From Pre-Christian Goddesses of Light

by Monique Nicholson

Cet article examine les liens qui existent entre les déesses gréco-romaines et celtiques et les saintes du christianisme. L'auteure met l'emphase sur les déesses Juno, Vesta et Brigid et sur leur conversion en saintes de lumière.

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In earliest Greco-Roman antiquity, the supreme deity, the bright, celestial light, possessed a feminine principle, Hera or Juno, as well as a masculine principle, Zeus or Jupiter. In ancient Greece, at the shrine of Dodona, Zeus (the bright, shining One) was worshipped jointly with a goddess whose name also meant "brilliantly shining," Dione, his feminine counterpart. There are obvious links to be made between Dione and Hera, Zeus's wife in later myth. Hera's name is related to the Sanskrit *svar*, "the sky."

Later in historical times, Zeus became for the Greeks the major celestial light, "the bright, shining One." Zeus was the bright sky, and so was Roman Jupiter (same etymology *di, div,* "brilliant, celestial light," from the Sanskrit *Dyauspitar*). The name of the German God Tiw or Ziu similarly meant: "the shining One," as did the name of the powerful Irish and Welsh God Lugh.

Notwithstanding these male examples, the adjectives used for god and goddess alike favoured our first examples of twin cosmic deities, female and male. For instance, when the pre-Christian Celts prayed to their most powerful goddess, they addressed her as Belisama, meaning "the most brilliant One." And Celtic Apollo was called Belenus "the bright or brilliant One." (There was a famous shrine to Apollo Belenus in the Vosges mountains of eastern France where Constantine had visions of light and of his future.) Celtic celestial light was both male and female.

However, if we choose to agree with Robert Graves (and not Moses Finley), the goddess was worshipped at a far earlier time than was the god. Therefore, before the triumph of patriarchy and with it of the male gods, the "bright, shining One" was a goddess. As we have noted, Hera was originally the queen of the sky, ruling over the cosmos, an independent virgin and totally unrelated to Zeus. When her cult later fused with and became subordinate to the cult of Zeus, a hasty marriage between the two was arranged. The unhappy union of Hera and Zeus may reflect the resistance of her followers to the takeover of Hera's cult. Nevertheless, at Stymphalos, three temples were erected to Hera: one to the child-goddess, one to the wife-goddess, one to the widow-goddess. This declares her a trinity goddess, revered under the names of, respectively, Hebe, Hera, and Hecate as well as deified "woman" *par excellence*. Hera was the goddess of marriage and maternity. At the same time, she was also Hera Parthenia, Hera the virgin—virginity and motherhood, an impossible aim for the average woman. However, major goddesses (Artemis, Diana, etc.) were simultaneously goddesses of virginity and motherhood. In Christianity, the Virgin Mary took over this ancient duality. Virginity and inspired motherhood (and/or midwifery): the goddess was the idealized perfect woman, the cause and beginner of all.

Hera's Roman double was Juno, a very great pan-Italian goddess who still had a right in the Capitoline temple to the golden sceptre, the *patera* (offering dish), and the thunderbolt. Juno's oldest titles have a direct bearing on this communication: Juno Lucetia and Juno Lucina. Juno Lucetia was the feminine principle of the celestial light, while Jupiter was the masculine principle. Like Jupiter, she also had a link with the moon, after all a light reflector. Furthermore, the moon is also a symbol of motherhood and the regulator of the menstrual calendar. Juno was light and she was life-giver both. From Juno Lucetia, goddess of light, to Juno Lucina, bringer of babies into light and the goddess of childbirth, the feminine principle of the celestial light was made evident. Juno, the Queen of Heaven, was so loved by Roman women that she was later given several other titles such as Juno Pronuba (for marriages), Juno Ossipago (to strengthen the bones of infants), or Juno Sospita (the Saviour). This may be related to some litanies to the Virgin Mary. One may see a further link in iconography: Juno Lucina was represented holding a child in her arms.

After Alexander, during the Hellenistic period, mystery religions became very popular as alternatives to official state religions. Most of these religions came from the conquered Middle East and they opened the way for Christianity. (St. Paul himself used mystery terms). The mystery religions answered a need for warmth, inspiration, and mysticism lacking in the official cults. Indeed, the adjective *mystical* itself means "related to the mysteries" and secret. The mysteries were religious rites preceded by secret initiation. The initiates (*mystes*) made a vow of silence about the holy secret revealed to them. With lips closed and eyes opened, they were born again, in joy and with hopes of a life after death, a new light to come. The Greek mystery religion of Demeter and Kore, the Mother

to Saints of Light

and the Daughter, has several links with light, often piercing total darkness. Just like Juno, Demeter was a goddess both of life and of light. Demeter and Persephone gave the grain in this life and the hope of life after death, and Christianity saved the message of the Two Goddesses in the Lord's Prayer ("give us this day our daily bread") and

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in the Gospel of St. John 12:24 ("... except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth along: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit").

In the Homeric Hymn, Demeter appears bathed in divine light. On a votive marble relief erected by Eukrates (fifth century BC) for curing him of his blindness, Demeter is goddess of light, almost a sun goddess. The yearly initiation into her mysteries was broadcast by the light shining suddenly from the top of the *Telesterion* (Hall of Initiation) at Eleusis, a light so bright that it could be seen from very far away and thus could not be kept hidden as were all other rites of this most secretive religion. Thus, the symbolism of this light must have been of the utmost importance. The initiates were reborn carrying lit torches to guide their way both in this and in the other world since all mystery-religions taught that there was life after death, immortality for the soul.

Some Indo-European traditions have preserved the idea of a female great goddess symbolized by the sun. However, the veneration of the goddesses of light implied much more complex ideas than would a mere solar cult, even if, for instance for the Celts, their representation included many sun-symbols (spoked-wheels, swastikas, etc.). This is true of Brigid in Ireland and also of the goddess Sul at Aquae Sulis (waters of Sul), now the city of Bath in England. There, C. Julius Solinus noted, in the temple dedicated to Sul Minerva "perpetual fires never whiten into ashes" (Solinus, Chapter 22, paragraph 10).

With the advent of Christianity, the Church replaced the worship of Demeter with the cult of a male saint Demetrios. However, at Eleusis, the much-loved goddess became St. Demetra and the people kept their old marble statue of the goddess now re-christened St. Demetra. In pagan defiance of the Church, the statue kept on accepting prayers and garlands of flowers until 1801, when Clarke and Cripps, two Englishmen, caused a local riot by removing the statue and shipping it to the Fitzwilliam Museum at Cambridge, no doubt with the help of the occupying forces. There are so many more examples, such as St. Eleftherios church in Athens, built on the spot where Eleuthia, the goddess of childbirth was worshipper; or as at the hilltop chapels built to St. Elias, replacing Helios, the Sun (including the chariot). Indo-European tradition in pre-Christian Europe did not distinguish between light, bright, and sky and often included the sun in the equation.

Moreover, fire mirrored on earth the life-giving power of the sun in the sky, and the goddesses of the hearth are among the earliest European deities. The Greek goddess of the hearth, (or rather the fire itself burning in the hearth) Hestia, was one of the twelve Olympian deities. She was invoked first and given the first part at all sacrifices. After the fifth century BC Hestia was displaced by male gods, for instance, on the east frieze of the Parthenon, by Dionysos, and in Plato's writing by Pluto-Hades (even if the latter was strictly speaking never an Olympian). Although Hestia's importance had diminished, very ancient rules still prevailed; to relight her sacred fire, one elaborate ritual prescribed drawing fire from the sun through burning glasses.

Hestia's Roman counterpart was Vesta. Vesta's name, just like Hestia's, derives from the Sanskrit root *vas* which has a connotation of "shining." The French scholar F. Guirand notes that Vesta "is the most beautiful of Roman divinities bright and pure like the flame which is her symbol" (Guirand and Pierre 204). Although a virgin goddess, she was at the same time a symbol of fertility and motherhood. The goddess Vesta was the sacred fire of Rome, and she was the flame in every hearth. As such, she had both a private and a public cult. The private cult was kept at certain appointed times every day in Roman households. The College of Vestal Virgins, an ancient order of priestesses, was in charge of Vesta's public cult. The college consisted of 19 Vestals plus the Great Vestal, the Virgo Vestalis Maxima. Their major duty was to protect the goddess, to keep the eternal communal flame burning in the round temple of Vesta on the forum. They also prepared for and celebrated the many religious days of Vesta's public cult.

The College of Vestals was a remarkable order of women who had enormous prestige as well as responsibilities. Although there were never more than seven active Vestal priestesses at any time, Christianity feared them and suppressed them in the late fourth century. Nonetheless, the Christian Church copied and adapted many of their rules for its nuns.

A most interesting example of transition from goddesses of light to saints of light comes from Ireland: the trinity-goddess Brigid and Saint Brigid of Kildare. The patron saint of Irish women and the only female of the *trias thaumaturga*, (the miracle-making triad of Ireland with Patrick and Columba of Iona), St. Brigid of Kildare lived between about AD 452 to AD 524. She was the daughter of Dubhtach and Brocca, a bondswoman, resented by Dubthach's wife. When she was still in her mother's womb a Druid prophesied:

> Marvellous will be the child that is in her womb. For the bondsmaid will bring forth a daughter conspicuous and radiant, who will shine like a sun among the stars of heaven; her like will not be known on earth. (Stokes 102)

She was born in Leinster, at sunrise, neither within nor without a house. Her birth *ad limina* (at the threshold) identifies her as belonging to the border no-man's land where souls and spirits meet. A flame and a fiery pillar from earth to heaven were seen. Three angels in the shape of clerics in shining white baptized her in milk and gave her her name. There was no drapery over her cradle, but a curtain of flame hung softly over it. The baby St. Brigid was surrounded by light. She was fed by the milk of a white red-eared cow. Her house looked ablaze.

As she grew up in rainy Ireland, Brigid would hang her rain-drenched cloak on the rays of the sun. She founded a church and a double monastery at Kildare. Brigid built Kildare, the church of the Oak, on a hill ridge in the shade of a giant oak tree that flourished until the tenth century. In the inner sanctuary of St. Brigid's Christian church at Kildare, a sacred and perpetual fire was maintained on the order of St. Brigid, in a special enclosure, by 19 nuns plus the mother Abbess, and this continued until the Reformation with some interruptions, such as during Viking raids. Giraldus Cambrensis (who died around 1220) described the shrine. The circular enclosure of the holy fire was surrounded by evergreen bushes; no man was allowed to enter. Here a close comparison may be made with the cult of Vesta and her Vestal priestesses. Furthermore, looming behind Brigid, a mother Abbess and Christian saint who spent all her life in Kildare and kept a Holy Fire burning, there is an older all-encompassing Indo-European mother-goddess (as with Mary at the French cathedral of Chartres). The three-in-one goddess Brigid represented learning, culture, wisdom, prophecy, purification, fertility, healing, motherhood, etc. No segregation of attributes is really possible: virginity and motherhood, war and healing, spirituality and nature, all were attributes of the trinity-goddess Brigid. Three, for the Celt, emphasized the multiplicity within the unique power; it represented all divine aspects.

Further, the trinity-goddess Brigid must have been originally a goddess of fire as well as of light. When the goddess visited a house, it was said she left her footprint in the ashes of the hearth. Again, one is reminded of Vesta. This would also explain the emphasis on light and fire for Brigid's Christian namesake. Although St. Brigid is pictured as a traditional bishop or mother Abbess, crozier and cathedral in hand, she is more often depicted with a burning flame symbolizing faith, coming from her head, an allusion to the shining fire of Kildare. Nonetheless, the popular St. Brigid's Cross, traditionally woven of rushes, is a solar emblem, although it is used to explain the Passion of Christ and as a Christian symbol. It is the perfect illustration to this communication. Notwithstanding, in iconography as in theology, St. Brigid is the symbol of Celtic Christianity.

The cult of St. Brigid is phenomenal, not only in Ireland where she is "the Mary of the Gaels, the radiant flame of gold," but also in the British Isles, where in England and in Scotland she is St. Bride. In Scotland she is invoked in childbirth. In the Western Isles of Scotland, the blessing said over cattle is highly poetic: "The protection of God and Colmkille encompass your going and coming, and about you be the milkmaid of the smooth white palms, Brigid of the clustering, golden-brown hair" (Montague 22). Several Gaelic greetings refer to her, such as *Brid agus Muire dhuit* ("Brigid and Mary be with you").

Throughout Western Europe there are more churches dedicated to St. Brigid than to St. Patrick and many more prayers, for instance, in French religious breviaries as well. In Brittany, she is Santez Berc'hed, and the same traditions concerning her exist there as in Ireland.

The death of St. Brigid, apparently on February 1, 524, is however most peculiar. February 1 is *Imbolc*, the Celtic Feast of Spring, the time of the lactation of the ewes and the time when the goddess Brigid was celebrated by a fire-festival. On February 1, the Celts looked eagerly for signs of Spring in nature (after all, this precedes by a few hours only our modern ground-hog day ritual). Christian February 2 celebrations definitely bear strong traces of Imbolc. And under the names Candlemas, Chandeleur, etc., this is still a celebration of light; the main rite consists of the blessing of numerous candles for the faithful.

There is no doubt that St. Brigid replaced the powerful goddess Brigid and that in her person many of the traditions associated with the goddess coalesced, perhaps on purpose. In hagiography (collections of stories of the saints), St. Brigid's symbolic name is the Fiery Arrow. Of course, Brigid the goddess is also characterized by the Fiery Arrow (as are other gods such as Apollo, for instance). From goddess to saint, continuity of tradition is evident: wise people do not renounce their religious past but are forever adapting its symbolism to the present.

Notwithstanding, quite a few goddesses were not as lucky as Brigid. Furthermore, the goddesses were often simply replaced by male saints. Among the female saints of light that supplanted the goddesses, one must mention St. Lucy.

Light was for pre-Christian Europe an intricate component of the Sacred, if not the essence itself of the Sacred in

the universe. Christianity kept this light-and-fire component of the Sacred and in the hands of its saints made it symbolize Christian faith itself. It is clear that the emphasis was on evolution rather than on revolution. The heroes replaced the gods, and the saints replaced the heroes.

Christianity too likes its heroes to be *ad limina* and boundary-breaking. Only the names—and often the sexes as well—were changed. In the words of Luce Irigaray, "the most extreme progression and regression goes by the name of God" (Irigaray qtd. in Moi 127). From goddesses of light to saints of light—in the transition process the pre-Christian female symbolism of God was deliberately altered, neutralized. And human spirituality, meant to soar on two wings, was immensely impoverished.

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