

Hallowe'en



I recall Halloween in my childhood days as a fun and innocent activity. We dressed up with homemade costumes and a mask perhaps made of paper mache, did a street or three, and came back home with a good-size bag of candies, peanuts, chips and fruit. Beyond the odd ghost here or there, front-yard decorations went no further than a jack-o-lantern. And yes, a few windows here or there got soaped in the course of the evening. I recall it as innocent fun.

Today scores of homes in our subdivisions are extensively decorated in connection with Halloween. Yes, the jack-o-lanterns (and other pumpkins) are still there. But in addition, the yard has become cluttered with goblins and ghosts, with tombstones and skeletons, spider webs and skulls and even coffins. One can't miss the common denominator in those additions: there's a focus on *death*. One wonders: why the change? What's behind it?

I did some research on the topic, and came away convinced that today's Halloween is another example of North America's drift to neo-paganism.

Neo-paganism

The term 'neo' catches the notion of 'new' or 'renewed'. The point of the term 'neo-paganism', then, is that society is embracing again the pagan beliefs that the ancestors of centuries ago once embraced. A pagan is a heathen, someone who worships 'the gods', makes sacrifices to them in order to keep them happy. The gods of the pagans are present in trees and stones, they're worshipped in high places and sacred groves. The church has received the mandate to preach the gospel of God the Creator and His Son Jesus Christ to the pagans of the world, so that these idol-worshippers might turn from their bondage to false gods and serve the living God. The apostle Paul and missionaries after him set out to do precisely this, and under God's blessing countless pagans of Europe turned from their paganism to serve the God-who-actually-exists. European culture even changed from its longtime pagan trappings to a distinctly Christian culture.

Samhain

One of the tribes to which the gospel came in the course of the centuries was the Celts of today's northern Great Britain (Ireland). The Celts considered October 31 the last day of their year, and celebrated the occasion with a festival known as Samhain (pronounced sow-eeen, I'm told; sounds Irish to me!). At the heart of this Samhain festival was the notion of death, for the end of October was the time when all nature died off; witness the leaves falling off the trees, the garden plants and crops dying, etc. The Celts believed that at this time of year –specifically on the last day of the year– the realm of the dead came closest to the realm of the living – so close, in fact, that the living could communicate with the dead and the dead could even enter again the realm of the living. Through the work of priests

(the Druids) one could seek guidance from the dead (fortune telling), and dead loved one would return to join in the feasts – or perhaps take vengeance for wrongs done to him while he was still alive....

Scripture

Here, of course, one meets beliefs that contradict the reality God has revealed in His Word. The thought that the realm of the dead comes close to the realm of the living (and their boundaries become porous) is perhaps believable if Death is not the curse of God on sin, but simply a natural phenomenon. The Lord, though, declares that death is His holy judgment on sin (Genesis 2:17; Romans 6:23). Further, the Druids, of course, could not actually contact the dead to receive guidance on behalf of the living, nor could the dead actually come to the living – be it to join in their celebrations, or to take vengeance on past wrongs. This typical pagan thinking also existed in Canaan before Israel received the Promised Land, and the Lord emphatically forbade His people to embrace any such concept. “Let no one be found among you who ... practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead” (Deuteronomy 18:10). Such practices were “detestable to the LORD” (vs 11). Those in the land of the living cannot contact the dead, for an impassable chasm is fixed between the realm of the living and the realm of the dead (Luke 16:26). When one thinks to contact the dead, one in fact does not ‘get through’ to the deceased loved one, but gets through to a demon – one whom Jesus Christ has defeated. No wonder God emphatically forbade any kind of sorcery or spiritism!

Hallowed Eve

One would think that when the gospel of Jesus’ triumph over death came to the Celts, they would have discarded their Samhain festival altogether, along with any remnant of its pagan beliefs. In point of fact, the old year festival was merged into the traditional Christian festival of November 1st, All Saints Day. The night before All Saints Day became ‘Hallowed Eve’, a term that contracted in time to Hallowe’en (or Halloween). The activities characterizing conduct on ‘Hallowed Eve’ historically contained bits and pieces of the old Samhain festival, be it that the more obvious pagan aspects (like ghosts and skeletons) disappeared amongst the Christians of Ireland.

With the migration of many Irish people to North America (particularly as a result of the Potato Famine in the 1840’s), the Irish Halloween came into North America and slowly became part of the North American cultural fabric. For a long time it was an innocent and fun event, especially for children.

Recently

North American culture has undergone a marked change in the last number of decades, inasmuch as both Canada and the United States (and indeed all western countries) have moved away from their Christian past. The Christian worldview that characterized North American thinking for many generations (that is, God Almighty created this world and still upholds it, He sent His Son to pay for sin, and He renews life through His Holy Spirit) has been tossed out. What new worldview takes its place? That is: what philosophy shall people adopt to make sense of what is life and death, what is the relation between people and animals, people and plants, people and nature, etc. The worldview in vogue today is the one our fathers had before God caused the gospel to spread through Europe. That worldview is known as paganism – with its sacrifices, worship of the dead, its spiritism, its witchcraft, etc. The rising popularity of the pagan worldview also explains the esteem

accorded to First Nations' spirituality; theirs is seen as a worldview untarnished by the 'evils' of Christianity....

Halloween

That brings us back to Halloween. The changes we've seen in the last couple of decades about the way our society 'does' Halloween is a very obvious illustration of society's return to paganism. From a neopagan website I learned the following about Halloween:

"A student sent me an email asking me to sum up in more personal terms what Halloween means to me and other Neopagans. Here is what I told her:

- Halloween is the modern name for Samhain, an ancient Celtic holy day which many Neopagans –especially Wiccans, Druids and Celtic Reconstructionists– celebrate as a spiritual beginning of a new year.
- Halloween is a time to confront our personal and cultural attitudes towards death and those who have passed on before us.
- Halloween is a time to lift the veil between the many material and spiritual worlds in divination, so as to gain spiritual insight about our pasts and futures.
- Halloween is a time to deepen our connection to the cycles of the seasons, to the generations that have come before us and those that will follow, and to the Gods and Goddesses we worship.
- Halloween is a time to let our inner children out to play, to pass on our childhood traditions to our children, and to share the fun with our friends and neighbors of many other faiths."

Trick or treat?

I understand the fun one can have going out to trick or treat. I've been out too. But Halloween has changed; from being a night of (rather) innocent fun it has changed of late into a pagan festival revolving around the dead. When the neighbor, then, sees my children participating in the fun, does he conclude that I'm *with* the neopagans or *against* their worldview? Does he receive evidence that I'm *for* Christ or *against* Him? To me the answer is self-evident.

For further reading:

Diana Moses VandeHoef, "The Craft of a New Era", *Reformed Perspective*, November 2000.
Berwyn Hoyt, "Halloween – Another Nail in Death's Coffin?", *Reformed Perspective*, October 2003.

You may also want to google to Halloween, Samhain, neopagan.

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