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Halloween: The Christian Holiday
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This year Halloween occurs on a Sunday, a coincidence that has given rise to complaints about combining Sunday with a "devil" holiday. In a recent Associated Press article, one person argued, "It's a day for the good Lord, not for the Devil." While another posited, "You go to church on Sunday, you don't go out and celebrate the devil."

The oddity here is that Halloween is a Christian religious day of long standing--nearly 12 centuries. The name itself is a shortening of "All Hallows Eve" or, in modern English, "All Holy Eve." Its association with the devil has more to do with costumed trick-or-treaters than it does with the holiday's meaning. So how was Halloween's meaning forgotten and replaced with notions of devil worship?

The holiday began more than 2000 years ago in Celtic Britain. Nov. 1 was the Celtic new year celebration called Savin (transliterated as Samhain). They believed that on the preceding evening dead family members would rise and visit their family. These spirits were understood as tricksters. They were often friendly, so families would leave doors unblocked and place food and drink on their tables to welcome their deceased relatives. If the dead became annoyed, however, it was believed they would play tricks, such as damaging crops, spoiling the cows' milk, etc.

After the Romans conquered Britain in 43 A.D., they combined two of their fall festivals with Savin. The first was also a "day of the dead" celebration, while the other was the feast of Pomona, the goddess of fruit trees. Her symbol was the apple, and part of the celebration included the activities of bobbing for apples.

Several centuries later, the Roman Empire had become Christian, and in 835 A.D., Pope Gregory moved the remembrance day for the martyrs of the church to Nov. 1, along with its accompanying vigil the preceding night. This is All Hallows Eve.

Eventually, Nov. 1 became All Saints Day, for the recollection of all Christian saints. Later, the Catholic Church designated Nov. 2 as All Souls Day.

This is a day to celebrate and pray for the "communion of saints," whether in heaven, in purgatory, or still alive on earth.

As Ireland, Scotland and England became Christian, Savin and its associated beliefs were forgotten, replaced by Christian ideals. However, some of the practices associated with the night of Oct. 31 continued. The notion that the dead would visit and either be treated or play tricks not only remained but was enhanced. Young men would dress up in scary costumes, demanding householders to treat them or suffer a trick. Turnips were carved to shelter candles from the wind. Ireland's and Scotland's mythical creatures were said to walk about on that night.

The Protestant Reformation severed Halloween's connection to All Saints Day and All Souls Day. Early Protestant movements despised the notion of special holy days. Early Baptist groups as well as the pilgrims who came to Plymouth even rejected Christmas.

By the mid-19th century, when the Irish and other British emigrants began coming to America in large numbers, Americans began to celebrate Halloween more widely. The Irish brought their traditions of costumes, trick-or-treating, and turnip carving (which quickly became pumpkin carving), and these were adopted by the Americans around them. The predominately Protestant Americans usually saw Halloween without its link to Christian -- i.e., Catholic -- beliefs. Over the decades, as they made Halloween their own holiday, the Christian tie was completely forgotten.

Thus today, few Americans are aware of the 1,200 years of Christian celebration of All Hallows Eve, and its symbolism of the union "the communion of saints." To give Halloween meaning, then, they draw upon what they see. Since they see a continued predominance of scary costumes, with the devil as the "scariest," it is not surprising that many people have come to understand Halloween as a holiday for the devil.