

Do Christians celebrate pagan festivals?

Canton Theology on Tap

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Question

Do you think Halloween is a pagan festival?

Do you support or discourage the participation in Halloween festal activities?

Context

According to [one survey](#), 78% of Americans in 2022 indicated that they would definitely or probably celebrate Halloween. According to a [recent LifeWay survey](#) of 1000 protestant pastors 13% of pastors in 2022 encourage their church members to avoid Halloween completely. That's up from just 8% in 2016. This fueled in part by the Satanic Church founder Anton LeVay's comment

"I am glad that Christian parents let their children worship the devil at least one night out of the year. Welcome to Halloween."

Today, more pastors are also encouraging church members to invite friends and neighbors to church events this year, too. 71% of pastors are encouraging church members to invite friends and neighbors to church events this year compared to just 67% in 2016.

Halloween is said to have its roots in [Samhain](#). Or so [says the History Channel](#). Samhain comes from the Druids in Ireland and festival practices include many elements similar to what we now see in Halloween. Carving gourds, dressing in costumes, giving out candy, etc. A really [handy summary](#) of it is

The history of Halloween goes back thousands of years to the ancient Celtic festival of Samhain. It was celebrated halfway between the autumnal equinox and the winter solstice, it started on October 31st at dusk, and probably went for three days. It was a celebration of the transition from the lighter half of the year, to the darker half. There's a bit of mystery surrounding Samhain but we know that the Ancient Celtic priests known as Druids would light a new bonfire after everyone had extinguished their hearths at the beginning of the festival, and then onto the bonfire, they would throw animal bones from animals that had been sacrificed (this is where you get the word bonfire, from bone-fire).

When Christianity arrived in Ireland in the 5th century CE, the Christians found it easier to convert people to their faith by incorporating some of the Pagan celebrations into the Catholic calendar, and that's exactly what happened with Samhain! All Saints Day, also known as All Hallow's Day, which was initially observed on May 13th was moved to November 1st, and then November second became All Souls Day which was used to absorb elements of Samhain that couldn't be absorbed into All Hallow's Day. The evening before All Hallow's Day, All Hallow's Evening (also known as All Hallow's Eve), eventually became known as Halloween.

From this synopsis it's easy to conclude that Christianity is merely acting like a parasite on top of much older traditions in order to peddle its wares. This evokes the image many have of Christian's relationship with culture where we [use popular media](#) as a [Jesus juke](#) to the gospel. At best this paints Christianity as tacky and guilty of the modern sin of cultural appropriation. At worst it lays the foundation for accusing Christianity of evolving over time as a [cargo cult](#) of religious practices.

We may not particularly care about Halloween in its current form. We may choose to go Trunk or Treating instead of Trick or Treating. But we can't avoid the hazard we face when we concede that Christianity has merely conscripted pagan festivals over time.

To help illustrate how far this problem stretches; here is a list of Christian holidays and the pagan counterparts they are apparently drawing from:

- 1) Christmas — Yule (Dec 21-25)
- 2) St. Brigid's Day Imbolc (Feb 1-2)
- 3) Easter — Ostara or Ishtar (Mar 20-23)
- 4) St. Walpurgis Night — Beltane (Apr 30, May 1)
- 5) John the Baptist Day — Litha (June 20-22)
- 6) Lammas Day — Lughnasadh (Aug 1)
- 7) Michaelmas — Mabon (Sept 20-23).
- 8) All Hallow's Eve (Halloween) — Samhain (Oct 31)

There are many similarities between Halloween and Samhain. A lot of popular media, such as the Halloween film franchise, have either explicitly or implicitly adopted the view that Halloween simply is Samhain in disguise. But before we concede defeat on the point of imitation too soon we should consider a couple of arguments in favor of Halloween having a [distinctly Christian influence](#).

First, Halloween is different from Samhain in some significant ways.

As historian Nicholas Rogers, author of "Halloween: From Pagan Ritual to Party Night" (Oxford University Press, 2002), puts it: "If Samhain imparted to Halloween a supernatural charge and an intrinsic liminality, it did not offer much in the way of actual

ritual practices, save in its fire rites. Most of these developed in conjunction with the medieval holy days of All Souls' and All Saints' day."

Furthermore, All Saint's Day was instituted long before it came into contact with Samhain

John Mirk's Festial (the most popular orthodox sermon compilation in late medieval England) actually explains how "All Hallows Eve" came about. Pope Boniface IV converted the Roman Pantheon into a Christian church dedicated to saints and martyrs during the 7th century. This day was then commemorated as All Saints' Day on May 13th. Later moved to November 1st by Pope Gregory III.

While Mirk's story does tell about the Christian appropriation of a pagan temple, his narrative is firmly situated in a Christian event (the dedication of a new church) far removed from the Celtic world of Samhain. From this medieval perspective, "Halloween" is a celebration of Christian triumph over paganism, rather than a pagan holiday masquerading as Christian.

Festivals themselves provide a rich insight into both Medieval Christianity and how ghost stories themselves are distinctly Christian inventions.

Throughout the Festial the focus of the sermons is on exempla, that is, illustrative stories with a moral purpose. These are sometimes distinguished by the title 'narratio,' but frequently merged into the body of the sermon. The stories incorporate a great deal of hagiographic material, that is, legends about saints. Mirk borrows heavily from the *Legenda Aurea*, most commonly known as *The Golden Legend*, an enormously popular Latin hagiographic work composed c.1260 by Jacobus de Voragine.⁴⁷ The Festial contains exciting and suspenseful stories: beautiful Christian princesses who find their life and virginity threatened by evil pagan emperors; journeys to distant, exotic countries; confrontations with dragons and wizards; and encounters with animated corpses. Far from the tedious repetition of warnings about damnation that are sometimes encountered in early modern and modern sermons, the stories of the Festial draw from the rich syncretic tradition that informed medieval popular religion.

And finally, there is the evidence that, like Gnosticism in general and Dan Brown in particular, pagan historians who hate Christianity often lie. One rule to keep in mind when considering historical events is that we need to apply the same level of scrutiny to all sides of the discussion.

James Frazer's "The Golden Bough" (a classic social anthropology study from 1890 that explores the parallels between Christianity and ancient mythology), we have very little evidence about the actual practices of Celtic people or their festivals.

Nicholas Rogers argues that James Frazer's description of Samhain in "The Golden Bough" anachronistically projected medieval traditions onto the past (as Rogers writes, "there is no hard evidence that Samhain was specifically devoted to the dead or to

ancestor worship”). In fact, scholars really aren’t sure what “Celtic” culture entails. Some are even questioning the reality of the “Celts” as a coherent people group.

Question

Are any Christian holidays simply knock offs of more ancient pagan festivals?
Are you familiar with the Christian tradition of All Saint’s Day?

Challenge

The hidden premise behind the assertion that Christianity is borrowing from pagan festivals is the charge that Christianity is not original. And in our culture to be unoriginal is to be inauthentic. And inauthenticity means something can’t be true.

But why should we consider originality to be the standard in the first place?

It may shock modern ears to hear this but all culture is based on derived works. And I’m not talking about obvious genres like Hip Hop or Jazz that are based on blending. Everything man makes is a derivative of something that already existed. The only one who has created “ex nihilo” or “out of nothing” is God per Colossians 1:16. It is a form of pride to think that anything man has made is truly original. That includes his festivals. Especially since God created the heavens and everything in them for us to mark the times and seasons according to Genesis 1:14.

God has also put eternity in the hearts of men according to Ecclesiastes 3:11. It stands to reason that some elements of pagan festivals will reflect that internal testimony given to all men to the degree that Romans 1:20 tells us they are without excuse for not coming to faith in Jesus.

In fact, in Acts 17 Paul utilizes these facts on his famous sermon on Mars Hill when he told his fellow Roman citizens about the God unknown to them that he knew. Paul also co-opted the creative works of his day and engaged in a bit of culture warring several times in his first letter to the Corinthians.

Would it be a stretch, then, for Christians in history to use Paul’s example and do the same with Pagan festivals?

One of the most popular forms of communication today are memes. Memes are mental viruses as described in Richard Dawkins book *The God Delusion*. Often memes intentionally subvert the original source they draw from. When used in the service of sharing Christian truths this ends up being a form of cutting down Asherah poles.

Question

How does the de-emphasis of originality impact your faith?
What are some other ways we can subvert paganism?

Conclusion

God created the sun moon and stars for us to use to mark times of “special meetings” per Genesis 1:14. So whatever we conclude of the special meetings themselves, it should be noted that it was God who created the universe and framework in which these special meetings are taking place. God also establishes rules for these meetings. Wild drunken orgies are simply not allowed. We are not to “eat and drink and rise up to play” per Exodus 32:6. In other words, we cannot say that anything goes.

In Halloween we have a picture of “Escaping through the flames” per 1 Corinthians 3:15

Christianity is a conquering religion and its trophies are redeemed pagan festivals.

Christianity is not in a defensive position when it comes to similarities with pagan mythologies. Gilgamesh has more to lose from its later dating than Noah does.

The Israelites were commanded by YHWH in Exodus 34:13
"But ye shall destroy their altars, break their images, and cut down their [asherah]"

And in the New Testament we are told that the gates will not prevail against the Church. We should still be conquering in the name of Jesus today. St Patrick thought so, that's why he has the mythology of driving snakes out of Ireland. Tolkien thought so, too. That's why he plunged Norse mythology into the baptismal pool and brought up his tales of Middle Earth and thereby changed the mythology of an entire nation in the process.

[Halloween is rapidly rising in popularity](#). What is more like the gates of hell than Halloween?

Question

How does the idea of Christianity being a conquering religion affect your participation in holidays like Halloween?



Josh R.R. Jokin
@joshcarlosjosh

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"Easter was actually originally a pagan holiday!"

Keep complaining and we'll take Toyotathon and make it a Christian holiday too.

10:32 AM · 4/5/21 · Twitter for Android

186 Retweets **26** Quote Tweets **1,427** Likes



Josh R.R. Jokin @joshcarlosjosh · 3h

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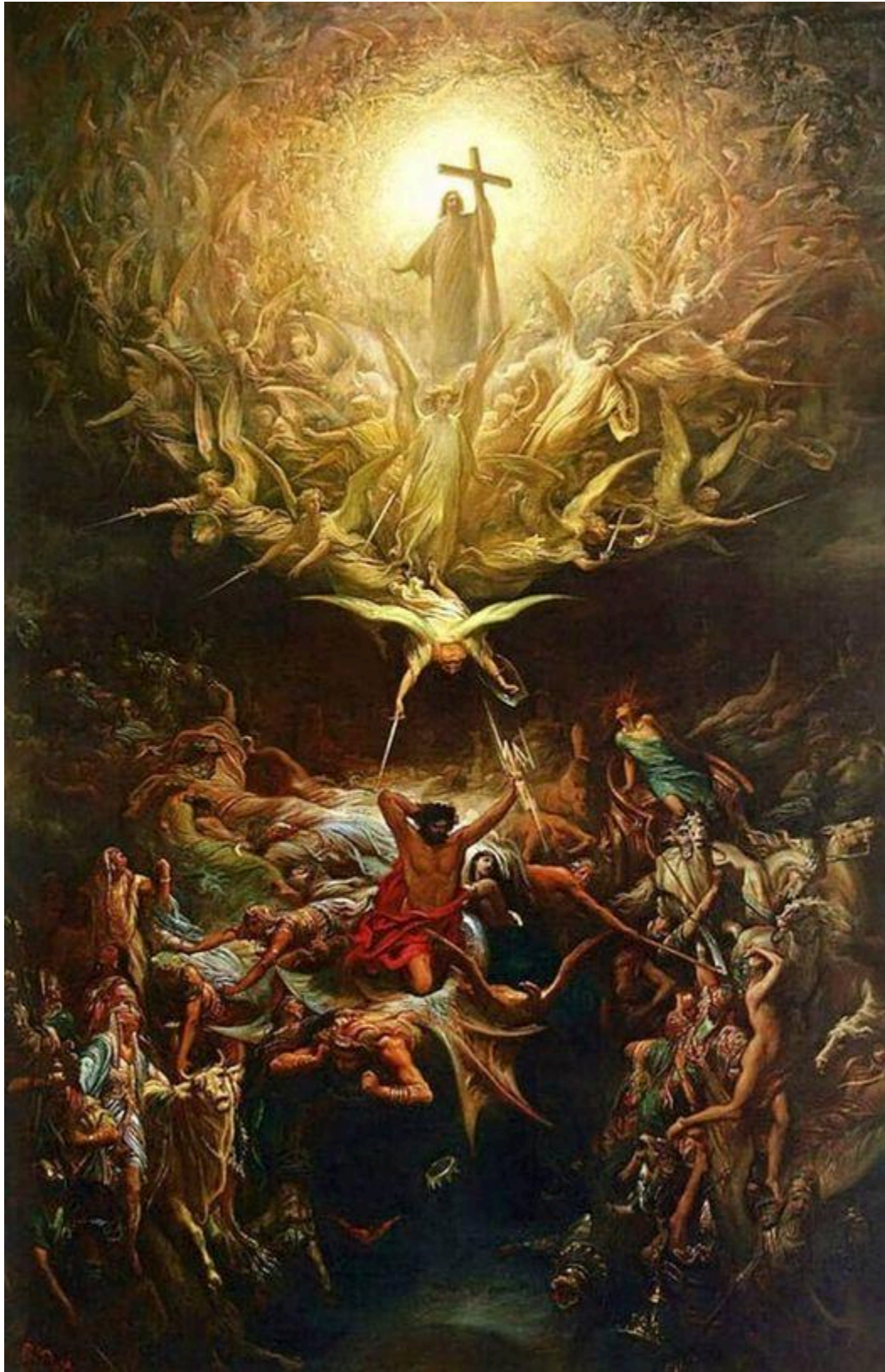
Replying to @joshcarlosjosh

"But we-"

You just lost Shark Week.

"That's not-"

SHARK WEEK IS A WEEK-LONG
CHRISTIAN FESTIVAL NOW



Gustav Dore "[Triumph Of Christianity Over Paganism](#)" 1899