

The Exalted Goddess turned Christian Saint – Cult of Brigid in Paganism, Christianity and Neo-Pagan revival movements.



This essay will focus on the evolution of beliefs surrounding Brigid, the Exalted Tripple Goddess and Christian Saint of ever-lit flame, showing how once a Woman of immesurable power and influence was turned into one of the Saints, only to resurface as, once again, an important Figure of Belief and worship in the wave of pagan revival.

As with everything related to faith, especially in this day and time when the Old Gods resurface and reclaim their once thought to be lost place, attitude and beliefs vary enough, for a saying to be widely known, that if you were to ask five pagans what Magic is, you will have five different explanations. This easily refers to how intimate and personal beliefs are for everyone. The aspect of a Deity of any kind is always a subject of one's perception and can be easily altered by the attitude of the individual. Those beliefs are of course passed down from generation to a generation, mostly via oral traditions and usually people are not aware of the sources of their beliefs, yet these are possible to be traced back, as everything done in this world leaves its own, unique mark. No less can be said about the Great Goddess, whose worship and beliefs penetrated this world in its own unique way.

Goddess Brigid the Daughter of Dagda of Tuatha De Danann, the archetype of Tripple Goddess, whilst not the neo-pagan archetype of Maiden, Mother and the Crone, the status of Triad is not only a proof of Her versatility and wide influence, but also close connection to three vastly different, yet

¹ John Duncan, The Coming Of The Bride, 1917 - <http://www.the-athenaeum.org/art/full.php?ID=27474>, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=46026001>

intervoven crafts. Brigid the Poet, the Mistress of words and Patron of bards, represents the inner world of imagination, emotions and spirit, guiding Her faithful through the arcane world of self discovery whilst providing enigmatic wisdom and advice through rhymes. Brigid the Healer, Goddess of Medicine, Doctors, Healers and Herbalists, the connection to the outerworld. Brigid of Smithcraft is a Goddess of craftsman, people who work with their hands and devote themselves to their craft. She is the Goddess of ambition and hard work, the outerword to the innerworld of Brigid the Poet. The focal point of Her worship was Her Sacred Flame, perpetually kept alive.

Her important association with the cow, coupled with its critical necessity in Celtic culture and history, relates to the festival of Imbolc. This celebration, which is so completely Hers, involves itself with the lighting of fires, purification with well water and the ushering in of the new year (Spring) by a maiden known as the Queen of the Heavens. The significance of Imbolc is so deep that it deserves an entire section within any work relating to Brigid.²

Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids describes Brid as follows:

Perhaps one of the most complex and contradictory Goddesses of the Celtic pantheon, Brigid can be seen as the most powerful religious figure in all of Irish history. Many layers of separate traditions have intertwined, making Her story and impact complicated but allowing Her to move so effortlessly down through the centuries. She has succeeded in travelling intact through generations, fulfilling different roles in divergent times.³

As described by this organisation, the Goddess was and still is recognised as a versatile, powerful force to be reckoned with, containing many aspects within Herself.

Christian worship of Brigid, or Brid, refers to Saint Brigit of Kildare, the Abess who created the first monastery for women in Ireland and was close friend with Saint Patrick, both of whom are worshiped as patron saints of the Country. According to Catholic Online Saint Brigid was born in 451 and died on the 1st of February 525, which was chosen as her day of worship, aliging with the Feast of Imbolc, which remains dedicated to the Goddess Brid. Saint Brigid is a daughter of Dubthach, a Leinster Chieftain and Brocca, his slave. The Saint was meant to be sold to a Celtic Druid, who was unable to feed her, as her purity caused her to vomit any food given by him, due to his considerable impurity and instead was fed by a white cow with red ears. The legends of her charitable nature describe her as giving away possessions belonging to her or her father to the poor, as well as being able to provide food for those in need and upon praying replenish the stock she used. According to the Catholic sources she was returned to her father, but upon learning that she was to marry a bard, she vowed to remain pure and faithful to Christian God and renounced her beauty, which was later on restored after her final vows.⁴ Another legend states that St Patrick heard her final vows and in turn accidentally used the form for ordaining priests, making her first femal-priest of Catholic Church. This unfortunately is not elaborated upon and Saint Brigid remains known as a nun and Abess of Monastery. Her cult is not only strong in Ireland, which she is a patron saint of, but also through worship of Roman Catholic Women Priests of St Brigid of Kildare community, who state:

² Winter Cymres, *Brigit: Survival Of A Goddess*, <https://druidry.org/resources/brigid-survival-of-a-goddess>

³ Winter Cymres, *Brigit: Survival Of A Goddess*, <https://druidry.org/resources/brigid-survival-of-a-goddess>

⁴ Catholic Online, https://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=453

Named in honour of St. Brigid, whose sacred fire has burned perpetually in Ireland since ancient times, the Hearth Keepers tend to the needs of the community and work to keep the flame of St. Brigid's alive.⁵

According to Gerald of Wales:

AT Kildare, in Leinster, celebrated for the glorious Brigit, many miracles have been wrought worthy of memory. Among these, the first that occurs is the fire of St. Brigit, which is reported never to go out. Not that it cannot be extinguished, but the nuns and holy women tend and feed it, adding fuel, with such watchful and diligent care, that from the time of the Virgin, it has continued burning through a long course of years ; and although such heaps of wood have been consumed during this long period, there has been no accumulation of ashes.⁶ (Gerald of Wales, Topography of Ireland)

According to the Brigidine Sisters the Perpetual Flame of Brigid is being guarded and kept alive in their centre – Solas Bhride in Kildare as it was many centuries ago. ⁷This keeps in line with both the Pagan and Christian traditions of worship of Brid and Saint Brigid.

Neo-Pagan revival movement puts Brigid on the pedestal of Queen-Goddess of Britain and Mother of Celts, as well as Her aspects of a Poet, Healer and a Blacksmith⁸. She is the dual Goddess of Fire and Water, of Sunlight and the Goddess of Ireland. Oftentimes Brigid is considered a Triad of Maiden, Mother and the Crone, whilst not entirely incorrect, Brigid is an example of Triadic Goddess of Craft and Forces of the Universe⁹, rather than stages of life, which people tend to associate Triple Goddess with. This comes initially from *The White Goddess* by Robert Graves, but according to John Halstead:

"Graves described the Triple Goddess in other ways, including Mother-Bride-Layer-out and Maiden-Nymph-Hag. Graves was primarily concerned with the Mother-Bride-Layer-out trinity, which describes the experience of the Triple Goddess from the male perspective of her son-lover-victim. The adoption of Maiden-Mother-Crone as the Triple Goddess' principal formulation can probably be credited to Starhawk's Spiral Dance and Margot Adler's Drawing Down the Moon, both published in 1979." ¹⁰

This caused it to become a popular belief among many pagans. This, unfortunately is factually incorrect when it comes to Brid, as much as Triskelion is one of Her symbols, as it is with all the Triads of Deities, it is not a representation of Maiden, Mother and Crone, but of three Crafts She had mastery of. Neo-Druidry recognises Her as a Goddess of Druids, representing three aspects of that role – Bard, Ovate and a Druid, whilst this is not a clear connection for a research point of view, as there is no records of Druids being part of Her Domain, and Her being the female aspect of duality points more towards the Priestess domain, rather than whole of Druidic circle, it is a clear example how the revival develops the dogma and builds upon the existing sources and beliefs to enrich the culture.

⁵ (<https://www.saintbrigids.org/who-we-are>)

⁶ Gerald of Wales, Topography of Ireland

⁷ (<https://brigidine.org.au/about-us/our-patroness/brigids-light-fire/>)

⁸ Susa Morgan Black, n.d, <https://druidry.org/resources/brigid-2>

⁹ Judith Shaw, 2017, <https://feminismandreligion.com/2017/01/25/triple-goddesses-in-the-celtic-world-by-judith-shaw/>

¹⁰ <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/allergicpagan/2014/11/19/13-things-you-dont-need-to-know-about-the-triple-goddess-but-are-kind-of-interesting/>

The current worship of Brigid remains a mixture between Catholic and Pagan, with similarities between them. Apart from being a Goddess that is called upon in the time of need, especially during childbirth, She is also celebrated during Imbolc with practitioners doing their best to re-enact traditions from centuries ago, through sources, trial and error rekindling the flame of faith. The proof of Brigid being important in British Isles lays in the fact that the Perpetual flame that was extinguished in the 16th century was re-lit 1990s and is currently being kept alive. This shows that regardless of faith, whether Goddess or Saint, Brigid found her home in the hearts of people. The celebration of Imbolc, one of the great pagan feasts is celebrated on the 1st of February, Christianity celebrates Candlemas the day after, a celebration which consists of lightening blessed fire and bringing it home for protection. This tradition directly correlates with pagan symbolism of Brigid – Goddess of Fire, Hearth, livestock. These days Imbolc consists of many traditions, many of which stem from the ancient times and were remembered through history. The ritual of cleansing through fire and water invokes the dual aspects of the Mother Goddess turned Virgin Saint, to remove impurities and allow for a new beginning with no restraints. It is by many considered a time of initiation, beginning of the new and as it is popularly known – rekindling of the fire.

As shown above, the figure of Goddess Brigid exceeded not only a single domain, but also a single religion. Her worship is an example of how a strong belief, intimately woven into our everyday life will not simply disappear, even if the religion itself will. As mentioned in the beginning of this essay, beliefs and faith are such intimate aspects of our lives that they become part of our identity, whether it is personal, or in case of Brigid multicultural. Her strong position as Mother Goddess and later on as a Foster Mother of Christ Saint, ensured survival of Her beliefs through time, religious and political changes, with rekindling of her faith being akin to a child coming back to their mother after a long period of absence.

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