

Confessions of a Halloweeneer

Why Should the Devil have all the good parties?

GEOFF RYAN, SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2002

“To confront the Empire is not to fight against it but to live beyond it.” (seminar leader at Messiah College, May 2002, speaking on living counter-culturally)

“Because we love something else more than this world, we love even this world better than those who know no other.” (C.S. Lewis)

It is said that confession is good for the soul, so... here it goes. I celebrate Halloween! It's true, I allow my kids to dress up and go out trick or treating. I carve pumpkins and buy candies to give out to children who come to our door in their spooky costumes. Now having so declared myself, allow me to offer a reasonable defense before the collective wrath of my fellow Christians descends upon my head (or at the very least, piles up in my mailbox).

Halloween is one of those sub-cultural shifts that caught me unawares upon my return from Russia. Having grown up in a relatively strict (by today's standards) evangelical – some would say fundamentalist – home meant that there were many things that were not allowed. To be fair, my parents loosened up as the years passed and my younger sister and brother had less restrictions to skirt than myself and my older brother. But in the early years, we rarely went to the movies, we categorically could not play any card games, on Sundays we were not allowed to play outside or with friends, TV was rationed and certain shows were off-limits, make-up (for girls) was not encouraged...I could go on. These and other things defined the parameters of our world as shaped by our faith and our understanding of Christian practice. The parameters were designed to keep us on the straight and narrow, protected from the corrupting influences of the world, to separate us really. Such was the world that most of my peers in the Army grew up in in the 60's and early 70's. It was pretty much the same for all of us.

Looking back now, it seems like there were a lot of

rules and taboos. Some quite helpful actually, while others were rather silly and often unwittingly produced the exact opposite outcome than originally intended (for example, as a small boy I came to dread Sundays, particularly in the summer, and so developed an aversion to church services that - believe it or not - plagues me to this day). We were products of our times though, and I don't blame my parents or feel any deep seated resentment for any of these things. They were doing the best they could and the results are not bad if I look at how we all turned out. The point is, however, that Halloween was never one of the “don'ts”. Everyone I knew celebrated Halloween – everyone I knew in the Army celebrated Halloween. It never even crossed our minds, as far as I can remember, that it might be a bad thing to do.

Sometime in the late 1980's or early 1990's, however, Halloween came to the attention of the ideologues of evangelical culture in North America and was put on the “hit list”. Being out of the loop for about a decade in Russia (where Halloween is not celebrated - nor incidentally is it celebrated anywhere else in Europe. Having said that, England celebrates Guy Fawkes Day which is infinitely more macabre and disturbing than anything I've ever seen during Halloween), I was blindsided by this shift when I found myself back in Canada in the autumn of 2000. As October approached, the question being asked was a hesitant, sussing out of one's position: “How do you feel about Halloween?” Not knowing that I was supposed to feel a certain way about Halloween, my ready admittance of complicity in the celebration got me into a fair few scrapes. I understood quickly enough that Halloween was something evangelicals – and particularly charismatics, who seemed increasingly to make up my acquaintances and friends - no longer did and that any mention of Halloween inevitably led me into arcane and rather confusing discussions on the occult, satanic ritual abuse, druids, generational curses, African voodoo and rock music, to name a few.

Looking back I realize that all the while these card playing, movie going, DVD owning, pierced-ear, evangelicals blithely went about activities that would have almost certainly consigned them to at least purgatory (had we believed in it) if not the fires of hell itself a few short years ago, while at the same time castigating me for my observance of a celebration that was one of the annual highlights of my early years. I smelt the whiff of cultural Christianity at work and decided to look a little deeper into the whole matter.

Finding credible information about the origins of this festival has proved harder than I thought. There are plenty of Christian ministries via the web that offered their take on the celebration. Some of this stuff is quite detailed, but the more I read, the more suspicious I became. My natural tendency toward dialecticalism aside, I soon found myself at sea amid an ocean of unsubstantiated charges, unprovable facts, unverified assertions, decontextualized Scripture verses and that odd mixture of sweeping generalization allied with minute and unnecessary detail that I have found to be a good indicator of falsehood afoot. A heavy reliance on anecdotal evidence also does little to further ones argument.

How certain brothers and sisters have made discoveries that no other historian or anthropologist have been yet able to figure out (such as, the origins and purpose of Stonehenge) or come into possession of certain facts that the FBI has no knowledge of (ie, "Occult killings take place in the U.S. every Halloween") mystifies me. Needless to say, I found this search inconclusive and not overly helpful.

In the end the issue is far deeper than whether or not one dresses up and goes trick or treating on October 31. It is a fundamental approach to mission and living as a Christian in a post-Christian culture. My celebration of Halloween and the good Christian men and women of the opposition represent differing concepts of engaging with culture and society. The issue is engagement versus withdrawal and where one draws the line. When does the prophetic cross the line into compromise?

Jesus advised his disciples (being the sheep they were, about to be sent out among the wolves) that the real trick (pardon the pun) was to be "in, but not of" the world. A tremendously difficult balancing act. I own a painting that I purchased in Madrid some years back from a sidewalk artist outside the Prado. It is a mixed medium piece using oils and sand. It is of a very vulnerable man (he is naked) rendered virtually as a stick figure, and

hence fragile and easily broken. He is wearing a halo which marks him, in my mind, as a saint. He is balancing precariously on a tightrope stretched over flames, the flames of hell, I figure. I saw something of myself in that painting which is why I bought it and why it hangs over my bed. I also see it as the preferred "missionary position" (believing that all believers are to be engaged in mission, hence we are all missionaries) – having the courage to walk that razor's edge, fully aware of one's own vulnerability and brokenness, yet keeping on in the midst of that surrounding, threatening danger.

The other "position" seems to have little of the missionary about it and takes its cue from Paul's admonishment in 2 Corinthians 6:17, usually taken out of context and rendered most typically in the King James Version: "Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you." The intent is withdrawal rather than engagement, the point of relation to "the world" is an adversarial one, primarily defensive ("keep oneself unspotted") and hence reactionary.

It is to me an odd sort of theology best exemplified by the old Protestant believers I encountered in Russia. Because under Communist rule things were so bleak and unrelentingly hostile, theology took a heavenward turn. There was not much to look forward to here on earth, so the trick was to get saved and then grit your teeth and hold onto your salvation until you made it to heaven (achieved in a number of ways but mainly through extreme legalism and a sharply defined dualism of sacred and secular that was applied right down to the minutiae of daily existence). Fully two-thirds of the songs in the Russian Baptist Hymnal are about heaven. Apocalyptic themes, the longing for Christ's return, obsession with "the world" - all staple fare for sermons on any given Sunday. Given the circumstances in Russia prior to perestroika, this is understandable and the courage and suffering that these brothers and sisters endured demands our respect and admiration. To construct such a worldview here, however, is unwarranted and a bit freakish. There are Christians who sit inside their homes with all the lights off on Halloween night, refusing to answer the doorbell and open their door to the halloweeners.

I look at it this way. I'm not too sure how the holiday came about. I think that All Hallows eve is when the forces of light and darkness engaged in battle and the good guys win and hence the following day is All Saints Day. Whether this was a pagan ceremony coopted by the

Church and “sanctified” for holy purposes or syncretized in the interests of compromise, well – it beats me. As it stands today, it is what it is. Whether Satan and his minions need a particular day in order to practice their dark arts, it seems somewhat like imposing the same time-space construct that we as humans are forced to live with on beings and forces that live in another dimension and I’m not sure this is a valid understanding. I don’t give October 31 as a particular night much more credit than I do April Fools day (most fools seem pretty active to me all year around) or Easter even – I take the celebration of the remembrance of the crucifixion and resurrection as deadly serious but that fact that it changes date from year to year would suggest to me that the value is in the how of the observance and not particularly the when.

As for all the pagan trappings that represent the “thin end of the wedge”, well, how far back does one start this wedge? Christmas Trees – ever looked into the origins of that? Santa Claus? Rearrange the letters and he becomes Satan Claus! Thanksgiving? Easter? The word comes from Esthe, who was an ancient Germanic, wood goddess. What about the days of the week? In case you’re wondering, they come mostly from Norse mythology (Wednesday = Wodin, Thursday = Thor, Friday = Frida...you get the picture). The symbolism of mystical and magical figures, well I grew up on C.S. Lewis’ “The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe”, as many of us did. Tolkein, of “Lord of the Rings” fame was a Christian and a mentor to Lewis. One of the best sermons I ever heard was on the fairy tale of Snow White as a resurrection metaphor. “Do you believe in magic...?”, goes the song. I am afraid I do.

Besides, if everyone around me is celebrating something, I want in. I’m going to get in on the action and see what cracks of opportunity appear. To ignore it is a denial of reality that is not prophetic but may actually border on the delusional. To run away belies Paul assertion to the Hebrew Christians: “But we are not of

those who shrink back and are destroyed...” (Hebrews 10:39). Why should the Devil have all the good music? Why should the Devil have all the good parties? Same principle, I reckon. He stole it all from God (and us) first - so why let him keep it?

So my kids dress up. Not as witches or murderers or devils - why would they? The bad guys are the losers after all and my kids want to be on the winning side. So they choose a superhero, they become angels, crimefighters, knights, good guys. They go out to party and get candy. I send them out to be “in, but not of”. Then I sit at home and wait for all the opportunities about to come to my door. Last year 290 of them came knocking.

Our house straddles the line between the housing project of Regent Park and the upwardly mobile, gentrified Cabbagetown neighbourhood. Sixty-five percent of Regent Park’s approximately 16,000 residents are 18 or under. The kids from Regent don’t trick or treat in the Park. They head north into Cabbagetown where the houses (and money) is. At the north end of Parliament Street is St. Jamestown, a complex of low-rent and subsidized apartment housing around 11,000 people, most of whom are new Canadians, almost forty percent are Tamil. They head south to Cabbagetown on Halloween. As one beleaguered resident grumbled goodnaturedly to me: “The Tamils attack from the North and the Regent Parkers from the South.”

The whole world came to my house last Halloween. Every conceivable nationality, big kids, little kids, kids in costumes and kids without costumes, kids I knew and kids who were complete strangers. We prepared packets of candy, invitations to our Saturday Kid’s Church and glossy evangelistic booklets obtained from Child Evangelism Fellowship. I heard a Somalian girl tell her Chinese friend as they passed on the street out front: “Go there - that’s the house where you get the Jesus books!”

So, what shall we wear this Halloween?