

Halloween: A Night To Dance With The Devil

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Note: This sermon makes reference to the Celtic god Samhain. Catherine Bond informs me that her research indicates he was a much later invention. There is a great deal of scholarly discussion of this. What is certain is that the Celts did worship horned gods and that Christians used this image in their modeling of the Devil.

Halloween is almost here, time again for what some call the Devil's Holiday. Sadly many fear and loathe this festival. Some would even like to see it abandoned. However Halloween, in various guises has been around for a very long time and at least to judge by retail sales is pretty healthy at the moment.

So what is Halloween's connection with the Devil and his minions? Why should the holiday be the focus of puritanical ire? Before we can answer this question we need to look at a little haunted history.

The notion that the veil between the mortal and spirit worlds is particularly thin at this time of year is very ancient. After all the time of harvest is the time of abundance, yet things have stopped growing and are moving toward death. Traditionally it is the time when domestic animals were slaughtered and the meat preserved. Death and life's intricate dance is most evident in the late autumn. Many peoples celebrated the life/death connection at this season.

Among the ancient Egyptians dead family members could return on a particular evening to feast with their living relatives. The Greeks observed the holy day of "Anthestia" which gave the dead a week long visit at the end of which priests would ritually send them back to the underworld, Hades for another year. In Rome late October was the time of Feralia, a festival to honor the dead, when they too came to visit. Some of them might not be too friendly and some Romans took to carrying hollowed out gourds with candles or oily rags alight inside to fend off the less friendly spirits. Feralia was immediately followed on November first with the Feast of Pomona, Goddess of the orchards. Once again the dance of death and life was celebrated, to honor the goddess Romans would exchange gifts of fruits and nuts and play apple-bobbing games.

Of course the greatest source of Halloween observance is the Celtic festival of Samhain. New Years Eve, October 31st. On this night the great sun god was at his weakest and would come to die. However not to worry too much he would be reborn in the morning, re-gather his strength and be celebrated at Beltain six months later.

On Samhain the veil between the worlds was drawn aside allowing the spirits and the dead to join the festival. The holiday had a mixed feeling to it. The harvest was in and animals slaughtered so there was great abundance. The gifts of the sun god were celebrated by feasting and bonfires, yet winter was coming.

Fire was a very important element of these observances. The sacred bonfires were meant to aid and encourage the sun god. Also to this end sacrificial victims would be offered up in the bonfires. Animals and even humans would be enclosed in wicker figure cages and tossed into

the bonfires. Some believed that the souls of the wicked could escape the underworld and inhabit animal bodies, notably those of cats. The bonfires served as a way of returning these souls whence they had come. Sadly Halloween would continue to be a tough time for cats for many years to follow. Again reflecting the life/death balance and also the interconnectedness of the community, each household would relight its hearth fire from the sacred bonfire on this night.

Ritual begging was another rite of the holiday. Priests and others would go about the village soliciting gifts for the gods or for the communal feast. Those who gave generously could look forward to a prosperous New Year. Those who did not, well that's where the "trick" part of "trick or treat" comes in.

When the Romans conquered Celtic lands the festivals of Feralia and Pomona merged to some degree with the native festival. However Rome was not always friendly and in some imperial reigns the Druids were persecuted as potential threats to Rome's power.

The problem of dealing with Celtic traditions was inherited from the Roman Empire by the Roman Catholic Church. As she so often did the church found ways to co-opt existing practices. A very minor holiday "All Saint's Day", which honored those saints who lacked their own festal day, was moved from the spring to November first which became the day honoring the hallowed dead, "All Hallows Day". Thus the old New Year's Eve became "All Hallows Eve"

Contrasting the light with the dark, the good with the evil, Halloween became the realm of the unhallowed dead. A night when the souls of the damned and evil spirits were free to roam the earth. Anyone caught committing even a minor sin by one of these spirits could be carried right off to Hell. A good way to avoid this, if you could not refrain from some minor sinning, was to dress up as one of the evil ones and fool them into leaving you alone.

It is at this point that the Devil and company join the Halloween story. The Church dealt with earlier religions by demonizing their gods, clergy and adherents. This had already worked well in Rome itself where the old Greco-Roman deities became evil spirits, demons and devils. Hades, the abode of the dead became Hell where adherents of the demonic powers would suffer eternally while the hallowed souls enjoyed heaven. Pluto/Hades started to merge with Satan and Eden's serpent and other biblical images of an evil one. Priestesses, such as those at the oracle of Delphi became witches, seducing souls to belief in the old gods now revealed as devils. Of course "thou shalt not suffer a witch to live". This same process would be used in the Celtic lands.

It is important to note that this was no mere ploy, Christians truly believed in demons, devils and witches and in their power to seduce people away from God. Many in the Celtic world continued to practice the old rites and it was not hard to see a witches coven in the priestesses dancing around the sacred fire or demons in priests decked out in religious regalia. The focus of these rituals, the horned god was added to the mix of biblical evil ones and classical gods that would give us the Devil. The night before All Saints' Day was becoming the Devil's Holiday.

So who is this guy (or gal)? The Devil? Who is he and what is his game? The Devil we know, as we have already seen emerged over a long time and from many sources. He became the embodiment of all those forces that could seduce believers away from the true God. Let us take a look at his biography.

I have to admit I have sometimes felt a sneaking admiration for the Devil. He has after all survived a lot of bad press over the centuries. Satan is a survivor, at least in part because many Christians need him.

More than that he has a certain dignity. This is perhaps clearest in Milton's "Paradise Lost". Alone of all the angels, Satan (or Lucifer, a name meaning "light"), claims the right to an independent identity. Perhaps this is why UU's can feel some sympathy for him (and why many

others think we are under his spell). Alone of the first generation of creation he puts forth the notion that he has inherent worth and dignity, that his value is not merely as a creation and tool of God's. All of the other angels, at least at first, are running around saying "Yes sir, God;" "Right away, God"; "All praise and worship to God". Alone Satan stands up and asks, in our modern idiom "What about me? What about my needs?" Satan seeks a relationship with God, not servitude. Of course this is exactly what makes him the evil one. He dares to have a vision of himself independent of God. He must have been fairly persuasive as Milton tells us that one third of the heavenly host were won over.

Satan was a very different character in the Old Testament however. He was one of Yahweh's servants, indeed one of the inner circle of angels around the holy throne. In the story of Job, Satan's big scene in the Bible, he only carries out God's instructions. Yes he torments Job but always at the direction and approval of God. It is Yahweh who allows Job to be stripped of everything: wealth, status, property, family even dignity. He allows Job's wife and children to die, allows Job's body to be covered with oozing sores. Satan had done no more than question whether Job would be as devoted a follower of God, as he was if God had not given him everything he could want. Yahweh both accepts the responsibility for what happens to Job and refuses to explain it. When Job asks "why" the reply he receives is "where were you when I created the world?" Even to this day there is a tradition in Judaism of Satan as God's prosecuting attorney. Satan makes the case against each soul at the judgment. Here on earth Satan's role is to test the faithful for God through temptation, sort of a divine entrapment scheme.

Early Judaism had no need of an evil Devil since its vision of God was not of an all-loving purely good spirit. God was powerful, wrathful and jealous. He would offer his protection to his chosen people but only on his conditions and with no guarantees. Before the time of the Babylonian captivity there was little if any belief in an after life or of heaven and hell.

Babylon contributed the after life concept, but such an afterlife as to make oblivion look good. The Babylonian gods were in many ways a rather petty lot, always playing low tricks on each other and on mortals. They were about natural rhythms and power and the general unfairness of life. Their worshipers considered themselves slaves of the gods, a relationship that continued after death. In their underworld, ruled over by a particularly jealous goddess, Ereshkigal, souls spent eternity working in the dust and eating dirt. This was the kernel of the idea of Gehenna, forerunner of Hell. It may also be the source of the notion that the dead are jealous of and hostile to the living.

With the fall of Babylon, Judaism came under the influence and rule of Persia. Dualistic concepts from Persia would join with Babylonian ideas in the further development of Judaism. The Vedic faith of Persia started out as Unitarian, that is strictly monotheistic. It time however it became a dualistic faith with a great good God, Ahura Mazda, god of light and an evil god Ahriman, god of darkness. These two were locked in eternal battle and humanity had to take sides. They would be joined eventually by Mithra, Ahura Mazda's son. Originally an independent solar religion Mithraism joined forces with Mazdaism to give us a mythology of a divine son, born on December 25th, leading the forces of his father against the evil one.

Ironically the priests of Ahura Mazda, who strove to lead the people and the empire on the side of goodness would come to be seen as agents of the devil by Christians. They even lent their name to one of the devil's chief powers. They were Magi and they practiced Magic. For Christians this was evil, an attempt to usurp powers belonging to God alone. Perhaps this is why the three magi quickly became three kings.

This was also the time in Israel's history when the Adam and Eve story most likely emerged. In this tale the Devil picks up some of his basic characteristics. Although the serpent is never

identified as such early Christians were in no doubt that he was the Devil. So Satan becomes reptilian in nature, cold blooded and other, and the enemy of humanity. The story also points out his particular appeal to women. In ancient symbolism the snake could represent wisdom and also male sexuality. The Devil uses his sex appeal to seduce women to his side. Oddly sex is never mentioned in the story, the couple simply become aware of their nakedness. On this is based all the angst about sex that characterizes so much Christian history. Well the Devil does come off as a lot sexier than old Yahweh.

However what the serpent really seduces our first parents to discover is the knowledge of good and evil. God never got around to explaining this concept to them. They could do no evil because they did not know of evil. Only God possessed this knowledge. Truly this was the evil act par excellence; remember the snake tells Eve "you will be like God". This is an arrogance, a sin above all others.

The Adam and Eve story highlights the real problem with the Devil for Christians. Why does he tempt Eve? Has he already fallen from grace? The story is an attempt to place the blame for evil outside of God, and on the Devil and human self will. Yet clearly serpent and woman were created by God. There is simply no way to get God off the hook here. Either evil exists because God created it or because he allows it. If God is to be the sole all-powerful Creator then everything, including evil, flows from him.

The whole purpose of the Devil is to locate evil away from God, yet unless the Devil is as powerful as God this really does not work. If the Devil is God's equal then God could lose. In the context of Christian concepts of God the Devil simply does not make sense. This has not stopped him.

It is in Christianity that the Devil gains his fullest development. He not only rebels against God, he becomes God's active opponent, competing with God for the loyalty and souls of humanity. In some ways he is Jesus' evil older brother, indeed that was an early heresy. The Christian Devil and Hell are in essence anti-God and anti-Heaven. They mirror and parody the divine. Both have their kingdoms and their angels and each inspires worship among mortals. Christians came to believe that Satan was worshiped in an inverted form of the Mass.

This Devil has grown far more powerful than Satan ever was in Judaism. He no longer simply tests the faithful; he seeks to destroy the faith. He offers himself as an alternative to God as the ruler of the world and object of worship, indeed the picture of the devil painted by the Church did draw heavily on the gods of its competitors for followers.

The Devil was a great horned god like Samhain, or Pluto or Amen-Ra of Egypt. He was reptilian like many ancient gods who could incarnate as wise snakes. It was neither hard nor illogical for Christians to see these competitors as evil, they drew people away from the true God. Thus their leaders were evil, demons, mages, witches, the devil's brides as nuns were God's) and wizards. The Devil was a very efficient way to personify the "enemy" and having literally demonized the competition a lot of really bad behavior could be justified in attacking them.

Satan served a purpose for the church. His existence provided at least some explanation for evil, even if it was a rather inconsistent theory. His story highlights the nature of evil in the church's eyes...the arrogant assertion of self, of separateness from the divine. The devil also helps get mortals off the hook; we are not truly evil, just weak. He also presents an incentive for proper behavior. If we cannot be good little boys and girls out of our love for God, perhaps we can out of fear of the Devil.

For us however the idea of an external reality called the Devil may not be very useful. Even so I would argue that even humanists have good reason to dance with the Devil. Just as we incarnate whatever on this earth may be divine action so too we incarnate the diabolical. Both

goodness and evil call the human soul home. If we create god's saints and angels to call forth our best selves so devils and demons remind us of our worst selves.

The Devil has had such a long run because we know the truth of his existence within ourselves. Our history certainly provides at least as much evidence of our demonic nature as of our divine nature. It is important that we not lose sight of this truth, that we accept the fact that we are sometimes saints, sometimes sinners. To do so is to deny a part of ourselves, to fail to face up to our potential for evil is the first step in giving in to it. It is simply too dangerous not to acknowledge our inner Devil. We must dance with the Devil to know his reality as part of the human psyche. This is at the very heart of a humanistic faith, to honestly know ourselves so that we may use our love and reason to guide our choices, despite the appeal of the "dark side." This is why Halloween scares some people. They do not believe that humans can rely on themselves to make these choices. Giving the Devil, any opening is just too scary. He must be totally denied. What is more everyone else must follow suit so that they do not bring the Devil into the world. The Devil is still working through the "other to destroy the faithful, and those who celebrate Halloween are among "the other." Sadly this approach still allows the saved to justify diabolical behavior in the fight against the Devil (read Islam, Communism, Atheism etc.). To fail to dance with the Devil is the true danger.

With Halloween upon us I would like to end on a lighter if no less true note. There are times, so long as we do not take it too seriously, when dancing with the Devil can be fun. After all in the traditional view almost everything that is fun, revelry, feasting, sex, dancing is diabolical. It seems that despite all his nastiness the Devil can, in fact, throw one hell of a party. As the old proverb has it "a *little* larceny is good for the soul".

Halloween allows us to explore who we are. It lets us look at ourselves in ways we normally do not. We might be a little wilder, a little sexier, a little more self-assured, a little more physical, a little happier. Traits we normally suppress can be acknowledged in a controlled way. We can balance out our self-perception. Our masks and costumes may reveal as much as they conceal our identity. Perhaps it is no accident that devilry has connotations of fun as well as of evil. We all sometimes want to be just a wee bit evil. Halloween gives us a chance to nod at this part of ourselves. This can be healthy, we cannot become what we want to be without knowing what we really are.

This can be a dance with the Devil. Just a dance though, not a date. We do not want to find ourselves going home with the Devil, but he can be a very charming dance partner.

Happy Halloween!