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CELTIC CHRISTIANITY AND THE SUPERHERO SAINTS:
PATRICK, COLUMBA, AND BRIGIT

by Kelly Hamilton

It is difficult to determine exactly when Christianity arrived in the British Isles and Ireland, as it is just as difficult to draw the line between the end of paganism and the beginning of Christianity. Celtic Christianity in the years 500 to 700 A.D. was an odd blend of pagan and Christian beliefs. Historians have placed most of the attention on the lives of the three most famous Celtic saints—Patrick, Columba, and Brigit. As these saints competed with the Druids for the souls of early Celtic people, they borrowed heavily from pagan beliefs to define a unique form of Christianity quite separate from Roman Christianity. Through the years, their hagiographers have elevated these saints to super-human status, giving them abilities far beyond what ordinary humans can do. Saints Patrick, Columba, and Brigit have been portrayed as superior miracle workers who blended pagan beliefs with Christianity in order to win souls, and to assert the supremacy of the Christian faith and the importance of monasteries after the fall of Rome.

Celtic religion prior to Christianity was polytheistic and nature oriented. The Celts believed that spirits inhabited rivers, trees, forests, and mountains. They followed a solar festival system that was linked to agricultural and pastoral activities.[1] Sun worship was an integral part of their belief system. The Sun was seen as a source of energy and life. Both the Sun and Earth spirits brought an annual rebirth every spring.[2] In addition to the Sun, the ancients Celts saw water and fire as essential to their existence. Water created and destroyed life, and fire was linked to the Sun. Ashes symbolized fertility along with the concepts of life and rebirth.[3] The cycle of birth, death, and rebirth were

themes found in both Celtic and Christian beliefs, as fire and water symbolized rebirth too. Like Christians, the ancient Celts baptized their children in water. They also maintained had a strong belief in life after death.[4] The strong similarities between Celtic religion and Christianity suggest that Christians borrowed heavily from Celtic practices in Ireland to produce a new religion acceptable to both. According to their biographers, the Irish saints took this hybrid religion to new heights in order to gain converts and to assert Gaelic supremacy. It is worth remembering that these same biographers had their own agendas in attributing fantastic deeds to the Irish saints, especially when it came to asserting the primacy of a particular monastery.

The idealized portraits of Celtic saints emerged from the sixth through the ninth centuries by hagiographers. The emphasis on Patrick and Columba has been to portray them as "spiritual supermen."[5] It is likely that they did not do all that they are credited with, as it seems impossible for them to have established many monasteries and copied Psalters and prayers while managing the struggle of day-to-day subsistence living. By the late seventh century, "Romanisers," who celebrated the fact that Roman Christianity overtook Celtic Christianity, probably wrote the biographies of Brigit, Patrick, and Columba. Perhaps the Celts felt the need to record their own history when the Celtic Church was put under Rome. But the development of monasteries in Ireland and Scotland played a large role in determining the cult of saints. Apparently, the prime requirement for sainthood was to establish not one, but many monasteries. "The fact that we regard the likes of Patrick, Columba, Brigit, and David as the greatest Celtic saints perhaps has less to do with the actual holiness of their lives than with the success of the monastic establishments that they actually or supposedly founded."[6] Monks wrote the lives of the saints, with their miraculous achievements, to stress the importance of their particular monastic institutions. But despite the need of early hagiographers to assert the primacy of particular churches or monasteries, there is no escaping the

fusion of pagan and Christian themes that have been woven into the "Saints Lives."

The blend of pagan and Christian themes is illustrated by the miracles performed rather than the holiness of particular saints. Ian Bradley quotes J. F. Kenney as saying that "sainthood is defined as the Christianized counterpart of the magic potency of the Druid."[7] Yet many of the miracle stories have parallels to the Gospel. In "Saints Lives," certain themes reoccur. Usually the saint comes from noble parentage, the birth is foretold in some way as a sign from God, the miracles are close to those found in the Gospel to impress pagan kings, and there is a strong emphasis on personal holiness and dedication.[8] Other common themes portrayed Irish saints as a source of miracles, exemplars of a child's giftedness, wanderers in search of the ideal place, and founders of houses or cells of religion usually on an island, hilltop, or in a forest.[9] Again, the strong emphasis on miracles suggests that the new Christian faith absorbed and even adapted some of the older pagan beliefs and festival dates.[10]

The cult of Brigit is characterized by the themes mentioned above, and also carries strong pagan beliefs. A Druid foretold her birth, and she was born at sunrise on a threshold. She hung her cloak on a sunbeam, and the house where she lived seemed to be on fire. Along with nineteen nuns, Brigit tended a perpetual sacred fire, so she is associated with the cult of fire and the sun. In addition to her supernatural powers of fertility and healing, she held power over animals, particularly cattle.[11] Many envisioned her going into battle with a staff in her hand and fire blazing from her head. She also established a monastery at Kildare, possibly on a pagan site.

Christian themes have been linked to Brigit as well. Her story of turning water into beer has the familiarity of the wedding feast at Cana in which Jesus turned water into wine. She has cured blindness, and displayed charitable acts by giving away all of her milk and butter only to be supplied with more by God. Interestingly, cattle and dairy work were seen by Celts as

female occupations. Her feast day, February 1, is the day of the Celtic festival "Imbolc," which is linked to milking and fertility.[12] And peasants have invoked her name to aid their livestock and cure their cattle.[13]

The two primary sources of Brigit come from the Latin monk Cogitosus, who wrote Brigit's biography in the mid-seventh century, and an anonymous *Vita Prima.* Cogitosus was a monk from the Kildare monastery located in Leinster. Her biography was probably written for propaganda purposes to reflect the primacy of the Kildare monastery over other Irish churches and to assert the dominance of the Leinster kings. The account written by Cogitosus favors Christian themes over pagan themes and includes a detailed description of the church in Kildare. Brigit is credited with establishing a monastery at Kildare that served as a double monastery for both men and women. Certainly as a devoted member of the monastery he would seek to assert its ecclesiastical supremacy.[14] An earlier poem dated around 600 likens Brigit to the Virgin Mary—also part of her cult. Many have called her "Mary of the Gaels."[15] She has been portrayed as virginal and spiritual, as has Mary. Her influence in Ireland is further evidenced by her name's association with numerous sacred wells and shrines in Ireland.[16] Brigit's association with fire, the Sun, and water reflect early Celtic beliefs and have been adopted as Christian symbols of rebirth and resurrection.

Although Brigit is widely known as a Celtic saint, information and facts about her remain sketchy. From her biographers, it is believed that she was born in 451 or 452 at Faughart, near Dundalk, and became a nun. The monastery she established at Kildare became a center for religion and learning. She also founded an art school that became known for its metal work and illumination. Brigit died February 1, 525. Hagiographers believe her relics to be interred in Downpatrick Cathedral along with St. Patrick's and St. Columba's. The cathedral city of Kildare and the school subsequently became famous throughout Europe.[17]

Patrick is probably the best known of the Celtic saints, although he himself was a Briton. Despite his leaving two works about himself, Patrick's legend definitely obscures his life. He is known as the saint who rid Ireland of snakes; yet snakes are not indigenous to Ireland. It is from his "Confession" that his life story is told. Patrick was born in England, the son of a deacon, around the year 390. When he was sixteen, he was captured in a raid and spent the next six years of his life enslaved in Ireland. During this time, his faith in God developed and he began to hear divine voices. Patrick eventually escaped and made it home; yet he continued to hear voices urging him to return to Ireland to preach and convert his pagan captors.[18] Another account of Patrick has him leaving Britain to train at the monastery of St. Martin of Tours in Gaul. He supposedly was consecrated as bishop and served as an apostle to Ireland. After converting pagan tribes, Patrick established a diocese at Armagh, and founded many monasteries.[19] Yet nowhere in his "Confession" does he make mention of this.

Patrick's "Confession" was written later in his life and has a tone of humility and unworthiness about it. He begins with, "I am Patrick, a sinner, most unlearned, the least of all the faithful, and utterly despised by many."[20] He continually made reference to his lack of education so it does not seem possible he could have studied at the monastery of St. Martin of Tours. Apparently, Patrick wrote his "Confession" in response to a charge that he was not worthy to be bishop. This charge stemmed from his revelation of a sin he committed as a youth to a friend who later used this information against him. Patrick thus wrote "Confession" to justify that, despite his shortcomings, he indeed was chosen by God to convert the Irish.

The second work that Patrick wrote was a letter to the soldiers of the British Coroticus in which he asks the soldiers to release captured Irish converts.[21] As with "Confession," he makes no mention of performing super miracle deeds. Much of Patrick's legend and myth comes from later hagiographers.

One of the most famous stories about Patrick centers on the battle with the high king, Leagaire, at Tara. This story has strong magical and pagan themes, and can be seen as a confrontation between the new religion and the old. As the story goes, on Easter Eve Patrick had kindled the paschal fire on a site that only a chief Druid was supposed to have lit afire. The Archdruid saw Patrick and his followers chanting psalms, and ordered Patrick to Tara. Patrick defended his fire as a mission of salvation. Leagaire demanded proof and ordered Patrick to perform a miracle. When Patrick refused, the king angrily plunged the area into a snowfall. When Patrick made the sign of the cross, the snowfall ended. Then the king plunged the area into darkness; Patrick dispersed the darkness. These contests continued until a trial by fire was established. In a tent filled with dry branches, a fire was lit and only Patrick's cloak was burned. But in the tent—filled with green branches—the Druid was burned and only his cloak remained. Finally the high king became convinced that Christianity was the superior religion.[22] After this encounter, Patrick established his headquarters at Armagh, thus establishing its primacy over all other churches in Ireland.

As in the case with Brigit, the use of fire is a common element in these stories. As stated above, the ancient Celts saw fire as a life-giving force, while Christians associate fire with the resurrection and new life. In this particular story, Patrick lit the kindling fire on Easter eve. In some Christian churches today, that same fire is called the Kindling of the Holy Fire and is also lit on Easter eve. Like lighting the Paschal candle during Baptisms, fire remains symbolic of rebirth and new life.

Monks from Armagh probably wrote the story of Patrick and his battle at Tara to assert Armagh's primacy. It is also possible that these monks wanted to assert the supremacy of the Roman Church over the Celtic Church in deciding the date of Easter and in acknowledging the power of bishops over abbots. In addition, politics played a large role in the cult of Patrick. The Ui Neill clan, claiming sovereignty over Tara, needed a patron

saint, therefore promoted the cult of Patrick. In 737, Aed Allan, and Ui Neill overlord, put all clerics in Ireland under the protection Armagh.[23] As Armagh's power grew, so did the reputation of and idolization of its patron saint. Increasingly, the tales about Patrick got taller and taller until he became a symbol of Irish national identity even though he was not Irish.

Interestingly, there has been some debate over whether Patrick really existed or if he was the composite of two actual men, Palladius and Patrick the Briton.[24] Scholars have differed on the date of Patick's birth, offering extremes from 313 to as late as 418. No one can pinpoint the exact location of his birth, or the exact location of his captivity in Ireland. Most of the conclusions regarding dates originate with the beginning of Patrick's mission in Ireland, an educated guess at best. Thomas O'Rahilly believes the composite theory proposing that first Palladius worked in Ireland to 461 to be later followed by Patrick in 462. Their missionary work eventually became recorded as the work of one man.[25] Since the only real details about Patrick come from his "Confession" and letter to Coroticus, everything else remains conjecture. Scholars have also put Patrick's mission at Down and Tara in addition to Armagh. They have gone so far to propose that Down was probably the original site of his mission, although Armagh became the center of his cult.[26] However, the patronage of the O'Neill dynasty is the reason Armagh became the superior church. One thing is certain; Patrick's life and achievements have been highly embellished through the years. He is credited with starting many churches and monasteries in places that he probably never visited. The legends and miracle stories grew to ridiculous heights in the later centuries.

Like those of Brigit and Patrick, the stories surrounding Columba are no less fantastic. His stories also contain a mix of Christian themes and old Celtic mythology. Columba's story begins in Ireland where he was born in 521 to the Ui Neill clan. Although he was called Colum the Dove, Columba had a fierce temper and was considered violent in nature. In 560, he became

embroiled in a battle at Culdreihmne in a dispute over copying a manuscript that did not belong to him. The battle resulted in nearly three thousand deaths, and Columba was excommunicated. He then fled with twelve companions to Iona, where he built his famous monastery.[27] Columba set out to convert the Picts to Christianity. Prior to his arrival in Scotland, Columba supposedly founded a number of monasteries in Ireland as well. He was one of twelve disciples studying under St. Finnian, was ordained, and founder of two monasteries at Durrow and Kells in addition to other churches.[28] It is interesting that the number twelve figures so prominently in Columba's life. His hagiographers probably chose this number as a link to the twelve apostles of Jesus to give Columba greater credibility.

Many miracle stories surround Columba's life, beginning with the prophesy of his birth. His mother dreamt an angel of the Lord appeared to her and told her she would bring forth a son.[29] Like Columba's twelve apostles, this story also has a familiar ring to it as when an angel prior to the birth of Jesus visited the Virgin Mary. Like Patrick, Columba also engaged in contests with pagans. His chief opponent was the Druid Broichan who influenced the Pictish king Brude. When Columba arrived at Brude's court, he encountered locked gates. Upon Columba's making the sign of the cross, the gates suddenly opened and Brude became a convert. Another time, Columba was about to sail on Loch Ness when Broichan caused darkness to fall and a harsh wind to blow. Columba was not deterred, and upon his setting sail, the wind calmed down. In yet another story, Broichan held a young girl captive that Columba demanded he free. Broichan fell ill and Columba offered to heal him if the girl was set free. Upon freeing the girl, Broichan received from Columba a stone from some blessed water, and he was healed. An even more miraculous event happened when Columba restored to life a young boy whose death was blamed on his parents for converting to the new Christian religion.[30] Other amazing stories include turning water into wine, driving out demons, causing a stone to

float, and converting a pagan spring by blessing it.[31] The likeness to Gospel stories is evident along with the same themes of death, rebirth, and resurrection. Columba, like Patrick, "out-matched" the Druids at their own game, and toppled magic with a better kind of magic.[32]

In addition to magic, Columba had the power of prophecy. Adomnan wrote:

> ...among the miracles which this same man of the Lord, while dwelling in mortal flesh, performed by the gift of God, was his foretelling the future by the spirit of prophecy, with which he was highly favoured from his early years, and making known to those who were present, what was happening in other places...[33]

The source of these magic and miracle stories is Adomnan, an abbot from Iona in the late seventh century who wrote "Life of St. Columba" just sixty years after Columba died. It is thought that Adomnan's political aim was to show both Gaelic superiority over the Picts and Columba's close association with the Dalriada kings.[34] Perhaps Columba wanted to make the Dalriada rulers a political power over the Picts. The Dalriada, like Columba, had Irish origins and Columba did oversee the coronation of a Dalriada king. Beyond Adomnan's political goal, he certainly meant to assert Iona's primacy over other Columban Churches in Scotland and Ireland, including Armagh. According to Adomnan, the Picts and the Scots mostly escaped a seventh century plague because of the monastery and the work of Columba.[35] As abbot of Iona, Adomnan felt it important to assert its supremacy, as it would give him power much like Columba. Because he was writing for a monastic community, he needed to reinforce the power of the abbot in addition to the idea that Columba was a saint. Monks certainly accepted divine intervention in life as a normal occurrence.

That Adomnon wrote exclusively of Columba's miracles leaves no doubt that he also wanted to proclaim the success of Christianity over paganism. During Columba's and Adomnan's day, Christianity and the Celtic other-world lived side by side in competition for souls. By the mid seventh century, Druidism remained powerful, and was condemned by the Christian Council of Nantes. St. Beuno's dying quote was, " 'I see the Trinity and Peter and Paul, and the Druids and the Saints' "[36] Rather than a religious group, Christians portrayed the Druids as a caste of magical practitioners that battled Christians for souls. It is believed that Christian missionaries practiced and even adopted pagan rituals. As early Christianity progressed, the veneration of saints increased as people appealed to them for help. Numerous shrines and wells bore saints' names, and rituals involving the use of fire and water became standard in worship. Resurrection and new life is the core of Christianity; yet raising the dead was a Celtic practice. Irish warriors raised their dead after a battle between the Britons and Hibernians.[37] Like Christians, Irish Druids baptized their children.[38] Lewis Spence wrote, "the Christian missionaries in Scotland and Ireland employed spells and charms of the self-same character as those of the Druids, ..." He believed Patrick and Columba happened to be Celts who practiced Celtic magic.[39]

If Patrick and Columba blended magic with Christianity to convert pagans, they certainly succeeded judging from the number of monasteries and churches they founded. Columba is said to have built three hundred churches. Adomnan puts the number at ninety: thirty-seven in Ireland and fifty-three in Scotland.[40] Many sites in Ireland are said to bear Brigit's name as well. The development of monasteries in Ireland and Scotland played a major role in determining the cult of saints. By the eighth century, most churches and monasteries attributed their foundation to a particular saint. Like Adomnan, monks felt the need to record their history, particularly after the Celtic Church fell under the see of Rome. Politically, hagiographers needed to push the

importance of their monastery in society. But the preponderance of miracle stories in "Saints Lives" makes it unclear whether those stories were meant to mirror the Gospel or to stress the importance of Celtic mythology prior to Christianity.[41] There is no escaping the blend of pagan and Christian themes.

According to Bradley, "The main purpose of a 'Vita' was often not, as tends to be assumed, to encourage the faithful but rather to demonstrate its subject's sanctity and superiority over other saints in the interest of promoting the authority, prestige, and financial interests of the monastery which claimed him or her as founder or patron."[42] So the more miraculous the deed, the more powerful the saint becomes. In a pagan era when people believed in magic, Christian missionaries would have to be portrayed as having miraculous powers in order to convince people that their religion was the stronger one. Columba himself was credited with the following poem:

> I reverence not the voices and birds,
> Nor sneezing, nor any charm in the wide world,
> Nor a child of chance, nor a woman;
> My Druid is Christ, the Son of God.
> Christ the Son of Mary, the great Abbot,
> The Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.[43]

Columba used his considerable powers when he encountered black demons on Iona. He once fought all day against the demons that, with their iron spikes, tried to impale Columba and his monks. Another time, he intervened when angels and demons struggled for the soul of a dead man. And when a group of monks drowned, Columba fought the demons yet again.[44] Clearly, Columba's strength and Iona's superiority were not to be doubted.

Columba died June 9, 597, at the age of seventy-seven while working on a Psalter. It was said that he never let an hour pass without reading, praying, or writing. Yet he found the time,

along with Patrick and Brigit, to travel, to convert souls, and to establish churches and monasteries. Through the years, the Celtic saints have consistently been portrayed as super miracle workers by their biographers. "Irishmen held strange opinions about their saints. They had not the least hesitation in assigning them the most extraordinary functions and in conferring on them the very first places in the ranks of the blessed."[45] Carmina Gadelica's "Invocation to Bride" illustrated the power of Brigit's protection by writing,

> No fire, no sun, no moon shall burn me,
> No lake, no water, nor sea shall drown me,
> No arrow of fairy nor dart of fay shall wound me,
> And I under the protection of my Holy Mary,
> And my gentle foster-mother is my beloved Bride.[46]

Celtic lore and pagan beliefs lie at the heart of the stories that surround Columba, Patrick, and Brigit. As Christianity was introduced to the Gaels and the Picts, native beliefs were borrowed and adopted. Celtic Christianity developed as a primitive, nature oriented religion, separate from the influence of Rome. The bond between Celtic saints and animals has been portrayed as in the example of an otter drying itself against Columba's legs. He even calmed the Loch Ness monster during a confrontation.[47] And Brigit has long been associated with cattle. The birds, beasts, and nature were part of the supernatural and real world in which they lived. That the saints would borrow from the early Celtic, animistic religion stands to reason. Thus, Celtic Christianity developed in a primitive, superstitious era. Monasteries became the font of civilization, and were more than just places to pray and learn. They were estates that provided sustenance and life to its inhabitants and to those who lived nearby. It is highly unlikely that Columba, Patrick, and Brigit accomplished all that they are credited with doing, but they certainly brought Christianity and some degree of civility and learning to people who

lived in uncertain times. They met the criteria of sainthood by achieving much more than ordinary humans could by establishing churches and by winning souls.

A great deal of literature exists on Celtic Christianity and the Celtic saints. Books written in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century suggest an extreme reverence for the saints. Dom Louis Gouguad's *Gaelic Pioneers of Christianity* represents one such example. Most of his book is about places that bear the Celtic saints' names and the invocation of their names for a special kind of protection. Lewis Spence's *The Magic Arts in Celtic Britain*, published in 1874, is pure fantasy, albeit fascinating. Stories like Patrick's showdown at Tara are presented as an example of Druid magic. The ancient Celts are portrayed as extremely mystical and magical people. Based on the number of Internet sites alone, it is clear that Celtic Christianity is enjoying a resurgence. The latter shift has been to portray the faith as some sort of "mother earth" centered religion, focused on ecology. Patrick appeared as a deer escaping Tara and of course Columba calmed the sea. Ian Bradley's *Celtic Christianity*, published in 1999, examined the trends of Celtic Christianity and the Celtic saints, and how they are perceived when the hagiography is removed.

Patrick, Brigit, and Columba were real people who did real things. It has been difficult to sort through fantasy and fact. Myths are not all harmful, as folklore can explain much about an early people's belief system. That the new Christian religion competed with the old pagan religion is certain. What is not certain is to what extent were the two mixed together. Had Patrick, Brigit, and Columba not borrowed some from paganism, it is doubtful that they would have been so successful and held in such high regard.

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