of the space, but reclaimed it as a time of connecting with the saints who have gone before us (and have not stayed around to haunt us). So the pagan roots are still there, the Christian roots are still there, and some sense of the sacred remains, though it may be buried under the \$6.8 billion pile of candy and costumes.

Methodist preacher and professor Tom Long did a little spiritual digging into the thin spaces of Halloween. He was particularly interested in finding out why so many adults are buying costumes and entertaining themselves in flagrant ways on Halloween. He thinks that there is something important going on culturally, and it may not be as base as we think.

It's more likely to be about a different kind of transgression. Many of us are interested in transgressing the lines between the place where we are and the adventure we'd like to live: the accountant who dresses up as a pirate; the real estate agent who paints herself Na'vi blue; the cashier who becomes Batman.

Is it possible that Americans love Halloween because so many of us long for lives bigger than the ones we inhabit? A life in which we move from crippling insecurity to one in which we trust ourselves, trust each other, and trust our creator? A life in which we learn to live with joy and freedom and courage?

You know that I'm going to say that if you want that, try Jesus. You can't show up to work on Tuesday still in Na'vi blue, but you can walk in with some Holy Spirit, ready to live into a bigger life.

The Rev. Paige Eaves  
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Can Christians come to some agreement re: Halloween? Probably not. I personally see nothing wrong with spooking it up, for lack of a better term, and I'm sure one of my fellow Jesus-followers will think I'm on the fast track to hell for my belief. That's OK: there are lots of us Christians who think other Christians are headed down below because they don't think like we do. Pity us.

The bigger question, I believe, is the one about Halloween losing its pagan roots. I believe it's the other way around: Our society has re-discovered its pagan roots. Look at the dying

churches around you. Those that aren't dying have a lot more older folks in the pews than young families. (One smart-alec friend of mine said the churches are full of old people because they're studying for finals.)

And how about you? Do you go to church? If not, why not? That pagan lifestyle is certainly appealing, isn't it? I love football, and as I'm getting ready to come to church on Sunday mornings, I have often thought it would be nice to stay home and watch the games. Nothing sinful about football or soccer or baseball on Sundays — but more of us are choosing anything but church, and I'm sorry.

Maybe the churches have failed; maybe ministers have failed. But paganism certainly hasn't, or so it seems to me. Long ago, in the year 325, the Emperor Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. Then in the 1800s the Danish theologian and philosopher Soren Kierkegaard said that when Constantine did that (made Christianity the official religion), that was the beginning of the end.

I'm not ready to throw in the towel yet, but that "gloomy Dane," as he was known, may have been on to something. By the way, pagans, God still loves you!

The Rev. C. L. "Skip" Lindeman  
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If Christians can't reach a consensus on such essential practices as baptism and communion, then I doubt we'll ever have a united position on Halloween. Since the Bible doesn't prohibit children from dressing up in costumes and going door to door to ask for candy, I wouldn't prohibit it either. I personally believe that a Christian family can enjoy many Halloween traditions without compromising their devotion to Jesus Christ. We certainly have with our kids over the years.

In the early days of the church, Christians disagreed on which kinds of foods were moral to eat (offered to idols, or not). Paul's answer was: "accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions.... Let each man be fully convinced in his own mind" (Romans 14:1, 5). On biblical non-specifics, Holy Spirit-directed conscience should be our guide. If I feel guilty celebrating Halloween traditions, I shouldn't participate.

I believe Halloween has lost much of its pagan roots in our culture, much as Christmas trees have. But Christian participants still need to use discretion and caution. Many people emphasize the satanic/demonic in their Halloween decorations; others focus on violence and gore. During my lifetime these emphases have greatly intensified. Such focus on spiritual darkness can lead the undiscerning down a destructive path. And it is unquestionably wrong for Christians to endorse or encourage such things. Whatever the occasion, the Bible urges us: "Set your mind on the things above" (Colossians 3:2). Here's a Christian Halloween thought: The dead will rise in Christ at his return, with glory, and not gore.

Pastor Jon Barta  
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Does Halloween really deserve this much attention? My threshold for major holidays includes a paid day off work, for starters. Halloween is the evening of a single day, no matter how hard retailers try to get us to spend Labor Day until the end of October purchasing seasonal gimcracks.

Next, and yes, it feels weird to uphold tradition, but when did Halloween become anything other than children wearing costumes, having some mildly scary fun, and, most important, getting lots of candy?

Back in my youth during the Jurassic, in the fall, before snow started falling on my 10-mile barefooted walk to school, my tiny town held a community event on Halloween night very like the Montrose "Spooktacular."

The night before was "beggar's night," for trick-or-treating in addition to on Halloween. Logistically talented kids, especially if a parent or sibling would drive us, could cover the entire town and many of the surrounding farms, and cadge a pillowcase full of candy, enough to last us until Christmas.

Churches were completely uninvolved, as I recall. Certainly ours had zero Halloween programming. I think I would have noticed if a group of kids in a town of numerous churches weren't participating for religious reasons in this equal-opportunity tooth-rotting.

Our congregation would have been otherwise engaged, getting ready for "Harvest Home," a pre-Thanksgiving gathering of food to donate to the county home and an area orphanage. (Told you it was the Jurassic.)

The Luther League would have been busy with a big hayride with a neighboring youth group, for variety in the gene pool. Our choir had to start working on extra music for Advent mid-week services.

I assume churches have even busier schedules nowadays. Plus I see my religious friends with a full plate of comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable, pushing for economic justice, ending wars, promoting the spiritual over shopping year-round, little things like that. Who has time to fuss about a minor holiday with a history including both sacred and secular elements?

Can Christianity come to terms with Halloween, which may or may not have lost its pagan roots? Who cares? Now please pass me the candy bowl so I can pick out the dark chocolates.

Roberta Medford  
Atheist  
Montrose  
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To me, the Halloween dilemma is less about its pagan roots (although that is certainly an issue) and more about how the occasion is celebrated today. The event's ever-increasing focus on death, the occult, and other violent and frightening elements seems contrary to the lessons that we usually try to inculcate our children with. For that matter, what kind of message are we subtly sending our youth when we encourage them to go "trick-or-treat?" That if you don't give me what I want, I will damage your property with eggs or toilet paper?

Of course, I know many parents are careful to protect their children from the negative aspects of

Halloween, and would never allow them to damage property. Nevertheless, a holiday should ideally be a time when we teach our children moral lessons about life and instill within them the importance of family cohesion by celebrating together in love and harmony. This does not seem to be the message of Halloween.

Judaism has a holiday in early spring called Purim during which we also dress up in all sorts of fun and colorful costumes and go from house to house. The major difference is that we give treats to others, instead of asking for them. Also central to this holiday is providing alms for the poor and hosting a grand feast that family and friends enjoy together.

Purim teaches our children the importance of sharing with others and our responsibility to the underprivileged, and it demonstrates the significance of family unity.

I don't want to sound like the Grinch who stole Halloween by suggesting that children be deprived of all the fun and excitement on October 31. But I would suggest that parents ensure that the merriment is focused on positive acts of goodness and kindness, and that they stay away from the really scary stuff and instead have their children wear costumes with a gentler tone.

Chances are that this approach will be easier on the younger kids anyway, and it will help to ease the atmosphere of mischief and fright that surrounds the holiday.

Rabbi Simcha Backman  
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With connections to the Mexican Day of the Dead celebrations, Catholic All Saint's Day, the Roman festival of Pomona and the Celtic holiday of Samhain, Halloween has a long and deep enough tradition to be accepted as a fun holiday for believers and unbelievers.

All Saint's Day has been celebrated by Western Catholic church members since at least the 8th century. The ancient Romans celebrated a harvest festival for the goddess Pomona, who was responsible for fruits and harvesting. Samhain was celebrated in England before the Romans took over the island. Samhain, the "summer's end," was a festival after the flocks were driven in and the harvest was largely finished. This was a time to remember the happy and unhappy times of the year. This day was sacred to the sun and other great powers in the world.

The Day of the Dead has been celebrated in Mexico and several other Spanish-speaking countries at least as far back as Aztec times. The holiday has been a way to commemorate dead parents, children and ancestors. Often observers hoped to make connections with spirits of their dead relatives and wanted to honor those who had come before them. Most observers are celebrating life, happiness, food, family, and fun. Of course this holiday has grown popular in Southern California and is celebrated all throughout the San Gabriel Valley from late October through early November.

So celebrations loosely or closely connected to Halloween have long, deep and honored traditions in the world. People should not be disrespectful of the Halloween traditions, and should decide whether they personally wish to participate or stand aside.

The Golden Rule should lead parents to want the beliefs of other people's children to be

respected as much as their own. Everyone should accept the place of Halloween in our society and make their own choices about their family's observance.

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When I first became Christian, I embraced the popular party line that pilloried Halloween for being an evil pagan celebration. So I joined with alternatives similar to JesusWeen, and likewise boycotted. I don't disparage anyone's desire to redeem the day, but after years of faith and a bit of education, I now believe we are addressing the issue inappropriately.

Recently, Jimmy Kimmel aired a spoofy commercial about JesusWeen with the children declaring themselves Jesus Weeners. "Yay, no candy, just Bibles!" Is that how we're perceived? "Don't go to the house with its lights out, Christians live there, they hate everything!" What happened to letting our light so shine that people praise God as a result (Matthew 5:16)? I know the Weeners want to distribute Bibles, but even the ancients would touch their children's tongues to honey before they shared scripture so they would remember to "taste and see that the Lord is good" (Psalm 34:6). If we distribute Bibles, we'd better attach really nice candy bars, lest the good news leave a bad taste in everyone's mouth.

Besides, the facts show that Halloween is a Christian holiday. It's the hallowed e'en' (evening) of All Saints, like Christmas Eve is the night before Christmas. It started when early Christian persecution waned and a feast was declared to memorialize all martyrs (akin to America's 9/11 remembrance). Eventually recognizing all saints, it was calendared during fall for two reasons: to feed the celebrating throngs, and to fill the void of defunct pagan harvest festivals. How ironic that Christians should now deny our own day, surrender it to paganism, and retreat to our own meaningless harvest festivals.

God created the autumnal colors and the creepy crawlies of earth, and declared them what? He declared them good (Genesis 1:12, 25). So Hollywood horror has joined in, but Halloween was always frightening. It was about Christian genocide, both Jew and Gentile. "You believe in Jesus? Face the lions, torture, crucifixion!" The secular fright component actually highlights Halloween's spiritual purpose. I'm no fan of the inordinate gore and grossness that tags along, but Christians shouldn't act as Halloween whiners either.

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