

# Worship of the Dead?

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**Heathen cultures and religions in many parts of the world involve some form of worship directed toward dead heroes or ancestors.**

**Religious observances such as Hallowmas, which begins on the evening of October 31, or Halloween (All Hallows' Eve), preserve to one extent or another, depending on the region, widespread ancient customs and superstitions directly associated with the worship of the dead. As does the "secular" observance of Halloween itself.**

**Does God's Word have anything to say about customs involving worship of the dead? Should Christians participate in the Halloween custom?**

The pagan sources of various customs and superstitions reflected in Halloween is commonly acknowledged. "Customs and superstitions gathered through the ages go into the celebration of Halloween, or All Hallows Eve, on October 31, the Christian festival of All Saints. It has its origins, however, in the autumn festivals of earlier times. The ancient Druids had a three-day celebration at the beginning of November. They believed that on the last night of October spirits of the dead roamed abroad, and they lighted bonfires to drive them away" ("Halloween," *Compton's Interactive Encyclopedia*, 1995, Compton's NewMedia, Inc.). In recounting various ancient customs associated with Halloween, the same source goes on to remark, "Halloween celebrations today reflect many of these early customs." Another source comments, "The pagan observances influenced the Christian festival of All Hallows' Eve, celebrated on the same date" (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, "Halloween," 1998 multi-media edition).

Included in the pagan superstitions and customs associated with Halloween are those practiced by the Celts at the time of their Samhain festival. "Samhain was seen as a liminal time, when spirits or fairies (the *aos sí*) could more easily come into our world. Many scholars see the *aos sí* as remnants of the pagan gods and nature spirits." To propitiate the spirits, "offerings of food and drink were left" for them.

People took various measures to ward off evil spirits, which included disguising themselves in some way, as well as lighting bonfires, a practice also linked to various other superstitions involving sun worship and nature worship.

"The souls of the dead were also thought to revisit their homes. People would set a place at the Samhain feast for the souls of dead kinfolk and tell tales of one's forebears." Customs in various places included going from house to house in costumes begging for food, which included offerings for the spirits. (*Wikipedia*, "Samhain").

These ancient customs survive today in cultures all over the world. Note the following from *Wikipedia*:

**Festival of the Dead or Feast of Ancestors** is held by many cultures throughout the world in honor or recognition of deceased members of the community, generally occurring after the harvest in August, September, October, or November. In many

cultures a single event, *Festival of the Dead*, lasting up to 3 days, was held at the end of October and beginning of November; examples include the Peruvians, the Pacific Islanders, the people of the Tonga Islands, the ancient Persians, the ancient Egyptians, the Japanese, ancient Romans, and the northern nations of Europe. For the Hindus the ritual done for the dead ancestors is called Pitru Paksha. It is based on the Hindu lunar calendar and the period lasts for 15 days. The dates change as per the Hindu lunar calendar.

In Japanese Buddhist custom the festival honoring the departed (deceased) spirits of one's ancestors is known as Bon Festival. In Inca religion the entire month of November is 'Ayamarca', which translates to *Festival of the Dead*. A Mexican holiday is called Day of the Dead. The Chinese and Buddhist festival is called Ghost Festival. In the 21st century, European traditions mark the celebrations of Halloween, All Saints and All Souls' Day. ("Festival of the Dead," en.wikipedia.org).

An example of how the dead are worshiped in modern day Mexico, and among at least some immigrants to the United States of Mexican descent, is found in an article from the Kansas City *Star* newspaper. The article describes how a woman named Maria, who had immigrated to the United States, "...keeps an altar in her grandmothers memory" in her home. The article also recounts how the woman "built a public altar for her grandmother as part of the ...Days of the Dead" activities in the city where she lives in the United States. The altar was adorned with articles which had belonged to the dead grandmother. The article comments, "...across the country people ...are reviving and revitalizing this custom that melds native cultural traditions and beliefs about death and dying with Christian devotion."

In describing how the "Days of the Dead" are observed in Mexico and elsewhere in late October and early November, the article states, "Lavish meals are prepared to 'nourish' the spirits that return to visit loved ones during this time." A celebrant comments, "I think the Day of the Dead is a very good indication of how our Indian relatives basically accepted Catholicism by adapting it and co-opting it into their own beliefs." (Kansas City *Star*, October 28, 2000).

An *Associated Press* article discusses how celebrants sit around bonfires awaiting the return of dead relatives. "Fires are thought to guide the wandering souls back to their families, according to Day of the Dead tradition. In some towns, fires flicker outside almost every doorway" (*Associated Press*, November 8, 2000).

Praying to the "saints," or to Mary, is also a relic of such worship. Some of the customs associated with Christmas, Easter and some other "Christian" holidays likewise can be traced back to ancient origins in systems of idolatry extant in Biblical times that involved worship of the dead.

Many of the great systems of idolatry in the ancient world revolved around the legend of a dead hero god, who was lamented, and eventually resurrected. The cults of Osiris, Tammuz, Baal, Dionysus, Adonis, and others featured such a legend. "A god of many names but of essentially one nature" (*The Golden Bough*, Sir James George Frazer, MacMillan one volume abridged edition, p. 378). In many lands, dead kings were worshiped. For example in Egypt,

the living Pharaoh was considered a personification of Horus, and the dead Pharaoh was identified with Osiris (*Ancient Egypt*, J.E. Manchip White, Dover, pp. 8-9). Tombs of the dead Pharaohs customarily included shrines or mortuary temples where priests attended to the worship of the dead rulers (*The Pyramids of Egypt*, I.E.S. Edwards, pp. 32, 95, 154, 161ff.). All such religious customs are prohibited under the law which God spoke from Mount Sinai, "You shall have no other gods before [or besides] Me" (Deuteronomy 5:7). And other similar warnings against idolatry apply as well.

More specifically, God told the Israelites, "You are the children of the Lord your God; you shall not cut yourselves nor shave the front of your head for the dead" (Deuteronomy 14:1). This is a prohibition against certain idolatrous customs associated with the worship of Osiris, Baal and similar deities, as referenced above. "...the Egyptians, with shorn heads, annually lamented over a buried idol of Osiris, smiting their breasts, slashing their shoulders, ripping open their old wounds..." (*The Golden Bough*, p. 435). In the text of a Baal epic from Ras Shamra, site of the ancient city of Ugarit on the Syrian coast, El is portrayed as mourning and lamenting for the dead Baal. "Cheeks and chin he rends, His upper arms he scores, His chest as a garden-plot, Even as a valley-bottom his back he lacerates" (*Documents from Old Testament Times*, D. Winton Thomas, ed., Harper Torchbooks, p. 130). The priests of Baal, in their confrontation with Elijah, imitated the same practice (1 Kings 18:28).

On an occasion during Israel's trek through the wilderness, "They joined themselves also to Baal of Peor, and ate sacrifices made to the dead" (Psalm 106:28). Thus are characterized sacrifices made to Baal (cf. Deuteronomy 4:3). God in his wrath slew 24,000 of them (Numbers 25:9).

God forbade the Israelites from adopting heathen religious customs (Deuteronomy 12:30-32). They were forbidden from offering their produce to the dead (Deuteronomy 26:14), another custom common in the ancient world, and still common today in some cultures. Israel's king Saul died in part for attempting to consult the dead through a medium (1 Chronicles 10:13; compare 1 Samuel 28:7 ff.). God condemns necromancy, which in its Scriptural application includes worshiping or praying to the dead, as well as seeking to communicate with them for divining the future or other purposes (Leviticus 19:26, 28, 31; 20:6-8; Deuteronomy 18:10-12; 2 Kings 21:6). The righteous king Josiah purged the land of spiritists, mediums, household gods and idols (2 Kings 23:24). The prophet Isaiah wrote, "And when they say to you, 'Seek those who are mediums and wizards, who whisper and mutter,' should not a people seek their God? Should they seek the dead on behalf of the living?" (Isaiah 8:19).

The dead know nothing and are powerless (Psalm 146:3-5; Ecclesiastes 9:5, 10). Only Jesus, of all humans who have ever lived, has immortality at the present time (1 Timothy 6:16). The saints, which includes all who will be in the first resurrection at Christ's coming, will not be made immortal until that time. "...at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: 'Death is swallowed up in victory.'" (1 Corinthians 15:52-54; see also 1 Corinthians 15:48-51).

“Saints,” as the term is used in Scripture, does not refer to deceased individuals who have been “beatified” by a Church, and declared worthy of “veneration,” or worship, and are to be prayed to. All those in the true Church are “called to be saints” (Romans 1:7). The word “saints,” is translated from the Greek ἅγιος [*hagios*], which means “holy” (cf. 1 Peter 1:15-16, 2:5, 9; 2 Peter 3:11). We are to fear and worship God alone, not any man (Acts 10:25-26; 14:8-17).

As Christians, we are to “flee from idolatry” (1 Corinthians 10:1-7, 14, 20-22). We live in a world given over to vain, idolatrous customs and beliefs. Mankind has stubbornly refused to forsake his idolatrous customs (Revelation 9:20-21). We must turn away from empty and vain heathenish customs founded on lies and deception (Zechariah 10:2; Jeremiah 2:5, 8; 10:1-5, 8-16; 1 Peter 4:1-5). We should disassociate ourselves from the empty and vain customs of heathenish religion and superstition. Halloween is one of those customs.

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