

Religion Today
October 22-28, 1999
Raising the Dead
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In our modern culture of horror movies, Halloween brings on thoughts of the dead rising from the earth and walking among the living. But to Christianity over the centuries, the phrase "the dead rising" would have meant raising the dead into heaven. Have you ever thought about what gives the dead the power to rise into heaven rather than into the world of the living?

Medieval Christian theologians believed that the dead were weighed down by their sins and so stopped at a midway point, Purgatory, where they were purified for entry into heaven. Post-Puritan Protestant thinkers emphasized lightening one's burden while here on earth, through confession, forgiveness, and leading a sanctified life. Now theological descriptions were fine for the clergy and the educated, but ordinary, often unlearned, Christians took a different route to ensuring that the dead made it to heaven, namely, by burying them in locations where there was a special link between heaven and earth.

Earthly locations with special links to heaven were considered to be sacred places. Sacred means "touched by God." In the Holy Land, in Palestine, sacred places were fairly common. Any place Jesus performed a miracle, for instance, was considered a sacred place. These locations where divine power had been displayed were believed to have a special link to heaven, the divine realm. Over the centuries, these sacred spots often became heavily used cemeteries.

The British Isles differed from the Holy Land. Since Christianity reached these islands centuries after Jesus' life and death, they had no sites where Jesus, or even some of his early followers, had lived, traveled or performed miracles.

So at what sacred locations could the early British Christians bury their dead? One

solution was to take over the sacred places of earlier religions -- the sites where the Druids and others had practiced their rites. Thus in Anglesey, two sites recently were found where the Christians buried their dead next to a Bronze Age burial mound nearly two millennia older. Near Stonehenge, the ancient stone circles of Avebury and Knowlton were appropriated by the Christians as cemeteries. And at Lough Erne in Northern Ireland, an ancient two-faced stone statue became the center of a Christian burial ground.

What is going on here? The early British Christians, like those in Israel, wanted to bury their dead at a sacred site. The only sacred sites they knew came from the pagans. But now that the Christians knew the true nature of the divine being, that he was God, they seemed to have decided that these sites were part of God's holiness. By burying the dead there, they were brought closer to the Christian heaven. But who knows, in the dark of Halloween night, whether the early Christians remained certain that their God was completely in control. Perhaps some pagan spirits and power remained, and who knows what the dead might do.