

Association of Christian Teachers (ACT)

www.christians-in-education.org.uk

Briefing Paper 3: Hallowe'en

Hallowe'en

Most children today can tell you something about Hallowe'en. It comes near the middle of the autumn term. They know that it has something to do with witches because many infant and junior schools get their children to make witch costumes and jack o'lanterns. The lanterns are fun because they are made of hollowed out turnips, swedes or pumpkins, with hideous faces carved into them and candles inside. Then there are games, like picking apples out of water with your teeth. The children may have been to Hallowe'en parties, and their parents and older brothers and sisters may go to Hallowe'en dances.

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Hallowe'en is celebrated on the date of a pagan festival. Does that matter?

Traditionally, many Christians have observed All Hallows' Eve on October 31, which had been the Celtic festival of Samhain. That in itself need not condemn the modern Hallowe'en. The question is whether paganism is still the main emphasis in celebrating the supernatural.

The date of Christmas has pre-Christian associations with the pagan feasts of midwinter. There is deplorable commercialism and over indulgence in the secular Christmas. But on its spiritual side Christmas is dominated by Christianity, even where pagan trappings remain. In the supernatural aspects of Christmas, the Incarnation has eclipsed the Yule log and dried out the mistletoe.

Hallowe'en is different. As a secular event it is not just an autumn binge. The pagan symbolism is prominent with little or no Christian overtone. The growing popularity of Hallowe'en goes hand in hand with the growing respectability of the occult.

What is the historical background of Hallowe'en?

Samhain marked the end of summer; herds returned from pasture, laws were reaffirmed and land tenures renewed. It was the Celtic and Anglo-Saxon New Year's Eve, a fire festival when bonfires were lit to frighten evil spirits. Souls of the dead revisited their homes, and it was a time to appease the supernatural powers that controlled natural processes. It was also a good time for divination about death, health, marriage and luck. It is not surprising that modern practitioners of secret arts choose Hallowe'en as a high point of their year's activities.

In the Middle Ages, the Christian feast of All Hallows (November 1) was often preceded by an evening greatly influenced by the older pagan observances. Witchcraft was much feared, foul fiends were thought to run wild. In popular devotion, Hallowe'en was the only time when the devil was prayed to for help and good fortune.

The modern Hallowe'en owes much of its popularity to the customs taken to the USA by Scottish and Irish immigrants. Hallowe'en became a night of mischief, and in the nineteenth century boys and young men went on orgies of vandalism. Sheds were overturned or set on fire, houses daubed and windows broken. The custom developed of children knocking on doors and asking for sweets or cakes as inducements not to inflict damage on the building ('a trick or a treat'). Today, the tricks are relatively mild, such as the use of spray paints on windows. However, some of the 'treats' recently given by American householders have been found to contain razor blades.

The tricking and treating tradition carries on the spirit of the past, representing by mischief a breakdown of the normal rules of behaviour and, by implication, of the moral order. In 1965

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UNICEF simultaneously brightened and befuddled the moral picture by introducing collections at Hallowe'en for the United Nations Children's Fund.

Is it only people who believe in evil spirits who need to worry about Hallowe'en?

No. There are other reasons for being concerned about Hallowe'en as an educational exercise.

- (a) Suppose if you will that spirits and witches are sheer nonsense. Why, then, encourage children to celebrate their mythical frolics and perhaps take them seriously? Paganism is hardly a cultural mainstay of all that is best in our society.
- (b) Suppose that in our folklore, witches and demons merely represent moral evil. Hallowe'en tends to celebrate evil in the ascendant by the reversal of moral standards. If Nazi figures were regularly presented for children's admiration and affection there would soon be a public outcry. But loveable little witches are brought out every autumn. This disturbs the polarization of good and bad, right and wrong in children's minds. It is a negative stroke in moral education.
- (c) Occultism, witchcraft and Satanism are popular and powerful fads, if nothing more. They are associated with sexual immorality, drugs, racism, sadism, and even murder. Hallowe'en can be an apparently harmless introduction to something very nasty below the surface of our society.

What can Christian parents or teachers do if Hallowe'en is celebrated in their schools?

- (i) Present arguments like those above with as much clarity and courtesy as possible, bearing in mind that Hallowe'en is usually introduced without much reflection on what it might mean.
- (ii) Be prepared to put the case against Hallowe'en in letters to the press, at least to encourage some thought before it is celebrated as a mindless custom.
- (iii) A Christian teacher may not be able alone to stop Hallowe'en being observed in a school. It is possible to make the best of it by portraying the destruction of evil and the triumph of good. That is the true meaning of the Christian festival of All Hallows.

Do Christians occupy a special position over Hallowe'en?

Yes. Christians today are taking the Bible's teaching about evil spiritual personalities with increasing seriousness. The Church of England has appointed a number of diocesan exorcists, showing a renewed belief in the reality of demons. Christians are finding St. Paul's words about struggling 'against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms' (Ephesians 6:12) highly relevant to modern life.

Christians, therefore, will beware of a festival which glorifies evil on the rampage. They serve Christ, who opposes and defeats such powers. Charles Wesley's hymn speaks for them:

**Jesus — the name high over all, In hell, or earth, or sky!
Angels and men before it fall, And devils fear and fly.**