

All Saints Alive

READER'S VIEWPOINT

Fireworks in Heaven?

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Last November 5th, I was flying into Heathrow on a mid-evening flight from Munich. We flew over the towns of the Thames estuary and the East End of London, and the familiar pattern of orange street lights, and the endless chains of car headlamps on the main roads were overlaid by countless tiny irregular sparkles of shivering, brightly coloured light. It was surprisingly beautiful. All the more so because it took me a good few minutes to realise what this strange phenomenon was. Fireworks.

The Spanish couple who shared the row of seats with me had also noticed the effect. "What was it?" they asked, "Is it your national festival tonight?"

Many countries celebrate their National Day with spectacular fireworks, usually on the anniversary of some decisive moment in their history. The French have Bastille Day, recalling the beginning of the Revolution. The USA has July 4th, the day of the Declaration of Independence.

Bonfire Night doesn't quite have the same ring about it. But it is the closest the English have to a National Festival. I carefully explained the history of the gunpowder plot, and its broader context of the English religious wars. The struggle between Roman Catholics and Protestants, and between more and less radical strands of Protestantism, covered 200 years of sporadic, but often brutal conflict. The frustration of the planned assassination of the protestant King James I, and the brutal execution of Guy Fawkes and his fellow conspirators, is the single event of that long conflict which has survived in popular

culture, in the practice of burning the Guy on a bonfire.



Knowing that my Spanish fellow travellers were probably Roman Catholic in sympathies, I was careful to explain that the original Protestant triumphalism which inspired the festival had long since disappeared; whilst most people knew the story of Guy Fawkes, the thoughts of the families enjoying their bonfires and fireworks were a million miles away from religion.



But perhaps it should serve as gentle reminder to us, at a time when the issue of violence and religion is front page news, that Christianity does not have to look far back into its past to find traditions of violence and

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intolerance that were every bit as bad as the horrendous violence we see between Shia and Sunni Muslims in Iraq. In Europe only 350 years ago, if you had a difference of theological viewpoint with someone, killing him/her was a fairly standard way of resolving the issue.

There are some places where Guy Fawkes night still awaken old conflicts; as the headmaster of St Peter's School in York once told a bemused BBC interviewer, 'One does not celebrate the barbaric execution of one of one's Old Boys'. But on the whole, we should be glad that the religious origins of this popular festival have been quietly forgotten, and that everyone can waive a sparkler, share the parkin and have a good time together.

Another popular festival at this time of year has also lost touch with its Christian origins, but I'm far less happy about it! The name Halloween, celebrated on the 31 October, is of course a corruption of 'All Hallows Eve'. All Hallows is the older English name for All Saints Day, celebrated on November 1st. Like Christmas, which the ancient Church deliberately 'clashed' with the pagan Roman New Year festival of the Unconquered Sun, the 8th Century Pope Boniface IV arranged for All Saints Day to clash with the ancient Romano-Celtic harvest festival of Samhain.



Much of what happens at Halloween is fairly harmless. Children enjoy dressing up as ghosts and witches, ancient pagan harvest traditions such as apple bobbing and pumpkin

lanterns are kept alive. 'Trick or treat' has got out of hand, but that is a social ill, not a spiritual one. But many people – adults, not children - have an unhealthy interest in ghosts and dark spiritual powers which Halloween can only encourage, and Christians should have no part in this. You may take the 'liberal' view, that the evil spiritual world is just an imagined hangover from the Middle Ages, or you may take the more traditional Christian line that Christ has conquered the dark Powers and Dominions,

but either way we have no business celebrating them.

But the great shame to me is that Halloween has replaced any real Christian celebration in popular culture of All Saints Day and its sister festival All Souls Day. In many Roman Catholic lands November 1st is a public Holiday. I have fond memories of All Saints Day in Bavaria, when everything closed down for the day, and people of all ages made a special pilgrimage to the graves of their parents and grandparents. Scattered families would reunite in their ancestors' home village, municipal cemeteries and village churchyards were bright with fresh flowers, and as the autumn daylight faded, flickering candles gave a pious glow to the rows of tombstones. The day inspired a deep sense, not of grief, but of godly sobriety and peace, a Sabbath of Sabbaths, and 'a mystic, sweet communion with those whose rest is won.'

Whether you join us on All Souls (November 2nd) for Howell's Requiem, or on November 5th for the fun of our bonfire party, please remember that the Saints in Glory are not distant from us, and smile down on our joys and pleasures. They may not have fireworks in Heaven (the Bible is not very clear on this point), but we can still invite them to share ours!

