

Halloween: The Killing Frost and the Gospel

Thomas G. Long
Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia

So, a pirate walks into a bar with a parrot on his shoulder....

A joke? No. It's Halloween, and the "pirate" is actually a youngish accountant – you know him well, the one who does your taxes – who has swapped his blue blazer, button-down oxford, and rep tie for a sash, a rubber Macaw, an eye-patch, a hook, and a rare evening of revelry at a local tavern. And he is by no means an exception. The Halloween apparel and candy industry estimates that about a third of all American adults will don a costume this October, about a third will attend a Halloween party, about half of all households will put Halloween decorations in homes and yards, a quarter of us will visit a "haunted" house, nearly three-quarters of the population will dispense candy to "trick or treaters," and, even in a chancy economic climate, we will spend about \$6 billion dollars doing so.¹ Halloween has in recent years vaulted ahead of other national holidays to second place in consumer spending, now trailing only Christmas.

Six billion dollars is approximately the annual gross domestic product of North Dakota, and the fact that we are willing to spend that kind of cash on orange and black crepe paper, jack-o-lanterns, plastic skeletons, and latex Sarah Palin masks means that something culturally interesting is at work.

Dollars, Demons, and Open Spaces

One obvious implication of all of this money on the table is that Halloween is not merely the happy children's festival it may appear to be, but a shark tank for marketers. Companies large and small have learned how to milk Halloween for quick profit. For example, one modestly sized novelty manufacturing company, looking for expansion possibilities and finding that they were outmatched in the hyper-competitive Christmas marketplace, stumbled on to Halloween. It was a bonanza; they sold \$15 million of jack-o-lantern leaf bags in six months.² Or again, the retail chain, Spencer Gifts, owns a seasonal company called "Spirit Halloween," which is the largest Halloween retailer in the nation (700 stores open two months a year, 12,000 employees). Steven Silverstein, Spencer's CEO, is lobbying to change the name of Halloween to "HalloWeekend" and to move Halloween officially to the last Saturday in October. "Halloween gets lost when it falls during the week," he says. "It's also better for our industry and the economy to have Halloween on a Saturday – revenues have ticked up as much as 30 percent when the holiday falls on a weekend versus a weekday."³

In the mid-1990s, the American Public Health Association, alarmed about the growing connection between Halloween and the consumption of alcohol, joined with other groups in a coalition called "Hands-Off Halloween" in an effort to keep the greedy mitts of beer manufacturers away from a holiday that is primarily for children. What kind of Halloween monster, the coalition asked, would use the symbols of this holiday to exploit the nation's youth? To do so would be the equivalent of depicting Santa Claus downing a Heineken.⁴ The beer companies responded with a sneer, in fact accelerating their Halloween marketing. Outside of Germany, October is a slow month for beer sales, so Miller developed a glow-in-the-dark Halloween label for their

Lite brand, Coors enlisted a character named “Count Drakula” to pitch their brew, and Anheuser-Busch launched a major “Fright Night” campaign complete with free Halloween masks.⁵

Princeton University Professor Leigh Eric Schmidt, author of *Consumer Rites: the Buying and Selling of American Holidays*, is persuaded that most of the customs of Halloween – the parades, the parties, the costumes, the trick or treating – have been almost fully co-opted by corporate interests. The big companies are putting on the pressure, he claims, to have a long season of preparation and advance purchasing. For the economic players behind Halloween, Schmidt argues, the sweetness of the occasion is not in the candy, but in millions of children in \$25 store-bought costumes carrying bags from door to door. “The shopping bag is the trick-or-treat symbol,” says Schmidt. “It’s appropriate that way: little shoppers in the making.”⁶

But consumerism isn’t the only interpretation of the cultural upsurge regarding Halloween. Extreme right-wing Christians, if the newspapers and cable networks are to be believed, have a different, more sinister, take. The way the story goes, fundamentalists are passionately convinced that Halloween involves nothing less than a hell-hungry culture locked in a death-clinch with the pagan forces of darkness. The old Druids emerge from the shadows at Halloween to entice us to unspeakable practices in league with the devil. In almost every Halloween news cycle, it seems, some reporter chortles over the assessment of Halloween’s dangers by televangelist Pat Robertson (who seems doggedly intent on providing an encyclopedia of stupid remarks for every occasion). Robertson reportedly snarled, “I think we ought to close Halloween down. Do you want your children to dress up as witches? The Druids used to dress up like this when they were doing human sacrifice.... [The children] are acting out Satanic rituals and participating in it, and don’t even realize it.”

Several years ago, when I was doing research for a newspaper story on this “Halloween is Satan’s breeding ground” view, I had a difficult time locating people who actually took this tack. I did find a few conservative churches that were holding alternative parties for their youth on Halloween, but almost to a person, the leaders were reluctant to sling charges of pagan rituals or Satanism, eager not to appear as uncultured idiots in whatever story I ended up writing. Indeed, in a recent article in *American Quarterly*, Ann Pellegrini, a professor of performance studies and religion at New York University, claims that the idea that conservative Christians hate Halloween is mostly old news. It is a mark of conservative Christianity in America to be market savvy, and Halloween, as we have seen, is a tempting market. Evangelical conservatives, Pellegrini argues, have always placed evangelism as their top priority, and evangelists in America, from George Whitfield to Aimee Semple McPherson to Jim Bakker, have consistently been willing to embrace theatrics, the latest technology, and other manifestation of secular culture in the name of soul winning. Halloween is no exception. Conservative Christians have discovered that if they will stop shunning the masks and the ghoulish costumes of Halloween and instead don them as evangelistic tools, they can turn the devil’s antics against him. As a prime example, she describes the emergence among independent churches of Halloween “Hell Houses”:

One of the most innovative such responses to Halloween and its lurking dangers is the phenomenon of Hell Houses. Hell Houses are evangelical riffs on the haunted houses that dot the landscape of secular culture each

Halloween....Where haunted houses promise to scare the bejeezus out of you, Hell Houses aim to scare you to Jesus. In a typical Hell House, demon tour guides take the audience through a series of bloody staged tableaux depicting sinners whose bad behavior – homosexuality, abortion, suicide, and, above all, rejection of Christ's saving grace – leads them straight to hell.⁷

Pat Robertson, far from shooting from the hip at Halloween, now gives suggestions on his Christian Broadcasting Network web site for ways to use Halloween as an opportunity for witnessing. One columnist on the site even mocks Robertson's former counsel:

The biggest trick played on Halloween is Christian kids and adults being bottled up inside churches or homes all night. That's right! Hiding from the devil in the family life center and surrendering the neighborhood to little Ghouls, goblins, and witches is a victory for old Beelzebub. He's got the church right where he wants it: inside the four walls, hunkered down behind the stained glass.⁸

In my own neighborhood each Halloween, there is a small parade of brightly costumed children and their parents, led by a fire truck with flashing lights. The parade winds its way through the streets and ends up at the neighborhood recreation center, where cookies and punch are served. Then in small clusters, the parents and children head back out into the neighborhood for a couple of hours of highly supervised trick or treating. It is a friendly occasion, a chance for children to have a safe Halloween, and for the adults, so often isolated by our life styles, to meet, talk, and catch up. My neighbors would be puzzled to be told that they were being exploited by global corporate interests or that they were exposing their children to demonic forces or that they should use this time for personal witnessing in the name of Christ.

In fact, it is precisely the non-controversial, non-ideological character of Halloween among my neighbors that may point to another reason for its rising appeal. In our ideologically contested society, other holidays can be divisive. It provides a seemingly safe and neutral public space for festival. Everyone can put on vestments and dance before Halloween's godless altar without fear of making a politically incorrect gaffe or doing something that will tick off the Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Muslims, or Agnostics down the street. Halloween is a demilitarized zone in the culture wars. It's Mardi gras without the burdens of Lent.

Not everyone, however, is enchanted by Halloween's neutrality, by the fact that it is a set of rituals seemingly without living roots, profound social meaning, or controlling mythology. Conservative columnist Meghan Cox Gurdon finds the non-committal nature of Halloween to be expressive of a moral weakness in our culture, and so she carps,

What gets my sacrificial goat is that Halloween isn't about anything. It's not about death, or life, or fall, or The Fall, or family, or patriotic love of country. It is a completely content-free, dark-caped, sugar-frosted bacchanal in a society that already, every day, gives people license to be content-free,

sugar-frosted, and to dress however gothically they like -- and that includes children.⁹

The Killing Frost

But is it true that Halloween isn't about anything, that it is simply a playful secular family festival without ideological value or intent, which, to whatever degree, has become commercialized, like everything else in our society? I think not. I am convinced that Halloween is a complex social phenomenon. It has many sides and meanings, some profound, some superficial, but at one deep level, the emerging rituals of Halloween in our culture form both a critique of and a hunger for the Christian faith.

The origins of Halloween are somewhat obscure, and the historical evolution of the holiday is a complicated and contested narrative, but this much seems clear: what we today call Halloween began as an agricultural festival in ancient Celtic society called Samhain (Gaelic for "summer's end"). It was held at that point in the year when the powers of the sun to provide light, growth, and warmth were waning, and the months of darkness and the killing frosts were encroaching. Samhain was an in-between place – between the light and the darkness, between the warmth and the cold, between the succulent abundance of summer and the killing power of winter, between life and death, between this world and the next.

On Samhain the tissue between the natural and the supernatural was thin, and the spirits of the dead and the creatures of the other world were thought to roam the earth. Eventually, as Europe was Christianized, Samhain became tied to All Saints Day and All Souls Day, and was renamed "All Hallows Eve" or Hallowe'en. The festival became a Christian one, but some of the old agricultural and pagan customs remained. The Puritans, who were among the earliest Christian settlers of America, disdained all masses and holy-days, Christmas and All Saints among them. In Puritan America, there was no Halloween. It was only in the early 19th century, when the dire potato famine sent thousands of Irish fleeing to American shores, that the customs of Halloween were introduced into the new world. For the best treatment of the history of Halloween, see Nicholas Rogers' superb *Halloween: from Pagan Ritual to Party Night* (Oxford University Press, 2002).

What strikes me as important about Halloween's history is not that the festival was pagan in origin, but that it emerged out of that social and personal anxiety that exists on the border between summer and winter, between life and death, between that which is fully visible in the light of day and the forbidden that lies hidden in the shadows. At its roots, Halloween allowed people to draw close to that which they most feared: to the dead, to their own death, to the powers of darkness.

From the beginning in the American context, Halloween always threatened to careen out of control into violence. In 1975, three years before she died, the legendary Margaret Mead took a look at American Halloween customs for *Redbook* magazine. The aging anthropologist, who was by no means squeamish about edgy social customs, was nevertheless shocked by and disapproving of the debaucheries of Halloween. How did our society move, she wondered, from the gentle children's festival Mead remembered from her childhood in rural Pennsylvania, when children were given apples and candy by neighbors, and the worst deeds were pranks like unlatching a garden gate, to the vandalism, looting, and arson unleashed by Halloween's "mischievous

night” in many urban centers in the 1960s and 70s?¹⁰

In fact, the highly organized parade and carefully watched trick or treating in my neighborhood is a local manifestation of a national trend: the social control of Halloween. After decades of urban vandalism, college high jinks and binge drinking, and rumors of razor blades in Halloween apples and poisoned candy (which turned out to be mostly urban legends),¹¹ many communities have made concerted efforts to make Halloween “a safe day for our children.”

But the big news, in my view, is that Halloween, which was once a festival for adults and became a festival primarily for children, is being reclaimed by grown-ups. Nearly as many adults (47 million) as children (58 million) now shop for Halloween costumes. Halloween is not just about children’s make-believe, but also about adult fantasies. It is no coincidence that our accountant strides into the local tavern sporting a pirate’s outfit. Vampires, pirates, and witches are hot adult costume choices now, displacing nurses and politicians (and leading one retail analyst to opine that this is because the nation is weary of the health care debate¹² – give me a break). Jack Kugelmass, who directs the Jewish studies program at Arizona State University, and who wrote a fascinating book about the mother of all bizarre American Halloween rituals, the Greenwich Village parade (*Masked Culture: The Greenwich Village Halloween Parade*, Columbia University Press, 1994), has said of Halloween:

There is also the issue of dress-up. We live in an age when we all feel that we can be whoever we want to be. This is a holiday that celebrates that. It says that you have the license to imagine yourself as whoever you want to be, and it’s a license to play with the darker, more macabre aspects of your personality.... This is a holiday of transgression--the whole point of dress-up is to transgress rigid categories.¹³

A holiday of transgression, I think this gets at the heart of it. As Michele Slung and Roland Hartman, editors of a collection of Halloween horror stories, have observed, Halloween is “a chance to put at least a touch of mystery, a little ‘safe’ danger, into the humdrum fabric of our lives.... [It is] a national monument dedicated to the weird.”¹⁴

And herein lies both the critique and invitation of Halloween. Our accountant with the rubber parrot on his shoulder is at one level worthy of ridicule. Here he is, a “manly man,” swashbuckling and brandishing a fake sword down at the corner pub, harmlessly flirting with a woman, who is herself a nurse in a geriatrics ward but tonight is dressed as a tart, when everybody knows that come 9:00 a.m. on the morrow, they will be neither tart nor pirate. She will be feeding stewed apples to her patients, and he will be wearing a green eyeshade and entering some client’s long-term capital gains into Excel. Here he is, downing a few more than he should of Miller Lites with the glow-in-the-dark label, when come tomorrow his quiet sobriety will be his most marketable asset. For this one night, as the killing frost of November threatens, he has made a joke of death, turning his front yard into a makeshift graveyard.

Beyond the ridicule, however, here is a man on that most transgressive of holidays, putting on a silly costume and strewing tombstones in his yard as a way of saying, “I am weary of the boring life I lead. I am weary of my domestication, even of my timid and conventional church. I yearn for adventure. I want to be summoned to a life

bigger than I now inhabit. I want to venture into that place where everything is urgent and a matter of life and death, where life is a dangerous risk worth taking." Down at Bailey's Tavern, they mockingly call that "Halloween Fright Night," but over at the real church, this hunger for an adventure, this yearning for a life of size and urgency, this desire to come close to death and to be unafraid is called the gospel; they call it discipleship.

Notes

- 1 National Retail Federation study conducted in September 2009 by BIGresearch.
- 2 Stacey Levinson, et al., "Halloween as a Consumption Experience," *Advances in Consumer Research*, 19/1 (1992), 222.
- 3 Denise Brasse, "He's Got Spirit: Spencer Gifts CEO talks Halloween, CIT, and Retail Careers," @NRE, October 23, 2009.
- 4 "APHA joins in Halloween request to Beer Institute," *Nation's Health*, 25/9 (October, 1995).
- 5 Levinson, 223.
- 6 Lee Eric Schmidt as quoted in "From Boo to Benign," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 47/10 (November 3, 2000), B4.
- 7 Ann Pellegrini, "Signaling Through the Flames": Hell House Performance and Structures of Religious Feeling *American Quarterly* 59:3 (September, 2007), 912.
- 8 Andy Freeman, "The Enemy's Victory: Darkened Homes and Harvest Parties," http://www.cbn.com/spirituallife/onlinediscipleship/halloween/freeman_halloween.aspx
- 9 Meghan Cox Gurdon, "The Horror, the Horror," *National Review* 55/21 (November 10, 2003), 26.
- 10 Margaret Mead, "Halloween: Where Has All the Mischief Gone?" *Redbook* 145 (October 1975), 31-34.
- 11 Joel Best and Gerald T. Horiuchi, "The Razor Blade in the Apple: The Social Construction of Urban Legends," *Social Problems*, 32/5 (June, 1985).
- 12 See "Vampires Move Up Top Costumes List; Nurses, Politicians Drop Off" a press release of the National Retail Federation, October 1, 2009.
- 13 Jack Kugelmass as quoted in "From Boo to Benign," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 47/10 (November 3, 2000), B4.
- 14 Michele Slung and Roland Hartman, *Murder for Halloween* (New York: Warner Books, 1994), xiv.