

B437. "A Harmless Holiday Ritual That Has Gone Totally Amok" Chicago Tribune, (October 31, 2003) p. 23 (Also published: "Halloween: A Fun Holiday Turned into a Shopping Fest" The Miami Herald, (October 31, 2003) p. 25A).

This Halloween is the most commercialized and wildest of its kind since 9/11, and arguably in recent memory. Marketers are winning one more battle to turn our holidays and rituals into shopping fests.

The Halloween season opens in early October when customers begin to look for unique "high end" items. Some retailers display Halloween merchandise even earlier. Candy corn showed up in my office with the end-of-September pay checks.

Halloween used to be a children's holiday. When my kids went to public school 20 years ago in Maryland, they and their friends would roam the neighborhood trick-or-treating. Then, it was considered safer for the parents to come along, I joined the ringing of door bells, although I never enjoyed being part of what looked to me like begging for candy.

This year, the National Retail Association is projecting total sales of \$6.9 billion for Halloween, including \$67 dollars each for those between the ages of 18 and 34. (This compared to \$5.3 billion in 1999 and \$3.5 billion in 1998). In 2001, Americans spent \$586 million on Halloween home decorations, more than any other holiday besides Christmas.

How can you spend that much? One clue comes from Southeast Washington, D.C. -- not an area known for its affluence -- where customers are paying up to \$175 to rent costumes.

The Halloween that followed shortly after 9/11 was a subdued affair, especially in New York City. It showed some signs of returning to its jubilant self in 2002. This year, as far as one can tell, 9/11 no longer will put a damper on partying in most parts. Once again scores of police officers will roam Georgetown for three days, trying to ensure that alcohol and drug abuse will not get out of hand, as many thousands of youngsters celebrate until the early morning hours.

The same holds for places from Venice, Calif., to Key West to Greenwich Village, along with many places in between. At these happenings, children and parents have no place; they are for young adults out to have fun. (One poll says that 54 percent of adults consider Halloween as much a holiday for them as for children.) Also, Halloween is the American holiday that is catching on most overseas, especially in France, of all places.

I am one of a handful of sociologists who study holidays that tell us volumes about the direction in which a society is headed. To proceed, we draw a distinction between holidays, on which we rededicate ourselves to our values (such as patriotism on July 4) and days on which we work off tensions by doing all the things that we are not supposed to do on work days.

We ought to worry when Memorial Day turns into a major shopping day rather than a day to commemorate those in the armed forces who have died in war. We ought to be concerned when for many the Fourth of July becomes a day on the beach rather than an expression of our commitment to the nation. We should be particularly concerned that Christmas, Hanukkah and Kwanzaa have become shop-until-you-drop holidays, and Easter is for many a day to parade new clothes rather than a celebration of the resurrection of Jesus.

Maybe no one can prevent Halloween from becoming just one more overblown holiday, but perhaps we can put more of Christ into Christmas, more of the nation into the Fourth and honor the dead on Memorial Day -- and perhaps even on Halloween.

Amitai Etzioni is the author of most recently *My Brother's Keeper: A Memoir and a Message*.