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Brigit, Matron of Poetry, Healing, Smithwork and Mercy: Female Divinity in a European Wisdom Tradition

Epigraph

“If we are to reframe the paternal scenario, see how it made its mark, play it backward, we cannot merely master the female whom the father was always seeking to take or take back in his threads, the female who, already, exceeded the father and whom he endlessly sought to bring back into his game... (Luce Irigaray)”¹

The political, economic and cultural crises in which we find ourselves have, on the one hand, destabilised the theological project; on the other hand, the question of religion has assumed major importance as cultural theorists now give renewed attention to the question of the social imaginary and its effects on the social orders.²

The task of theologians has, therefore, become immensely more challenging and our methods and concerns have become very diverse as, in the light of political and sociological critiques of religion, we explore not only the truth or falsity of traditional theological claims, but also the beneficent or lethal effects of the Christian theological imaginary on the social world.

Jürgen Habermas identified two components of our current cultural crises: the question of legitimation and the dominance of instrumental rationality.³ Julia Kristeva referred to the “sacrificial social contract”.⁴ Arguably, in the framework of a phallic morphology, they are interrelated. Our task, therefore,

¹ Luce Irigaray, *Sexes and genealogies*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Columbia University Press: New York 1993), 42. Originally published as Luce Irigaray, *Sexes et Parentés* (Minuit: Paris 1987).

² Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, trans. Kathleen Blarney (MIT Press: Cambridge, MA 1975/1987); *World in Fragments: Writings on Politics, Society Psychoanalysis and the Imagination*, trans. and ed. David Ames Curtis (Stanford University Press: CA 1997). Claudia Strauss, “The Imaginary,” in: *Anthropological Theory* vol. 6 (2006) 3, 322-344.

³ Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis* (Beacon Press: Boston 1973).

⁴ Julia Kristeva, “Woman’s time,” in: *The Kristeva reader*, edited by Toril Moi (Columbia University Press: New York 1986), 187-213.

as feminist theologians must be to redress that balance radically in several ways. Rather than participate in the “add women and stir” approach of equality feminism, we must identify and theologically elaborate our specific female morphologies as a means of redressing the balance and forging a more wholistic theology that takes seriously the prophetic injunction found in many of our traditions: *I desire mercy not sacrifice*.

Can we go beyond the traditional ways societies have been legitimated (through sacrifice), and can we develop, critically and imaginatively, alternative epistemologies to challenge those instrumental rationalities that have taken us to the brink? Can we find ways to recuperate the indigenous wisdom traditions, the taproots of our cultures, and generating hope? Is there an indigenous European wisdom tradition on which we can draw to critique our present state of affairs and to offer the hope of other possibilities?

This article suggests one possible approach to that project that takes seriously the question of gender and the distorted effects of phallic and sacrificial morphologies on the theological enterprise and social imaginary. The approach draws on many strands in Europe’s history: pre-Celtic, pan Celtic, Christian, post-Christian, and pagan.

Many European wisdom traditions were rooted and preserved in rural and agricultural communities: sometimes these are attached to local festivals, goddesses, or even saints. They speak of a stream of wisdom, rooted in consciousness and perhaps even in European cellular memory. How do we recuperate and translate them for today, especially on behalf of those in danger of being severely damaged by the pressures of contemporary living in cultures dominated by wars, and fuelled by greed. The focus on the figure of *Brigit* in this article is a modest contribution.

It is important to state, however, that for those of us who engage with Brigit’s traditions the figure of Brigit is not an object of *worship* but a metaphor through which we can engage imaginatively and creatively with a female tradition of ethics and divinity. Brigit offers a new basis on which we can imagine a renewed form of European unity based not on certainty but on poetry; not on splitting, but on healing; not on warfare, but on psychic mojo or smithcraft.

Who is Brigit?

The word “Brigit” carries enormous potential and it is important to spell out what the word means. The word derives from the Indo European word *brig* and means the Exalted or High One. It is cognate with the Vedic word, *brihati* that relates to the word *Brigantī*, Latinized as Brigantia. Brigantia is said to

have been the goddess of the Brigante tribe, and Cartimandua was the queen of this tribe in the first century C.E.⁵

In an ancient Irish dictionary, *Cormac's Glossary*, Brigit was described as patron of healing, smithwork and poetry.

“A poetess, daughter of the Dagda ... a goddess whom *filid* [poets] used to worship. As her intercession was very great and very splendid, so they call her goddess of poets. She had two sisters of the same name, Brigit, the woman of healing, and Brigit, the woman of smith-craft, daughter of the Dagda, from whom names among all the Irish a goddess used to be called Brigit.”⁶

Encountering Brigit, one engages in a complex mixture of mythology, *Lives of Brigit* – a fifth century Irish saint – and centuries’ old folk practices.

I argued elsewhere that the figure of Brigit incorporated many of the old indigenous local female divinities and collected them into a single entity called *Brigit*.⁷ The word *Brigit* is, therefore, a title rather than the name of only one person.⁸

⁵ Cf. John Koch in collaboration Julia Kristeva, “Woman’s time,” 187-213.

Cf. John Koch in collaboration with John Carey (eds.), *The Celtic Heroic Age: Literary Sources for Ancient Celtic Europe and Early Ireland and Wales* (Malden: Massachusetts 1995), 39-40. According to Séamas Ó Catháin, her “cult transmitted ancient elements of the culture of the prehistoric era down to our own time.” *The Festival of Brigit: Celtic Goddess and Holy Woman* (DBA Publications: Dublin 1995), ix. For a study of the Brigantia cf. Guy Ragland Phillips, *Brigantia: A Mysteriography* (Boston: Routledge, Kegan, Paul: Boston 1976). “‘Brigi’ corresponds to that of the British goddess, Brigantia, epigraphically attested as a tutelary goddess of the Brigantes, a northern British people about whom Tacitus wrote at some length. Both names are reflexes of Celtic *Briganti* ‘the exalted one’. This is perhaps the best evidence that a goddess whose Irish name was Brigit inhabited the Celtic pantheon.” Catherine McKenna, “Apotheosis and Evanescence: The Fortunes of Saint Brigit in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,” in: Joseph Falaky Nagy (ed.), *CSANA Yearbook 1: The Individual in Celtic Literatures* (Four Courts Press: Dublin 2001), 74-108, here 105.

⁶ “A poetess, daughter of the Dagda ... a goddess whom *filid* (poets) used to worship. As her intercession was very great and very splendid, so they call her goddess of poets. She had two sisters of the same name, Brigit, the woman of healing, and Brigit, the woman of smith-craft, daughter of the Dagda, from whom names among all the Irish a goddess used to be called Brigit.” Cf. James F. Kenney, *The Sources for the Early History of Ireland* (1929), reprinted with add. by Ludwig Bieler (Octagon Books: New York 1966), 357-358.

⁷ In the Irish case, for instance, many of these local divinities found themselves in her Christian monastery as smiths, cooks, and companions. Cf. Mary Condren, *The Serpent and the Goddess: Women, Religion and Power in Celtic Ireland* (Harper & Row: San Francisco 1989), repr. (New Island Books: Dublin 2002), 71ff.

⁸ Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddesses: Warriors, Virgins & Mothers* (George Braziller & British Museum Press: New York and London 1995), 196.

In this article, *Brigit* is being used both a noun and a verb. As a noun the word refers to a composite figure – poet, lawmaker, feminist, hospitaller and Christian saint. As a verb, the word refers to the *neart*, the life force and creativity gathered under her cultural cloak at the time of her festival – February 1st, 13th or even March 1st. *Brigit* is, therefore, synonymous with a European Wisdom tradition and the language of *wisdom* rather than *deity* can embrace those disaffected from the main religious traditions.

European Brigit

Brigit's traditions have deep European roots: sites are found in Italy, Portugal, France, Germany, Sweden, Austria, Scotland, England and Wales. But Brigit also has very specific Irish associations in that, in addition to the artefacts, holy wells, rituals and shrines, Ireland has also preserved a written tradition revolving around a 5th century Irish historical saint who took the name of Brigit: these *Lives*, together with her rituals artefacts and symbols, convey valuable evidence of a pre-Christian and Christian record of female divinity.

Celtic scholars discuss whether Brigit was originally a goddess turned into a saint, or a saint turned into a goddess.⁹ Whatever the outcome, the mechanisms involved speak of a powerful legacy on which those who, in ancient times, claimed to speak or write in her name could draw.

Brigit's traditions overlap with other female figures of divinity such as Minerva, Sul, Vesta, and Juno. Known as a midwife, Brigit's feast-day was also that of the Roman Goddess, Juno, the Goddess of love, and the "aid-woman" (midwife) of ancient Rome.

The rites practised at the historical convent in Kildare in the south of Ireland were said to resemble those of the Roman Goddess Minerva. Her embroidery tools were preserved at a chapel near Glastonbury, at Beckery in England. Glastonbury also held objects of healing associated with Brigit, such as her

⁹ Laurence J. Maney, "When Brigit Met Patrick," in: *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 14 (1994), 175-194. Lisa Lawrence, "Pagan Imagery in the Early Lives of Brigit: A Transformation from Goddess to Saint?" in: *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 16 (1996), 39-54; Catherine McKenna, "Between Two Worlds: Saint Brigit and Pre-Christian Religion in the Vita Prima," in: Joseph Falaky Nagy (ed.), *CSANA Yearbook 2* (Four Courts Press: Dublin, Ireland and Portland, Oregon 2002): Identifying the 'Celtic,' 66-74; Christina Harrington, *Women in a Celtic Church: Ireland 450-1150* (Oxford University Press: Oxford 2002); D. P. Ausbender, "Gendering the Vita Prima: An Examination of St. Brigit's role as Mary of the Gael," in: *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 26 (2007).

bag and her bell. Her imagery was associated with the sun, moon, cows, sheep, vultures, baths, sacred fires and milk.¹⁰

Goddesses were often sanitized and reframed to suit patriarchal purposes by being incorporated into the emerging state religions. Some early Irish texts followed that lead when speaking of nuns, called *caillech* or *palliate*:

“*Pallium* [veil] is named from paleness, this and *palliate* or ‘Goddess Pallas’ who is Minerva, whose temple is white, whose priests and virgins are *palliatæ*, that is, veiled; this, in mutated form perseveres with the same name, [thus] it is permitted nowadays that the pallium-wearers, that is to say, the veiled women, may be esteemed...”

Pallium-wearers, that is the veiled women, are to have much honour, because they conquer their sex, that is to say, their fragility, and they withdraw from the world through their actions.”¹¹

Likewise, goddesses such as Athena in Aeschylus’s *Oresteian* Trilogy achieved her status in patriarchal times as lawmaker by crying out “no woman gave me birth.”¹² In that sense, just as the ancient goddesses were colonised, so too some early Irish sources considered women’s entry into religious life as effectively their overcoming their sex, rather than enhancing them as women.

However, Brigit was venerated by local people who preserved her memories and ritual practices all over Europe and her traditions were not subject (until patriarchal times) to such misogynist overlays. Her memories preserve evidence of a tradition of female agency and divinity prior to layers of colonisation in subsequent centuries. For that reason, we have very rich sources on which to draw and many more have yet to be excavated.

Brigit took on many aspects of female divinity: virgin, mother, and crone that also correspond with poetry, healing and smithwork – categories that overlapped. The sources used here will mainly be Irish, but the aim is to encourage other European scholars, in particular, to research the parallels in their own localities. From very tentative explorations to date there is little doubt that such parallels will be found. Brigit was one of the first Europeans!

¹⁰ J. L. Robinson, “St. Brigit of Glastonbury,” in: *JRSAI* 83 (1953), 97-99.

¹¹ *Collectio Canonum Hibernensis*, cited in Christina Harrington, *Women in a Celtic Church* (Oxford University Press: Oxford 2002), 144.

¹² “No mother gave me birth / I honor the male in all things but marriage / Yes, with all my heart I am my Father’s child.” Athena, in Aeschylus’s *Oresteian Trilogy*, Lines 750-755. Arlene Saxonhouse, “Aeschylus’ Oresteia: Misogyny, Philogyny and Justice,” in: *Women and Politics* vol. 4 (2) (summer/1984), 11-32.

Some of us (who are not mystics) personify our relationship to divinity and relate to the *person* of Brigit. Others relate not to her person but to her rituals, symbols, and traditions. Brigit's cloak – her most famous symbol – is an ample garment that can embrace us all! Using the metaphor of her cloak we can engage with diversity, not by converting everyone to the same viewpoint, but by using language and symbols that enable us to embrace the greatest possible number of different points of view.¹³

Poetry

According to early Irish law, Brigh Ambui was a “female author of wisdom and prudence among the men of Erin. From her is named *Briathra Brighi* i.e. certain incantation by which the poet's mind was supposed to be rendered prophetic.”¹⁴ Brigit was matroness of poets who used her tinkling bell to call the poets to assembly.¹⁵

In ancient Ireland poets were not simply wordsmiths. Ireland was ruled by a triad of kings, religious figures (abbots and bishops) and poets. Poets played a role in inaugurating and legitimating kings, and could overthrow them should they not live up to their duties. Poets, therefore, called the society to integrity and challenged unjust rule.

In Brigit's matronage of poetry we find the first clues of a distinct approach to knowledge and wisdom. In a largely oral culture, the training for poets consisted of their spending many hours in complete darkness memorising the old sagas and wisdom lore of Ireland. The Celtic understanding was that all things are born in darkness. The structure of the year reflected this awareness. The Celtic year begins on November 1st with Samhain, presided over by the Cailleach, the Hag, or Wise Woman. The harvest festivals are over, the New Year begins, and the womb of the earth is plunged into darkness awaiting the coming of the light on the Winter Solstice, December 21st.

Facing into darkness, including the darkness within themselves, poets were uniquely positioned to call a community to integrity, to defend the weak, to pronounce judgements on false decisions, and to puncture the pretentiousness of rulers and despots. In that sense, they had much in common with some of the great prophets of the Hebrew Bible.

¹³ I first heard this definition of ecumenism being articulated by Mary Hunt, co-director of the WATER project in Washington.

¹⁴ *Ancient Laws and Institutes of Ireland*, Rolls Series, 6 vols. (Dublin 1865-1901), here vol. 1, 23.

¹⁵ Cf. Whitley Stokes (ed.), *Three Irish Glossaries* (Williams and Norgate: London 1862), 8.

Provided they could carry out their duties, poets achieved very high status in Irish society and had an *honour price* comparable to that of kings. Three things were required of them:

“they ordained it thus: to grant to every *ollam* forever (in payment for his honour and outrage, provided that he could perform *imbas forosnai* and *dichetal do chollaib cenn* and *teinm laedo*, an equal honour-price with the king of Tara, provided that he could perform those three things.”¹⁶

These terms have been variously translated: *imbas forosna*, “knowledge which illumines”; *dichetal dichennaib*, “extempore incantation”; *teinm laida*, “illumination of song”.

Poets were expected to develop and cultivate their intuitive powers, or what we might now call *cellular knowledge*.

“... And this is how it used to be done: when the *filí* used to see the person or the thing approaching at a distance, he would encounter him at once from the *ends of his bones, or of his mind without thinking*, and it is at the same time that he recited it and performed the divination) [emphasis added].”¹⁷

Composing “without thinking” presupposes a store of knowledge and poetic talent that brings things to light, and makes manifest hidden wisdom. In other words, poets fostered alternative forms of *knowing* thereby allowing them to access sources of wisdom within their own bodies, or from within the collective unconscious.

Ancient Ireland was not subject to colonisation by the Roman Empire. Therefore, the Irish Brehon laws, (a unique European source of Old European polity) were not finally erased until the full rigour of English colonisation took place in the 16th century. In these laws, the goddess, Brigit, positively sponsored women’s concerns and fought for their rights. She is said to have “pronounced judgments on female covenants.”

It was also said that “It is required of a satirist that he be able to compose ‘a defamatory *demand do chennaib*, so that cheeks are reddened.””¹⁸ In the mythological sources Brigit plays exactly that role. As the mother, wife, or daughter of the chief judge, Sencha, Brigit successively appears and causes

¹⁶ John Carey, “The Three Things Required of a Poet,” in: *Ériu* XL VIII (1997), 41-58, here 51.

¹⁷ Carey, “Three Things,” 55.

¹⁸ Carey, “Three Things,” 45.

blotches to appear on his cheeks when he ruled against women holding property in their own right.¹⁹ She is said to have established the regulations governing twins (usually an extreme anomaly in early societies). In one famous incident she was instrumental in establishing the law which forced two warring sides to delay for five days before engaging in combat, a role similar to that of the Irish Goddess Macha, or to her European counterpart, the Roman Goddess Minerva.²⁰

Overthrow

Not surprisingly when the representative of Rome, the future Saint Patrick, came to Ireland as a bishop (he was formerly a slave), his mandate was to erase any competing sources of authority to those of the Christian church. It is said that he immediately attacked alternative sources of wisdom. According to one tradition, he issued the following edict:

“Patrick forbade those three things to the *filid* [poets] when they were converted, for they were impure; for neither *teinm laedo* nor *imbas forosnai* was performed without an offering to idols... He left to them after that the genealogies of the men of Ireland, and the metre of every poem, and the lore of names and letters, and storytelling with lays... and true judgement in the canon of their art: **‘What had been sung, what had been heard, what had been established.’** He left (all) that with the *filid*; and Patrick said that every honour which they had had in Ireland when they used to perform those three things aforesaid should be accorded to them thereafter; for what they had taken up was better than what they had abandoned. [Emphasis added]”²¹

In other words, in the name of the new orthodoxies, Patrick rejects poetic approaches or forms of divination in favour of positivist evidence that could be set in stone. Rather than inner authority, mature individuation, and poetic creativity, the emerging order demanded certainty and obedience. New stories would be told and the Christian narrative would be interpreted in ways that valorised obedience, *even unto death*. The perfect conditions for the *herd instinct* were set in place.

¹⁹ Cf. Condren, *Serpent and Goddess*, 71, 236.

²⁰ Cf. Condren, *Serpent and the Goddess*, 62-64.

²¹ Carey, “Three Things,” 57. *Patrick* is effectively a metaphor for the emerging patriarchal social order. This passage is the subject of some dispute. Cf. Nora Chadwick, “Imbas Forosnaí;” in: *Scottish Gaelic Studies* 4 (1935), 97-135, here 101.

In early social forms, according to Riane Eisler, “power was primarily equated with the responsibility of motherhood rather than with the exaction of obedience to a male-dominant elite through force or the fear of force.”²² In contrast, sacrality in the patriarchal tradition constitutes a form of what I have characterised elsewhere as “suffering into truth.”²³ Such a view of sacrality is based on a phallic male morphology in which the zenith of individuation is not relationship but splitting from one’s first object (in the psychoanalytic sense) – one’s mother, a splitting attested in many of the major patriarchal mythological systems, and valorised by some psychoanalytic traditions.

In the new patriarchal social arrangements, given their alternative sources of knowledge and authority, poets were a distinct threat. Their “inspired wisdom,” therefore, enjoyed various fortunes in subsequent Irish texts. At first it referred to professional knowledge; then it was repudiated as being the work of “demons;” lastly, it appears to have been romanticised as a form of alternative epistemology to the emerging Christian hegemony.²⁴

Healing

Brigit’s second matronage, *healing*, pervades everything that her traditions represent. Her images and traditions speak powerfully of an indigenous healing wisdom connecting people to nature, the earth, each other, and to divinity.

Regardless of the conversion of a fifth century historical figure to Christianity or any Christian overlays, the rituals, images and traditions of Brigit clearly belong to another symbolic economy, one that recognised our human origins, and especially our origins in the wombs of mothers.

Our ancestors accepted our dependence on the earth and our human origins from women’s bodies. They sought to co-operate with nature; they honoured women and at times of social renewal they ritually remembered and celebrated their part in the cosmic universe. Since women’s bodies produced new life it

²² Riane Eisler, *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History Our Future* (Harper & Row: San Francisco 1987), 38.

²³ Mary Condren, “Suffering into Truth: Constructing the Patriarchal Sacred,” in: *Journal of Feminist Theology* vol. 17 (2009) 3, 356-392.

²⁴ “In the ‘Caldron of Poesy,’ *imbas forosnai* has an honoured place, but is not seen as being significantly different in kind from talent or professional knowledge. Cormac focuses on the supernatural aspects, only to repudiate it: pagan prophesy is the work of demons. Finally, in the revised Bretha Nemed, Cormac’s formulation is adopted but his negative assessment is ignored: we find rather a romanticizing desire to emphasize the fili’s mantic expertise at the expense of everything else.” Carey, “Three Things,” 50.

followed that metaphors of cave (womb), mountains (breasts), rivers and wells (uterine fluids), perfectly represented creative life principles and co-operation with them would bring prosperity and joy to all her children.

At Faughart near Dundalk, Co. Louth, (said to be Brigit's birthplace) we find the remains of her healing stones still venerated by those most ancient indigenous Irish people, the Travellers, who regularly come to her shrines to celebrate their ritual traditions. The stones are clearly connected to themes in her *Lives* and are shaped in such a way as to heal the eyes, kidneys, backs, knees or whatever other human body part her devotees entrust to her care. In her Christian *Lives*, she healed lepers, the infertile, and the blind.

At the site in Kildare, said to be where she set up her Christian monastery, the water flows through her breasts into the living stream. Her most prolific images and sites are the wells scattered all over Europe. These wells, such as that at Faughart, often appear on the top of mountains and hills, suggesting the bubbling source of life itself coming out of her breast on the top of the mountain.

The old festival of Imbolc, February 1st (now Brigit's Day) which in the old-Irish, *oimelc*, may mean "ewe-milk," is associated with breastfeeding. It is possible also that the pilgrimages which took place on the feast of Imbolc were remnants of a druidic ritual which celebrate the fluids of the womb, which were sacred in the old religion.²⁵

Another possible explanation of the word is "in the belly" which may relate to the processions held around the fields, often seen as the body of goddesses in which grain and other crops grew. This also reflects the general association with the rebirth of nature at the time of Imbolc.²⁶

Brigit's symbolism is firmly maternal, nourishing, protecting, spinning and weaving the bonds of human community, but it is maternal in the broadest sense of that word in that Brigit's traditions fostered what theorist Sara Ruddick has entitled *maternal thinking*, an epistemology that refuses to do in the public world what would not be acceptable in the home.²⁷ Brigit constantly bridged the worlds of nature and culture and her traditions aim to bridge the world of public and private and to keep the life force moving rather than allowing it to stagnate.

²⁵ This is suggested by Donal Ó Cathasaigh, "The Cult of Brigid: A Study of Pagan-Christian Syncretism in Ireland," in: James J. Preston (ed.), *Mother Worship: Theme and Variations* (North Carolina: Chapel Hill 1982), 92.

²⁶ Pamela Berger, *The Goddess Obscured* (Beacon Press: Boston 1985), 70.

²⁷ Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking* (Women's Press: London 1989).

Her traditions speak of an approach to sacrality intimately connected to *relationships* rather than *splitting*. The sacrality of the Old Europeans focussed on nurturing and healing relationships between people, the land, their neighbours, and their ancestors. They would not have recognised most contemporary anthropological definitions of the Sacred/Profane dichotomies which Emile Durkheim and his followers considered to be the foundation of all religion.²⁸ They would hardly have understood the abjection of women, now considered almost normative by some post modern theorists.²⁹

Today we are inclined to think of such attitudes as “nature worship,” but this is very badly mistaken. The word “attunement” would better describe the attitude of the ancients. They saw themselves as part of nature, and depended on the wisdom of nature for their sustenance. While they might certainly have been inclined to personify divinity in female or male forms, in reality, their conception of divinity was closer to what we today call *Gaia*, the notion that the earth has a self-regulatory inherent wisdom. That wisdom, however, is at the level of the tiny particles rather than a Grand Scheme of Things with a Great Controller somewhere in the sky. Today, we would call their attitude to divinity *panentheistic*, that is to say, divinity infusing everything, as distinct from pantheism, the worship of many gods.

Entering the Healing Cave

In many cultures throughout the world, just as the poets entered darkness to seek inspiration, religious practitioners re-entered symbolic *wombs* or menstrual huts in order to “absorb the maternal entropy.”³⁰ They returned to their origins to heal and revitalise their communities. Priests entering the darkness of the womb were seeking to be re-born: they embraced darkness and the

²⁸ Cf. Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* ([1915] George Allen & Unwin: London 1976); Roger Caillois, *Man and the Sacred*, trans. by Meyer Barash (Free Press of Glencoe: Glencoe, ILL 1950), with three added appendices on Sex, Play, and War. (*L'Homme et le Sacré*, Gallimard: Paris 2nd ed. 1950).

²⁹ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, trans. by Leon Roudiez (Columbia University Press: New York 1982), 105. (*Pouvoirs de l'horreur*, Seuil: Paris 1980).

³⁰ Masao Yamaguchi, “Towards a Poetics of the Scapegoat,” in: Paul Dumouchel (ed.) *Violence and Truth: On the Work of René Girard* (Stanford University Press: Stanford, CA 1988), 187. In the Irish context, there was up to the twelfth century, at least, a ceremony, recorded by the traveller, Giraldus Cambrensis, when the king bathed in the blood of the horse/Goddess. Cf. Gerald of Wales, *The History and Topography of Ireland*, edited by John J. O'Meara (Penguin Books: Harmondsworth, Middlesex 1982), 110.

complexity of the cycle of birth, life, and death, rather than attempting to overcome death and mortality with spurious fantasies of immortality. Brigit's traditions contain similar suggestive evidence.

In one of the *Lives*, Brigit had a bishop, Conlaed, who was particularly fond of fine Roman vestments in which to conduct his religious ceremonies. Brigit, however, consistently gave these vestments away to lepers, beggars, or to whomsoever she felt needed them more.

Conlaed was furious and several times Brigit had to make the clothing *reappear* to appease Conlaed's wrath. A crisis arose when one day he appeared in search of them, and all she had to offer was a *garment like to the skin of a seal's head*. In ancient Europe, that kind of garment was exactly the kind of garment priests used when they wanted to symbolically re-enter the womb for the sake of regeneration. Often, however, they simultaneously threw real women out of the precincts!³¹

Conlaed had had enough and he set out for Rome for the third time, presumably to get more vestments, but Brigit said to him: "You will not get there and you will not come back. And so it was fulfilled, for wolves devoured him."³²

The practice of re-entering the womb for the sake of regeneration may also be one of the origins of the figures called *Sheela-na-gigs* that are found both in Ireland, Europe, and throughout the world, often placed on the doors and lintels of churches.³³ Foetal-like in appearance, they hold their genitals apart signifying to the person coming in that they were re-entering the womb/church, a place where our origins were honoured and remembered. The church was a place of peace: weapons must be left aside; the power of life and death remained the prerogative of divinity.³⁴

Sacrality and Social Structures

Given such maternal imagery and the importance of nature and ecology, these were reflected in the social structures. Social organisation largely took

³¹ Cf. Nancy Jay, *Throughout Your Generations Forever: Sacrifice, Religion, and Paternity* (Chicago University Press: Chicago and London 1992), 116.

³² Thesaurus Paleohibernicus, *A Collection of Old-Irish Glosses, Scholia, Prose and Verse*, Whitley Stokes / John Strachan (eds.), 2 vols. (Cambridge University Press: London 1903), here vol. 2, 347. For different versions of this story, see Donncha Ó hAodha (ed.), *Bethu Brigte* (Institute for Advanced Studies Dublin 1978), 34, 64.

³³ Miriam Robbins Dexter / Victor H. Mair, *Sacred Display: Divine and Magical Female Figures of Eurasia* (Cambria Press: New York) (Forthcoming).

³⁴ Cf. James H. Dunn, "Site-na-Gcoch," in: *Eire-Ireland* 12 (1977), 68-85.

the form of intersecting rings, rings within larger rings, as communities encountered the wider world. The religious ceremonies that took place at the changing of the seasons were occasions for great communal gatherings of renewal: people remembered and re-enacted their place in the social and symbolic universe in a creative intersection between nature and culture.

A distinct feature of such ceremonies is that they enabled participants to *heighten* their awareness of dependence on the earth and all its fruits, rather than *suppress consciousness* in favour of an arbitrary splitting between the sacred and the profane that served to divide people from one another and to foster the *Othering* that has been so much a part of the European tradition. For that reason, ceremonies were held at the time of the great turnings of the year, allowing people to acknowledge and celebrate their dependence on and participation in the Great Wheel of Life.

This relatedness took physical expression in the actual landscape which also preserved evidence of a profound complementarity between the sexes and their distinct contribution to the social polity. For instance, Ireland had two main physical centres: Tara and Uisneach, described as “two kidneys in a beast.”³⁵ Tara was considered to be masculine and was mainly the political centre. Uisneach was considered to be feminine and was mainly the ritual centre.³⁶ Their functions largely overlapped and were complementary. Nevertheless, Uisneach was the site of the Navelstone and clearly represented our maternal primeval origins.³⁷

In that sense, the Irish recognised what contemporary anthropologists such as Peggy Reeves Sanday or Shanshan Du who study matri-centred societies see as the need for a *dialectic between the sexes* (the term is Luce Irigaray’s) rather than the oppositional or fused relations that pertain today.³⁸

Similar to Rig Veda, and a five fold conception of the world,³⁹ Ireland was also said to have had five provinces. Four of these were physical provinces,

³⁵ Alwyn and Brinley Rees, *Celtic Heritage* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1961), 120, 146, cf. also 152, 63.

³⁶ Rees / Rees, *Celtic Heritage*, 146, 150.

³⁷ Rees / Rees, *Celtic Heritage*, 159, 187.

³⁸ Cf. Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, 140; For contemporary examples of societies where such a dialectic exists and is encouraged, cf. Peggy Reeves Sanday, *Women at the Center: Life in a Modern Matriarchy* (Cornell University Press: New York 2002); Shanshan Du, “Chopsticks Only Work in Pairs:” *Gender – Unity and Gender Equality Among the Lahu of Southwest China* (New York: Columbia University Press 2002).

³⁹ Rees / Rees, *Celtic Heritage*, 148, 38, nn. 9 ad 11.

but the fifth province, Uisneach, was both an imaginative and physical entity that held the other provinces together. It is said that “Uisneach was the primeval unity, the principle in which all oppositions are resolved.”⁴⁰ Every year the hearth fires of Ireland were kindled from the fire at Uisneach.⁴¹

The lake at Uisneach is said to have been named from Lugh,⁴² and the Christian narrators of Brigit’s *Lives* ensured that Brigit was clearly associated with Uisneach. Her veiling or ordination as bishop (depending on one’s interpretation of what happened), took place at Uisneach, clearly establishing her rightful place in the lineage of both pagan and Christian religious authority.

Overthrow

Whereas Brigit’s traditions had insisted on creating, maintaining, and healing relationships through the power of her artefacts, imagery, stories and rituals, the rising power of the father gods depended on their establishing or maintaining their positions by threatening to, or actually sacrificing their children.

In keeping with her maternal aspects, the predominant fluid for Brigit is milk, the milk of human kindness. The milk of the Sacred Cow was one of the earliest sacred foods throughout the world, equivalent to our present day Holy Communion. In historical times it was said that the Abbess of Kildare (Brigit’s successors) could drink only from the milk of White Cow.⁴³ The same milk was also believed to provide an antidote to the poison of weapons.⁴⁴

Milk represented the ideal form of all food for its purity and nourishment. Mother’s milk was especially valuable and was believed to have curative powers. For instance, Brigit was even said to have been baptized in milk. Baptisms in milk were practised by the Irish until the practice was banned by the Synod of Cashel in 1171.⁴⁵

If Brigit’s traditions focus on nature, patriarchal theologies focus on a *Supernature* mostly under the control of a clerical male hierarchy. In the Christian literature, Lugh of the Generous Hand is replaced by her priestly

⁴⁰ Rees / Rees, *Celtic Heritage*, 163.

⁴¹ Rees / Rees, *Celtic Heritage*, 156, 387, n.51.

⁴² Máire MacNeill, *The Festival of Lughnasa: A Study of the Celtic Festival of the Beginning of Harvest*, 2 vols. (Comhairle Bhealoideas Éireann. Dublin 1962), 9.

⁴³ *Vita Prima S. Brigitae*, ed. trans. Séan Connolly, *Journal of the Royal Society Antiquaries of Ireland* vol. 119 (1989), 5-49, here 16, vv.6-7.

⁴⁴ Cf. Condren, *The Serpent and Goddess*, 58.

⁴⁵ *Gesta Regis Henrici Secundi Benedicti Abbatis*, W. Stubbs (ed.), from the Cotton Mss Rolls Series (London 1867) at 1171, 1:28.

chaplain, Ninnid of the Pure Hand, said to have kept his hand clean to administer communion to her.⁴⁶ The shift from the generosity of Lugh to the purity of Ninnid would have far reaching implications for our understanding of ethics and the sacred.

Not surprisingly, therefore, when Brigit's traditions were overthrown, maternal milk was replaced by blood shed, not in the course of the life cycle – childbirth or menstruation – but in the voluntary giving or taking of life, in various forms of sacrifice.

Smithcraft

Brigit's matronage of poetry, healing and smithcraft are intimately allied to the three traditional designations of female divinity: Virgin, Mother and Crone. None of these attributes or specialties is exclusive even if we have addressed them in turn. Brigit as Crone takes on the characteristics of the Death Goddess who does not *cause* death but is the one who can foretell death. Her closest counterpart in Irish mythology would be the Morrígáin.

The traditional figure of alchemy, magic, and culture, the smith was a feared and revered alchemical figure in most traditional societies and Indo-European mythology. Smiths transformed nature to culture, forged the instruments of agriculture, shod the animals and often maintained the village fire. Evidence is now emerging to suggest that spears used by smiths were used for ritual purposes. Those found in various excavations bear no evidence of other use.⁴⁷

As a smith, Brigit transformed people's minds rather than metals. She forged new ways of being and transformed old patterns of behaviour into new courses of action. Her *psychic mojo* speaks of another kind of in-depth knowledge: the perspective of the Crone, the one who has seen it all and is not afraid to speak. Brigit may be patroness of smithcraft, but her anvil was that of the soul; her alchemy, that of the spirit.

Brigit's matronage of smithwork would also have rejected the divisions between the domestic and the political, the public and private, sacred and profane. At times of battle, like the Morrígáin, Brigit used her transformative powers, *magic mojo*, psychic warfare, rather than weapons, to confuse the

⁴⁶ Whitley Stokes, *Three Middle Irish Homilies on the Lives of SS. Patrick, Brigit, and Columcille* (Privately printed: Calcutta 1877), 85.

⁴⁷ See Ivan Mazarov, "The Blacksmith as 'King' in the Necropolis of Varna," in: Joan Marler (ed.), *From the realm of the ancestors: an anthology in honor of Marija Gimbutas* (Knowledge, Ideas and Trends: Manchester CT 1997), 175-187.

opposing sides.⁴⁸ She put warring sides into shamanic-like trances, giving them sweet dreams of victory without shedding a drop of blood. She placed clouds between opposing sides in battle so they could not see one another. She and her nuns went to the battlefield (against the wishes of the warriors) surrounding the battlefield so that the men were too embarrassed and ashamed to fight.

In that manifestation she played a role similar to those traditions of women who stripped off their clothing, exposed their naked breasts, or displayed their genitals in attempts to remind the warriors of their human origins, mitigate their omnipotent warrior fantasies, and prevent their going to war.⁴⁹

Fire that does not burn

Brigit's matronage of smithwork also takes the form of the "inner fire" necessary to ensure the ethical life of the community. In various sources there are many references to the *fire that does not burn*, the life-force within.

When she was born, the people saw pillars of fire shoot from her house, but were amazed that the house was intact.⁵⁰ At her ordination as bishop a fiery column shot from her head.⁵¹ She also touched the altar which remained perpetually green thereafter. Three times the church was burned down but the beam remained intact under the ashes,⁵² Brigit was known as the *Fiery Arrow*.⁵³

Fire was also the means through which Brigit knew if her nuns had been faithful. Every morning, one of her nuns, Darlughdacha went to collect the seed of the fire. On one unfortunate morning, when she returned, the fire had burned through her apron, symbolising that her purity had been compromised. Shamefully, she confessed to Brigit that indeed a blacksmith had admired her ankles.⁵⁴ Brigit told her to put coals in her shoes to purify herself once again.⁵⁵

⁴⁸ The term is Barbara Mor's, Cf. "The Morigain," in: *Woman of Power* No. 15 (Winter/1989-90), 60.

⁴⁹ For accounts of naked women subduing men in battle see "The Chase of Síd na mBan Finn," in: *Todd Lecture Series* vol. xvi. (1910), 75. The Sheela-na-Gigs found on entrances to many Irish churches might also have been intended to disarm warriors. See F.R.S.A.I. Figures Known as Hags of the Castle, Sheelas, or Sheela-na-Gigs," in: *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries* vol. XXIV Series V vol. IV (March/1894), 78.

⁵⁰ Ó hAodha, *Bethu Brigitte*, 20.

⁵¹ Ó hAodha, *Bethu Brigitte*, 24.

⁵² Ó hAodha, *Bethu Brigitte*, 24.

⁵³ Whitley Stokes, *Three Irish Glossaries*, xxxiii-xxxiv.

⁵⁴ Cf. Robert A. S. MacAlister, "The Fire Walk in Ancient Ireland," in: *Man* 63 (1919), 117-118; J. Mair, "Darlughdacha – Eine Vergessene Heilige," in: *Frigisinga* 5, no. 34 (1928), 433-435.

⁵⁵ For full bibliographical references to these stories cf. Condren, *The Serpent and the Goddess*, 236.

The stories bear evidence of an old purification fire ritual, but the importance for us is that Brigit's followers (like the ancient Vestal Virgins) were charged with holding the *seed of the fire* on behalf of the community. The *fire would not burn* providing they remained focussed, and undistracted by flattery.

Overthrow

The figure of Brigit – goddess, lawmaker, poet, healer, smith, Christian saint – moved from generation to generation, often forming bridges between new epistemes and the various invading layers of people who came to Ireland. In one story recounting a radically changing episteme Brigit, in her manifestation as a member of the *Tuatha Dé Danaan* (People of the Goddess Danu), becomes the wife of one of the invaders, Bres of the Fomorians and had a son, Ruadán.

Goibniú was the smith of the *Tuatha Dé Danaan*, and Ruadán was sent by the Fomoiré to kill one of the *áes dána*.⁵⁶ Goibniú helped make a weapon for Ruadán and the spear was finally ground by Crón the mother of Fíánlach who handed it to Ruadán.

Ruadán thanked Goibniú by turning the weapon on him, attempting to kill him. Goibniú survived the triple attack but then turned the weapon on Ruadán killing him. The significance of the incidence is the line in the text that reads as follows:⁵⁷

“So the spear was given to Rúadán by his maternal kin, and for that reason a weaver's beam is still called ‘the spear of the maternal kin’ in Ireland.”

Space does not permit an exploration here of the “weaver's beam.” Suffice to say now that the weaving and spinning of fate formed an integral part of the work of the Crone. The *weaver's beam* was one of the instruments of prophecy, or tools of divination. Many incidences occur where the *weaver's beam* has sacral qualities. However, in a process that Joseph Campbell termed the “Great Reversal,” in this story the weaver's beam is turned into a weapon of violence, just as the Goddess of Death has been turned into a Goddess of War.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ The *Áes dána* were people with special distinction in the arts.

⁵⁷ “Second Battle of Moytura,” in: T.P. Cross / C.H. Slover (eds.), *Ancient Irish Tales* (Barnes and Noble: New York 1969), 28-48.

⁵⁸ Joseph Campbell, *The Mythic Dimension: Selected Essays 1959-1987* (New World Library: California 1997), 220.

The text also contains an interesting epithet:

“Bríg came and keened for her son. At first she shrieked, in the end she wept. Then for the first time weeping and shrieking were heard in Ireland. (Now she is the Bríg who invented a whistle for signalling at night.)”

The significance of this is that in most ancient law systems, if a woman is raped and does not cry out, she is not to blame if she is in the desert. However, if a woman is raped in the city and does not cry out or her cry is not heard she is to blame. These laws are found in the *Book of Deuteronomy*, as well as in Hittite and Babylonian lawtracts.⁵⁹

In a culture picturing a mother as its highest deity, rape, which potentially forced a woman to become a mother, was a dreadful crime. Men were subject to severe punishments, and one incensed king removed rape from the list of pardonable crimes lest he ever be tempted to show leniency. Should a woman become pregnant following a rape, this was taken to be a sign of her compliance; it was vital, therefore, that some means of resistance be put forth.

Brigit is said to have invented the first whistle for signalling at night, the equivalent of our contemporary “shriek alarms,” to lessen the possibility that a woman putting up resistance would not be heard. Brigit could be said to be matron of whistleblowers – the one who resists the herd instinct and speaks up for the sake of justice and integrity.

Today, in our Brigit celebrations, we use these whistles to ask for energy, send our power, and wake up the life force, the *neart*, within ourselves and

⁵⁹ Cf. Fergus Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law* (Institute for Advanced Studies: Dublin 1988), 134-136.

Cf. *Annals of Loch Cé: A Chronicle of Irish Affairs 1014-1590*, W. M. Hennessy (ed.), 2 vols. ([London 1871], Irish Manuscripts Commission: Dublin 1939) here vol.1, 269, where a man was blinded for the crime of rape.

In one version of this work it is stated that the prince Ollamh Fodhla, “Particularly expressed his severity against the ravishment of women, which it seems, was a piece of gallantry and a common vice of those days, for the offender was to suffer death without mercy, and the king thought fit to give up so much of his prerogative, as to put it out of his power either to extend his pardon, or even to reprieve the criminal.” Geoffrey Keating, *Keating’s General History of Ireland With many Curious Amendments Taken from the Psalters of Tara and Cashel by Dermot O’Connor* (J. Duffy: Dublin n.d.), 162. In the current official text of *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn (History of Ireland)*, by Geoffrey Keating / David Comyn (eds.), 4 vols. ([1901-1914], reprint, Irish Texts Society: London 1987) this last part has been omitted. vol.2, 132. Elizabeth A. Gray (ed.), *Cath Maige Tuired* (Irish Texts Society: Dublin 1983), 57.

our communities, in other words to awaken the *divine vibrations*.⁶⁰ We encourage participants, in the name of Brigit, to blow the whistle on their own addictions and on hidden injustices in their communities.

Mercy

Brigit took *mercy* as her main Beatitude when she went to Uisneach to receive the veil or to be ordained. In an old Celtic text it is said that sacrifice “rescues the earth from the demons.”⁶¹ If sacrifice, was intent on *rescuing the earth from the demons*, Brigit was equally intent on ensuring that demons were not created in the first place! In her *Lives* she constantly rejected efforts to abject others. When a pregnant woman was to be stoned she interfered and stopped it happening. When a pregnant princess came to her in desperation for fear that she would be burned, Brigit performed a holy abortion – she blessed her and the foetus disappeared. Needless to say, such stories vanished from her *Lives* in some of the recent editions over the last two hundred years.⁶²

Mercy encourages collective responsibility (rather than scapegoating). All the examples of Jesus and the Hebrew prophets when they cried out for *mercy not sacrifice* speak of the need for mature individuation, the capacity to stand out against the group, the herd instinct, and to confront one’s own darkness before being willing to *cast the first stone*.

Brigit’s focus on poetry rather than dogma, healing rather than splitting, inner smithwork rather than burning of infidels – all of these collectively might

⁶⁰ Commenting on the challenge posed to theology by the work of Charles Darwin, she wrote: “The man who tries to know himself as the beginning of wisdom is, then, at first confronted with a chaos of mutually destructive vibrations. It is no wonder if the first result of such an attempt is to puzzle, bewilder and even shake people’s faith in any possible divine harmony or peace. But anyone who does not despair, but perseveres using love or self-identification as a method of understanding others, will find in the practice of the method itself, the key to the solution of the problem in his own personality. We have to accustom our minds to the idea that we not a being but a becoming. This is only after all the idea implied in a belief in evolution. Indeed, rapid movement is the condition of all life as we know it. Our life is in a constant readjustment of shifting, moving, relations and responses, and thus the key of life according to Christ’s teaching is no attempt at static self-expression. It is rather to live something one has not yet become, for to live a thing is the only way of becoming it.” Eva Gore-Booth, *A Psychological and Poetic Approach to the Study of Christ* (Longmans Green & Co: London 1923), 111.

⁶¹ Cited in Rees / Rees, *Celtic Heritage*, 79.

⁶² Cf. Kim McCone, “Brigit in the Seventh Century: A Saint With Three Lives?” in: *Peritia* 1 (1982), 108.

contribute to our developing a *theology of mercy*, an appropriate aim for a European indigenous theology in the light of our deeply problematic history.

One story encapsulates the deep wisdom of poetry, healing and smithwork. Brigit (in her manifestation as a saint) was left alone in a house with a young boy, who was deaf and dumb, the “people of the house” having gone out. Guests came to the door. Brigit “did not know of the boy’s condition,” so she told him to “attend to the guests.” He rose, greeted them, offered them hospitality, and from that point on was perfectly well.⁶³

The story represents an implicit challenge to *identity politics* – the ways in which we designate our *others*, rather than encouraging their individuality and creativity to blossom. *Identity politics* have wreaked havoc on feminist efforts to effect social and political change as the competing claims of ethnicity, sexuality or class potentially destroy collective action on the part of women. However, the Irish non-violence activist and mystic, Eva Gore Booth once addressed this question when she wrote: “It is not the self that one is that one must express in desire, thought, word and deed, but the self that one desires to be.”⁶⁴

Eva was writing in the aftermath of the First World War when the *herd instinct* and *identity politics* had lured tens of millions of Europeans to their deaths. Not until the aftermath of the Second World War was the problem addressed by psychoanalyst, Wilfrid Bion. Fascinated with the dynamics he had encountered in the world wars, Bion, (theorist of the school developed by Melanie Klein) applied her findings to groups. Groups, he argued, are not merely collections of individuals: they become entities in themselves and effectively recreate the archaic mother.⁶⁵ Despite what individuals might achieve in their own psychic development, often in large social groupings, people regress to the paranoid/schizoid position in the form of in-group and out-group fantasies.

⁶³ *Vita Prima Sanctae Brigitae*, John Colgan (ed.), *Trias Thaumaturga*, 527-542; *Acta SS.*, Febr., I, 118-134; trans. Séan Connolly, *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 119 (1989), 5-49, v. 37, 22.

⁶⁴ Eva Gore Booth, *A psychological and poetic approach to the study of Christ in the fourth gospel* (Longmans, Green & Co: London 1923), 111.

⁶⁵ Cf. Wilfrid Bion, “Group dynamics – A Review,” in: Melanie Klein et al. (eds.), *New Directions in Psychoanalysis* (Tavistock: London 1955), 440-477; Maria Grazia Minetti, “In search of the mirror: fusion and differentiation in women’s groups,” in: Sandra Kemp / Paola Bono (eds.), *The Lonely Mirror: Italian Perspectives on Feminist Theory* (Routledge: London 1993), 115-127; Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*; Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. by Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill. (Athlone Press: London 1993) (*Ethique de la Différence Sexuelle*, Minuit: Paris 1984).

Anxious to put a healthy post-war German Civil Service in place, Bion distinguished between *work groups* and *basic assumption* groups (some groups contain features of both). Work groups are oriented toward pragmatic achievement of positive aims. Basic assumption groups are often more focussed on issues of identity and, therefore, more liable to develop paranoid/schizoid features when this identity is under threat. As Hanna Segal argues:

“I think that the degree of dehumanisation we encounter in such group practices as genocide we would see in an individual only in the psychotic or the criminal psychopath. When such mechanisms get out of hand, the groups, instead of containing psychotic functioning, put it into practice and we get such irrational behaviour as wars and genocide.”⁶⁶

Space does not permit a full exploration of these issues here.⁶⁷ However, in this brief account we can immediately see two things. First, the impetus to “recreate the archaic mother” could be considered to be a backlash against the dominance of what Jürgen Habermas called instrumental rationality.⁶⁸ Group dynamics, or the herd instinct, flourish in the absence of alternative access to healthy forms of regression. In a homophobic and misogynist society, war provides an apparently legitimate occasion for male bonding of men, albeit in the service of death rather than of life, or life through death – redemptive violence.

Second, Bion’s emphasis on the need to focus on the pragmatic achievement of *concrete aims* rather than *specific identities* lays down a challenge to contemporary feminism for the need to focus on concrete policies and the strategies to achieve them, rather than on our disparate identities.

When Brigit “did not know” of the boy’s condition, she transcended identity politics, and called him into speech through drawing out his innate gifts and generosity. Likewise, in encountering Brigit we look as much toward the future as back to the past. We seek healthy forms of regression that encourage mature responsibility rather than unconscious fantasies. Lastly, we strive to transcend identity politics in favour of new constellations, new possibilities beyond the dysfunctional strategies of legitimation developed by patriarchal cultures.

⁶⁶ Segal, *Psychoanalysis, Literature and War*, 147-148.

⁶⁷ Mary Condren, “War, Religion, Gender and Psyche: An Irish Perspective,” in: Christina von Braun / Ulrike Brunotte / Gabriele Dietze / Daniela Hrzan / Gabriele Jähner / Dagmar Pruin (eds.), *Holy War and Gender: ‘Gotteskrieg’ und Geschlecht* (Transaction Publishers: Centre for Transdisciplinary Gender Studies, Humboldt University Berlin / New Brunswick, NJ / London 2006), 143-177.

⁶⁸ Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis* (Beacon Press: Boston 1973).

Stories such as these, therefore, can be read as mere pious epithets. Alternatively, we can begin to interrogate them for the nuggets of wisdom they might contain to inspire us into the future.

Brigit Symbolism

In Brigit's symbolism, (found in various forms through Europe) we find powerful sources of inspiration for women today. Her mantle or cloak (in Irish her *bhrat* – pronounced *vrat*) that is traditionally put out every year on the evening of her festival, becomes impregnated with the dew of the earth. Brought inside and cut into strips, it reminds us of the healing power of nature and is traditionally used to heal humans, animals and birds.

Her girdle or belt (in Irish her *crios* – pronounced *kriss*) is used by women to protect their virginity, encourage fertility, or ease their croning.

Brigit's Cross is well known throughout the world, a cross woven into several strands that can have three or four arms. Some cultures know it as the Eye Goddess, a diamond shaped cross, used to ward off evil.⁶⁹ With its traditional lozenge shaped centre, the cross symbolizes women's art of weaving together the threads of community; our vulvic origins; and the acute eye of discernment required to maintain the vigilance of the crone over the social order.

In some sagas, the Crone appears with such a third eye in her forehead, known as the weaver's beam.⁷⁰ In patriarchal mythology, needless to say, this eye becomes the *evil eye*, possibly reflecting and ensuring that Crone wisdom is superseded by the voice of patriarchal authority.

Brigit's authority does not derive from weaponry but from the capacity for what artist and psychoanalyst, Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger, calls *self-fragilization*, those artistic, spiritual, and ethical practices that foster resistance to those ideologies and personal practices that generate violent social relations.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Osbert. G. S. Crawford, *The Eye Goddess* with new introduction by Miriam Robbins Dexter (Delphi Press 1991).

⁷⁰ Jacqueline Borsje / Fergus Kelly, "The Evil Eye' In Early Irish Literature And Law," in: *Celtica* 24 (2003), 1-39.

⁷¹ Nowhere was this better expressed than in the recent wars of the former Yugoslavia. As one theorist wrote: "Since 1987, Serbs have not known exactly who they are, but they have been absolutely prepared to discover themselves through a hatred of the 'other'." Zarana Papis, "Feminist Politics in Serbia," in: Wenona Giles / Malathia de Alwis / Edith Klein / Neluka Silva (eds.), *Feminists Under Fire: Exchanges Across the War Zones* (Between the Lines: Toronto, Canada 2003), 46.

For those reasons, Brigit's successors in Ireland, the great abbesses, were called the *Nuns of Life, those who turned back the streams of war*.⁷²

In these times, when we are on the threshold of new religious and political possibilities, our old European indigenous wisdom traditions, embodied in the figure of Brigit, open up for us the ability to heal old wounds, the creativity to design a new vision for our world, and the hope and wisdom to forge a new way.

When the sterile and post modern critique of epistemology leaves many of us paralysed and dumbfounded we need to return to those elements – poetry, healing, smithwork and mercy – and set them up as the new criteria for any theologising worthy of the name. In other words, instead of wondering whether our theologising conforms to what Patrick termed “What had been sung, what had been heard, what had been established” we need to ask different questions: Do our theologies inspire poetry, effect healing, and transform base cultural and individual elements into cultural treasures and practical strategies that cultivate *mercy not sacrifice*?

Conclusion

As theologians, we need to go beyond mere equality to reclaim our role in the great theological project: the Queen of the Sciences. It is time to re-evaluate our task and to ask again: what are our wider responsibilities? How can we contribute to the debates on the formation of the social imaginary or social capital?⁷³

The task of theologians has, therefore, become immensely more challenging and our methods and concerns have become very diverse as, in the light of political and sociological critiques of religion, we explore not only the truth or falsity of traditional theological claims, but also the beneficent or lethal effects of the Christian theological imaginary on the social world.

In the European Union the question of the social imaginary has been implicitly recognised by several programmes such as “Giving a Soul to Europe,” or

⁷² Fergus Kelly refers to a passage in Bretha Crólige “which lists some categories of women are particularly important in the túath [tribe], including ‘the woman who turns back the streams of war’ (*ben sues srutha cotha for cula*) and ‘the hostage ruler (?)’ (*rechtaid géill*). The former could refer to a female military leader, though the glossator may be right in identifying her as an abbess or female hermit ‘who turns back the many sins of war through her prayers’.” Kelly, *Guide to Early Irish Law*, 69.

⁷³ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 1977), 171-183.

the HERA Project which seeks new and imaginative ways to foster unity and cultivate ethical and spiritual awareness. As the founder of the “Soul” project, former European president Jacques Delors argued in 1992: “If in the next ten years we haven’t managed to Give a Soul to Europe, to give it spirituality and meaning, the game will be up.”⁷⁴

Feminist theologians can play a major role in this quest, but only if we go beyond the limitations of theology’s concern with legitimation (usually achieved through sacrifice)⁷⁵ and instrumental rationality in order to respond to the call, variously articulated by feminist scholars, to generate new forms of poetry, healing, and smithwork – new forms of redemptive love and mercy rather than redemptive violence.⁷⁶

For all of those reasons, when we invoke Brigit, in the words of poet Anne O’Reilly, we are asking her to:

*breathe life into the mouth of dead winter
as it is these days in the lives of women
whose spirits have ceased to quicken.
nurture them with your milk
be midwife to their birthing
release them from all that hinders them.*⁷⁷

In einer feministischen, post-kolonialen, post-modernistischen und post-christlichen Welt wird die Notwendigkeit von neuen Zugängen zur Theologie zunehmend deutlich. Außerdem wird im Lichte unserer gegenwärtigen wirtschaftlichen und politischen Krisen die soziale Bildersprache in einer post-religiösen Welt zunehmend mit kritischen Augen betrachtet. Brigitta, weibliche Gottheit des Alten Europa, eine christliche Heilige und heute eine feministische Ikone, bildet eine Brücke zwischen diesen Welten und ist somit eine Quelle für theologische Reflexionen und für eine künstlerische und kulturelle Erneuerung eines religiösen Symbolsystems in Europa. Brigitta war eine Meisterin der Dichtung, der Heilkunst und der Schmiedekunst. In der Tradition der großen alttestamentlichen und christlichen ProphetInnen machte

⁷⁴ Speech to the churches, Brussels 4 February 1992.

⁷⁵ Cf. Mary Condren, “Sacrifice and Political Legitimation: The Creation of a Gendered Social Order,” in: *Journal of Women’s History* vol. 6, no. 4 (Winter/1995); vol. 7, no. 1 (Spring/1995), 160-189.

⁷⁶ “Women, along with the culture as a whole, need constructive visions of redemptive love. We need to return to love and proclaim its transformative power.” bell hooks *Communion, the Female Search for Love* (Harper Collins: New York 2002).

⁷⁷ Privately published.

sie die *Barmherzigkeit* zu ihrer obersten Tugend. Diese macht es möglich, die instrumentelle Vernunft, die Hegemonie der *erlösenden Gewalt* sowie das, was Julia Kristeva den *Opfer-fordernden Gesellschaftsvertrag* nannte, in Frage zu stellen. Ihre Traditionen ermutigen zu neuen Wegen, die instrumentelle Vernunft, von der zurzeit die westliche Kultur durchdrungen ist, herauszufordern. Brigittas Symbole, Rituale und Werkzeuge dienen als reiche kulturelle Quellen, lassen Erinnerungen an die Ahnen wach werden und bringen die Menschen mit den Jahreszeiten der Natur, den Zyklen von Geburt, Leben, Tod und Wiedergeburt in Einklang. Dieser Artikel bietet eine kurze Einführung in dieses Material und seine Möglichkeiten für eine weitere kritische, kreative und theologische Reflexion.

En un mundo feminista, postcolonial, postmoderno y postcristiano se hace cada vez más necesario encontrar nuevos planteamientos teológicos. A ello se añade que en vista de la crisis económica y política que estamos viviendo, en el mundo postreligioso se cuestiona cada vez más el lenguaje de imágenes sociales. Brígida, quien fue una divinidad de la antigua Europa, una santa cristiana y que en la actualidad es un icono feminista, es el puente que une estos mundos, con lo que se convierte en fuente de reflexiones teológicas y fuente de la renovación artística y cultural de la simbología religiosa de Europa. Brígida fue una maestra de la poesía, de la medicina y de la herrería. Al igual que los grandes profetas y las grandes profetisas del Antiguo Testamento y del cristianismo hizo de la *misericordia* su máxima virtud. De esta manera es posible cuestionar la racionalidad instrumental, la hegemonía de la *violencia redentora* y lo que Julia Kristeva llama el *contrato social que exige sacrificios*. Las tradiciones de Brígida nos invitan a ir por nuevos caminos para retar a la racionalidad instrumental que impregna en la actualidad la cultura occidental. Los símbolos, rituales y herramientas empleados por Brígida son ricas fuentes culturales; despiertan recuerdos de nuestros ancestros, creando una armonía entre los seres humanos y las estaciones de la naturaleza, el ciclo de nacimiento, vida, muerte y regeneración. En este artículo se presenta una breve introducción al tema mencionado y a las oportunidades que ofrece de entrar en una reflexión crítica, creativa y teológica.

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