

CEMENT PAPER

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HALLOWEEN

- Background information -

The festival

- October 31st is the 'Eve of All Hallows', 'Hallow even' or 'Hallowe'en' (now more usually just 'Halloween'). 'All Hallows' is an ancient festival of the Christian church celebrated on November 1st which celebrates all those Christians from the past who have served God and the Church well. Sometimes it is known as 'All Saints Day'.
- November 2nd is 'All Souls Day' when many remember those of their families who have died. It is very strong in Roman Catholic communities where often people visit graves to put flowers on them or say Requiem Masses in churches. In South America there are great celebrations on this day called 'Dia dos Mortos' - the 'Day of the Dead'.



Traditions

- In Pagan times there was an autumn festival called Samhain or 'Summer's end' although the exact date of this is not known. It was a time of year when large fires were lit to keep people warm and ceremonies were carried out to chase away the wicked spirits of the darkness. We do not have any definite anthropological information on these celebrations although modern Pagans have developed their own.
- Many of the modern celebrations in the last ten to twenty years have come from USA where there has been a tradition of 'trick or treating', pumpkin lanterns, and so on, all of which have a distinctly American flavour. As pumpkins, for example, are not indigenous to Britain, this is a borrowed tradition.

- In the past, in Scotland, Ireland and the North of England, there have been various Halloween traditions. Children would go round neighbours' houses and have to perform a song, dance or poem to receive their gift of nuts and fruit (there was not usually money involved although some neighbours did give a few coins). In Scotland this was called 'Guising'. Parties were held with specific Halloween games such as 'dookin' for apples', 'jammy scones' and 'Nelson's Eye.' Although there might be some children dressed as witches, etc, most children just dressed up as whatever they fancied - anything from favourite story and TV characters to famous people. In Scotland the evening usually ended with a reading of Robert Burns' poem 'Tam O'Shanter' or telling a ghost story. In Ireland and Scotland 'tumshie lanterns' made from hollowed out turnips (swedes) were carried but their significance was more to light the way rather than linked with the idea of chasing away evil spirits. The idea, held in some country areas that the face of a lantern chased away 'ghosties and ghowlies' was more a children's tradition.

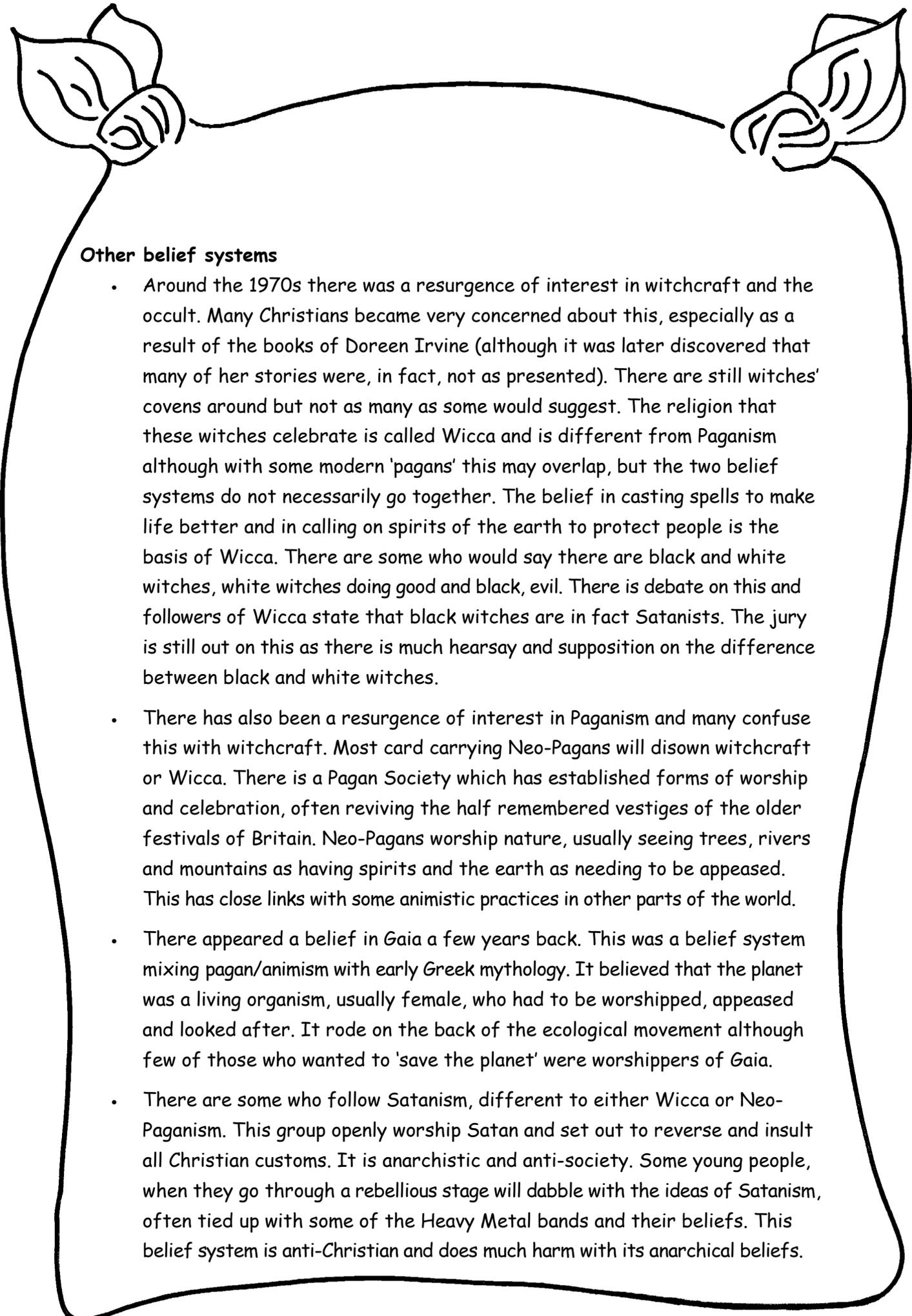


Dracula



Dracula is also a popular character at Halloween. He never existed but was a purely fictional character created by Bram Stoker in 1897. In Wallachia (part of modern Romania) there was a Feudal Prince who ruled a large area including the southern part of Transylvania. His name was Vlad Dracul - the dragon (dracul) was his family crest. Apparently he was a very fair ruler but in his battles against the Ottoman Empire he was very nasty to those he captured. There was also a folk belief in part of Transylvania that anyone who had had wrong done to them could come back after death as a vampire (nothing to do with bats, but a spirit or ghost with a human body) to seek revenge, unless certain ceremonies

were carried out. These involved prayers being said and a cross being put in the coffin, although in one area there was a ceremony of driving a piece of wood from a particular tree through the corpse's heart, thus keeping them in their grave. (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* obviously draws on such traditions.) Bram Stoker put these 'exotic' elements together and came up with his fictional character Dracula. The book, widely read in America, became a cult when it was used by Hollywood to make a film. The Dracula that children are familiar with owes more to Hollywood than to either the folk traditions or indeed, Bram Stoker! The story is thus totally fictional but it is interesting that even in this fiction, the cross was such a powerful symbol that it could rid fear of all things evil.



Other belief systems

- Around the 1970s there was a resurgence of interest in witchcraft and the occult. Many Christians became very concerned about this, especially as a result of the books of Doreen Irvine (although it was later discovered that many of her stories were, in fact, not as presented). There are still witches' covens around but not as many as some would suggest. The religion that these witches celebrate is called Wicca and is different from Paganism although with some modern 'pagans' this may overlap, but the two belief systems do not necessarily go together. The belief in casting spells to make life better and in calling on spirits of the earth to protect people is the basis of Wicca. There are some who would say there are black and white witches, white witches doing good and black, evil. There is debate on this and followers of Wicca state that black witches are in fact Satanists. The jury is still out on this as there is much hearsay and supposition on the difference between black and white witches.
- There has also been a resurgence of interest in Paganism and many confuse this with witchcraft. Most card carrying Neo-Pagans will disown witchcraft or Wicca. There is a Pagan Society which has established forms of worship and celebration, often reviving the half remembered vestiges of the older festivals of Britain. Neo-Pagans worship nature, usually seeing trees, rivers and mountains as having spirits and the earth as needing to be appeased. This has close links with some animistic practices in other parts of the world.
- There appeared a belief in Gaia a few years back. This was a belief system mixing pagan/animism with early Greek mythology. It believed that the planet was a living organism, usually female, who had to be worshipped, appeased and looked after. It rode on the back of the ecological movement although few of those who wanted to 'save the planet' were worshippers of Gaia.
- There are some who follow Satanism, different to either Wicca or Neo-Paganism. This group openly worship Satan and set out to reverse and insult all Christian customs. It is anarchistic and anti-society. Some young people, when they go through a rebellious stage will dabble with the ideas of Satanism, often tied up with some of the Heavy Metal bands and their beliefs. This belief system is anti-Christian and does much harm with its anarchical beliefs.

- The New Age movement takes a mixture of different religions and practices to create its own individualised religion. It encompasses a mixture of fiction, half-remembered traditions and elements from the major world faiths, especially eastern religions such as Hinduism.
- There is no clear evidence of Halloween ever being celebrated as an 'evil' celebration. But one cannot argue with the fact that followers of Wicca, Satanism and Neo-Paganism all do use this evening as one of their own celebrations.



And today...

- With the onslaught of American books, TV shows and films that have appeared over the last 20 years, Halloween has become a popular festival in areas where it was not celebrated before. However, the witches that children dress up as at Halloween bear no resemblance to real witches of Wicca. Rather they have their root in fairy stories and traditional tales. Harry Potter has further popularised this tradition, but in the 1980s when the *Worst Witch* books of Jill Murphy and Kaye Umansky's books on witches were published, children also wanted to dress up at Halloween as witches. Nowadays at Halloween everyone seems to want to be a witch!
- For most children, Halloween is an excuse for having fun, getting sweets and money from neighbours, and enjoying scaring each other in a safely controlled environment. They are not making a link with the idea of true evil, with Neo-Pagan elements and with the kinds of witches found in Wicca. It is usually adults who feel uneasy about the celebration and give it a significance that children do not. The onus is on us as adults to disentangle tradition, fun, risk, fear, commercialism from the reality of the occult, and to prayerfully decide where we individually feel it is right to draw the line.

CURBS Cement Paper 12
 'Halloween: Background Information' by Moira Kleissner
 From *Unmasking Halloween*

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CEMENT PAPER

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HALLOWEEN

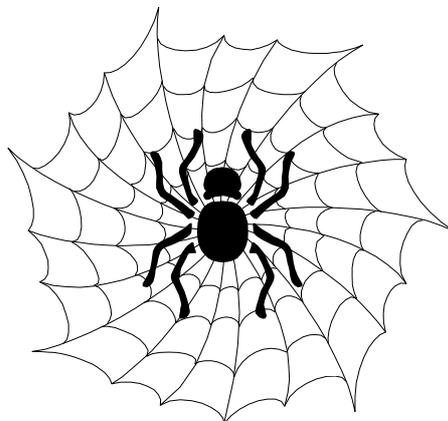
- Questions to weigh up -

Questions to weigh up

Halloween is a 'hot potato'. Christians are not generally happy to hold a celebration at this time of year and many do not like their children to be involved with Halloween events. Some feel uneasy and wish Halloween would go away quickly! Others hold alternatives such as 'Light Parties'. There are several issues, questions and differing opinions surrounding Halloween and I would like to air some of them.

Where do we draw the line?

Many of us are unhappy with an overt celebration of, for example, witches, and dislike seeing witch mobiles at school, 'spooky' dressing up, or books about wizardry, however seemingly harmless. Focusing on ghosts, demons, the devil and wizards is usually uncomfortable for Christians because they represent a reality - the real world of the occult - and sometimes its active presence in our communities. However, one of the 20th century's most prominent Christian writers and theologians, C.S. Lewis included witches in his Narnia Chronicles which have since become popular children's classics and are seen as a powerful allegory of Christian truth.

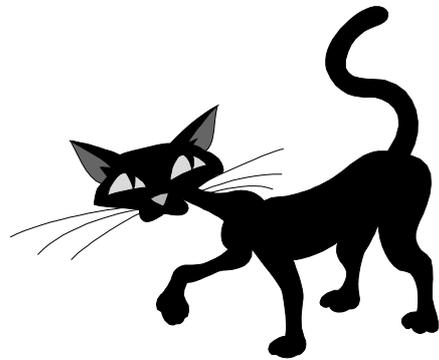




So what about vampires, dismembered bodies, eyeballs, blood...? For some of us, these represent violence and so they, too, are off limits. And what about skeletons, monsters, death? Are these too nasty or too morbid to touch? Is there any way in which we might allow exploration of these negative things, either in a serious, fun or frivolous way? Should we even mention 'death' in this context?

Does 'scary' equal 'bad' for our children?

Some say Halloween provides an opportunity to test out, in a safe environment, things that are risky or nasty. There *is* a fascination in most children for things we as adults associate with the occult. These satisfy their hunger for incident, for risk and for stimulation, and they touch our children's spirituality. Ghost stories, some say, allow the child to explore their own feelings of fear with a happy resolution within a safe framework.



Risk is important. My son's best memories of camp and of friendship were ones which involved times when danger and risk were overcome alongside others (ie, making a raft, falling off, and helping each other onto another raft).

If we merely replace the elements of Halloween - all the occult, blood, death and nastiness - with light, joy and gentleness, are we in danger of making the celebration of our faith seem soppy, irrelevant and gutless? Are we in danger of shutting our children away from aspects of Halloween which all their friends will be exploring? Will they then explore this elsewhere without ever having been helped to make wise choices? We hope in this Kit to make it possible to look at some of the emotions, hungers and issues which are prominent in a typical Halloween, and to then work at some strong, gutsy, fun alternatives.



Celebrating Halloween

Halloween seems to celebrate...

FEAR
THE OCCULT
VIOLENCE
DEATH

...but also:

A SPIRITUAL WORLD
FUN AND GAMES
FASCINATION
COLOUR
PARTY
COMMUNITY

We can provide a safe space in which to explore other strong extremes...



...and all these too:





Does information release or entice?

If you intend to use the material in this Kit, be aware that accurate information about the occult can defuse myths and bring truth. It can minimise fear and bring release. But it can also entice. Too much true information about the occult, even stories of conversion from occult practices to Christian faith, can have the effect of enticing and fascinating the listener even more. Be aware of what you say and why.

What is your objective?

As you approach Halloween time, consider your stance on the subject. Do you aim to:

- Do what everyone else does?
- Provide a watered-down version?
- Ignore Halloween completely?
- Replace it with something completely different?
- Replace it with the direct opposite (ie, a light party) ?
- Confront myths about the occult?
- Reclaim some elements (for example, that night was made by God and is therefore good)?

There is material in this Kit to help you, whichever you decide is right for you and your children.

Know your limits

If this whole area is too tricky or if you are in doubt, then leave well alone or discuss with other church members until you're confident of the stance you intend to take. Be aware of the opinions of your children and their parents. Proceed wisely and with plenty of prayer.