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CHRISTIANITY AND PAGANISM.

St. Agnes and St. Bridget,

And their Pagan Prototypes.

BY

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PREFACE.

THE following pages are the substance of a lecture given by me from many platforms in London and the Provinces, and which also has appeared in the *National Reformer*. Mr. Bradlaugh has kindly given me permission to reprint the articles, to which there are some slight alterations and a few additions.

I venture to hope that the facts here stated may be useful for our friends to lend or give to enquirers whose minds are open to the reception of truth.

tions at trials in place of oaths, had precedence over consuls and chief magistrates, and even had power to pardon condemned criminals. So ancient was the worship that Ovid says it was brought to Italy from Troy by Æneas ("Fasti", book iii). We are at once enabled to trace this myth to its origin, for Butler says that St. Ambrose declares that *agnes* in Greek means *chastity*, and in Latin, *lamb*. "The parents of St. Agnes, who escaped her fate, were, after her decease, blessed with a vision while praying at her tomb, in which she appeared to them in a garment of glory, and a lamb standing by her side of the purest white, a companion which the painters have very appropriately given to her, not only for that cause, but upon a consideration of a lamb being the universally-acknowledged emblem of innocence with which her name so *fortunately* accords, and to preserve which coincidence she was *no doubt*, so miraculously saved from all impurity" (Brady, "Clavis Calendaria", vol. i., p. 168). St Agnes having been transferred into the Church of England calendar at the Reformation, a proceeding somewhat puzzling to Brady, who was a staunch Protestant, it was necessary for him to present the legend of her in a pious and decorous manner.

This story, like all the others, has been turned to excellent account by the Church. The Pope is often figuratively called the shepherd. "*Ego sum Pastor Bonus*" is the statement made of himself by Innocent XI. in a medal described by Bonanni, a title that Hartwell Horne regarded as absolutely blasphemous. But we shall see that the popes have been careful and business-like in their sheep-dealing. There is in Rome a magnificent church dedicated to St. Agnes, to which the popes were wont to repair on St. Agnes day. Two white lambs were brought to the high altar and solemnly blessed by his holiness; being sheared, the wool was handed over to the nuns of St. Agnes. By these it was woven, and of the cloth palls were made which fetched high prices from newly-made archbishops who were compelled to purchase them. "That the Pope sheared the Christian sheep is allegory; but it is fact also that he is a breeder of real four-legged ewes and rams, and knows how to sell his wool at a price that would astonish all our farmers. He keeps a little flock of lambs, which have been consecrated over the graves of the

Apostles, and from the wool of which the bishops' palls are woven. . . . The price set on a pall was very high indeed; the revenue got from this source pleased the popes well, and John VIII. ordained that every Archbishop who had not obtained his pall from Rome after three months' time was to be considered as deposed. The popes gave, however, in the cloak some little for the treasure of a price they set upon it; this was yet to be saved, so the cloak dwindled away into a worsted ribbon, a few inches wide, with a red cross for its ornament. Such ribbons are woven by nuns from the consecrated wool, and weigh about three ounces. The wool of the Pope's little flock would fetch about three millions of florins" (*All The Year Round*, vol. iii., p. 431). The writer of the above tells us that Arnold, Archbishop of Trèves, was very much at a loss when he received two palls, with the bills, from two opposing popes, and that Marculph, Archbishop of Mayence was compelled to sell the left leg of a golden Christ to pay for his. Barnaby Googe, an old English poet, has these lines:

For in St. Agnes' church this day, the while the Mass
they sing
Two Lambs as white as snow the Nuns do yearly use
to bring.

I should hesitate to quote the following ode, which is a long, long way after Horace, did I not find it in a Roman Catholic author, Forster, on page 25 of his "Perennial Calendar". It is headed "Verses on St. Agnes' Shrine".

"Where each pretty Ba-lamb most gaily appears,
With ribbons stuck round on its tail and its ears,
On gold fringed cushions they're stretched out to eat,
And piously ba, and to church music bleat.
Yet to me they seem crying, Alack, and Alas!
What's all this white damask to daisies and grass!
Then they're brought to the Pope, and with transport
they're kissed,
And receive consecration from sanctity's fist;
To chaste Nuns he consigns them, instead of their dams,
And orders the Friars to keep them from rams."

From the Pagan deification of one of the most sacred of human virtues there can be no doubt was evolved this myth of Agnes. Vesta was invoked by the Roman women; childless matrons implored her intervention in their behalf;

young girls sought her aid to complement their lives; the priests received their common offerings and grew rich on the credulity of the votaries of the Goddess. As with the heathen myth, so with its Christian successor; numberless superstitions grew and flourished among Christian women, artfully counselled by their priests to regard Agnes as their patron and protectress. Our own Keats has immortalised one of these legends as only poets can. His "Eve of St. Agnes" was being read by Shelley when that sudden squall deprived the world of his genius and him of life, for when his body was found he was holding in his hand the poems of Keats opened at this very piece. Of Madeline, Keats says:—

" They told her how, upon St. Agnes' Eve,
Young virgins might have visions of delight,
And soft adorings from their loves receive
Upon the honeyed middle of the night,
If ceremonies due they did aright."

Paine rightly said that the heathens having had gods for everything, the Christians have saints for everything. The Church has, therefore, canonised Agnes again under her other name of Pudentiana, and she is remembered in the calendar under that title on May 19th. On the door of the church dedicated to her at Rome "is a Lamb of God in a medallion with the following inscription: 'Dead and living I am but one; I am at once the shepherd and the lamb'" (Didron, "Christian Iconography", p. 338). Every symbol connected with the myth is Pagan too, but we reserve observations on the "lamb" cult for *Corpus Christi* day. Didron, who was an ardent Christian, has this admission in connexion with the figure of the good shepherd: "In conclusion, it has been affirmed at least by Pagan antiquaries, that the subject of the Good Shepherd does not belong properly, and as an invention of its own, to Christianity; according to them, Christians borrowed that idea, as they had done the nimbus, from Pagan art". This contention he does not controvert, contenting himself with saying (p. 341), "the subject was one of love, which had strayed into Paganism"; but that the religion of Christ being emphatically that of love, it was entitled to claim it as its own. Strange logic this; but the fact is one to be remembered, especially in reading the Fourth

Gospel, in which the Galilean legend is presented in its Platonic dress.

Hone, in his "Book of Days", 1825 (p. 143), quotes a curious story from Stopford's "Pagano-Papismus" of sheep being driven into churches and blessed by the priests after being sprinkled with holy water. It concludes: "Then he signed all the sheep with the sign of the cross, repeated thrice some Latin verses, with the Paternoster and some Ave Maria, sung the mass of the Holy Ghost, and at the conclusions an offering of fourpence was for himself and another of threepence for the poor. This ceremony was adopted by the Romish Church from certain customs of the ancient Romans in their worship of Pales, the Goddess of sheepfolds and pastures. They prayed her to bless the sheep, and sprinkled them with water. The chief difference seems to have consisted in this, that the ancient Romans let the sheep remain in their folds, while the moderns drove them into the Church."

SAINT BRIDGET.

FROM Italy to Ireland is a far cry, but there is a very close resemblance between the two countries and the two peoples. A volume might be written on the tempers, prejudices, sufferings and aspirations of these nations, both having experienced the same mental and political bondage and from precisely the same causes. Italy, thanks to Garibaldi, Mazzini, and the band of stainless patriots who gave or risked their lives for freedom, has at least rid herself of Bourbon despotism and political serfdom; although the abject ignorance of the masses and the accursed militarism of her present rulers—a disease that infects the whole of Europe—still keep her poor. But let us turn to Ireland and observe the misery, the utter

hopelessness, and the dense ignorance that envelope the peasantry of that land, keeping in remembrance that this wretchedness is not of recent growth, but the outcome of nearly a thousand years of misrule and centuries of superstitious teaching. "God save Ireland" has been the prayer of millions of patriots, but God has hitherto refused or been unable to do so. Periodic famine has devastated it, and removed a fourth of its population; myriads of its sons and daughters have fled its shores to escape starvation; pestilence has followed in the footsteps of want and claimed its victims in turn. Is it not on record that even sea-weed has to furnish life-giving sustenance on which landlords claim their royalty? Yet with this ever accumulating load of horror and misery it has boasted for a dozen centuries that it has possessed a blessing and a jewel that more fortunate peoples have lacked—the True Church, Ireland has reared magnificent cathedrals, built churches in every hamlet; abbeys, convents, retreats, and chapels have overspread its fertile valleys and its barren hills; gold and silver ornaments have been given by its faithful children to deck the shrines of dead men and women, and of mythical men and women too. Rich vestments of the finest linen is furnished for its great black army; tithes and church dues have been paid with the utmost regularity; shiploads of luscious wines have been imported at the cost of its votaries from Spain and Portugal, to be miraculously transformed into the blood of their God, not one drop of which comes to their share. In addition to all this faith and liberality, this suffering and credulous people subscribes largely to Peter's Pence for the Pope, to Foreign Missions and other causes to enable heathen and heretic to share in their good fortune; and thousands of its stalwart sons have enlisted under the flag of foreign despots to crush liberty and heresy—pouring out their blood under the blessings of their church on a hundred battlefields from Fontenoy to Mentana. And what has the church in return for all this, given to the people? Did the priests ever teach the people self-reliance or prudence? Did they ever recommend them to restrict their numbers to the measure of capacity of the land to support them? Have they ever initiated either productive or distributive co-operation? Did they when their power was paramount, and their faith unchallenged in pre-

Reformation days, give education to their devoted flocks? The priest to-day frequently boasts of the seminaries and colleges founded by pious Catholics of ages past;—institutions that were reserved for the priests to manufacture his successor, or for the rich few whose wealth was the only passport to knowledge.

But they have given something to Ireland. Heaven and hell! Purgatory! St. Patrick! and hundreds of other legendary male and female saints, among whom are St. Bridget. Even this is doubtful; for the probability is that Bridget was stolen from the old Pagan religion of Ireland. Let us go to her priestly historian to see who the Church alleges she was, what she did, and where she came from.

Butler ("Lives," vol. ii, p. 28) says she was born at Fochard, but gives no date or particulars. She received the veil from St. Mel, nephew of St. Patrick, flourished in the beginning of the sixth century, and "her five modern lives mention little else but wonderful miracles". This is the usual story. Ages after the assumed period when the saint lived, fiction supplied what is deemed essential for the ignorant and the credulous. In a note Butler says that her name occurs in most copies of the martyrology which bears the name of St. Jerome, which in itself would be sufficient to prove her a Goddess, considering that that holy saint lived in the preceding century to herself. Her body with those of St. Patrick and St. Columba, were found in a triple vault at Downpatrick in 1185, "but their monument was destroyed in the reign of King Henry VIII.". The Jesuits, however, are fortunate in having her head in their church at Lisbon, but Butler, who states this, and also that she was buried in Downpatrick Cathedral, does not tell us where these lucky Jesuits got the extra head from. But, seriously, was there ever such a woman as St. Bridget or such men as Saints Mel and Patrick? Was Ireland a Christian country in the fifth century, with nunneries and kindred institutions? History—real history—is against such an assumption; but there was a Bridget—Pagan, not Papal. Ireland, centuries before the time under consideration, had a religion, priests, temples, ritual, holy books, hymns, heaven, hell, and Bridget. The Irish language bears ample proof that the Phœnicians had traded on its shores, and left behind.

the impress of their speech and faith. Lieutenant-Colonel Vallancy says (*Collectanea de Rebus Hibernicis*, no. 8, p. 288-291): "To those who do not trace the origin of the ancient Celtes and their language from the Orientals, it is matter of wonder how the worship of Baal should be known to the Iberno-Celts or Irish". Again "*Bal mhairth ort* and *Bal Shia Shuit* the good Bal, and the God Bal to you, are to this day common salutations in Munster, and particularly about Waterford". Further he says, "*Ceres* or *Keres* was worshipped as the moon. *Ceo* in Irish signifies clouds, vapors, and *Re* is the moon, which compounded form *Ceore*. She was also named *Ceolestis* and *Keolectis*, and was invoked in droughts to obtain rain" *ipsa virgo Ceolistis pluviarum pollicitatrix*; (Tertullian Apol., c. xxiii). M. Rolin thinks this deity was the same Queen of Heaven, to whom the Jewish women burnt incense, poured out drink offerings, and made cakes with their own hands. *Ut facit placentas reginae Caeli*. The children gathered the wood, the fathers kindled the fire, and the women kneaded the dough to make cakes for the Queen of Heaven¹ (Jer. vii, 18). This Pagan custom is still preserved in Ireland on the eve of St. Bridget, and it was probably transposed to this date from the festival of a famed poetess of that name in the time of Paganism.

In an ancient glossary now before me she is thus described: *Brighid ban shileadh ingheau acu Dagha*; *bean dhe Eirinn*; i.e., Brigit, a poetess, the daughter of Dagha; a goddess of Ireland. On St. Bridget's Eve every farmer's wife in Ireland makes a cake called *Bairin-breac*; the neighbours are invited, the madder of ale and the pipe go round, and the evening concludes with mirth and festivity."

Here, then, we have the fact that, just as in all the religions of the ancients the sun and the moon were personified, and eventually had divine honors paid to them in pre-Christian Ireland, and Ceres or Brighed was their Queen of Heaven. When the latter was transformed into a Christian saint it is exceeding doubtful if the worship of Mary had found a footing in that country. Vallancy is not the only authority who proves the legendary character

¹ This is the exact rendering of the revised version: the authorised version having *their* Queen of Heaven.

of this Christian saint. Even Moore, good Catholic as he was, is compelled to admit that "by one of those violations of chronology not unfrequently hazarded for the purpose of bringing extraordinary personages together, an intimate friendship is supposed to have existed between St. Bridget and St. Patrick, and she is even said to have woven, at the apostle's own request, the shroud in which he was buried. But with this imagined intercourse between the two saints, the dates of the respective lives are inconsistent: and it is but just possible that Brigid might have seen the great apostle of her country as she was a child of about twelve years old when he died." Of course Moore has no evidence for the date of the birth or death of either, but it would not have done for the faithful to have been apprised of this difficulty. Giraldus Cambrensis says that at her cell at Kildare—*Kill dara*, Cell of the Oak, there was an altar on which perpetual fire kept ablaze, and in his time six hundred years after Brigid's supposed death it was still burning. Moore, in noticing this heathen practice, seeks to extenuate the force of our and other writers' contention, that the Christian Brigid was manufactured from the Pagan Brigha.

"Whether this rite formed any part of the Saint's original institution, or is to be considered as an innovation of later times, it is, at all events, certain that when Kildare was founded, the policy of converting to the purposes of the new faith those ancient forms and usages which had so long been made to serve as instruments of error, was very generally acted upon." Exactly, even to the creation of the saint out of the goddess. Moore goes on to say, "and, in the very choice of a site for St. Brigid's Monastery, the same principle is manifest, the old venerable oak, already invested with the solemnity of druidical associations, having, in this, as in most other instances of religious foundation, suggested the selection of the spot where the Christian temple was to rise."

Here, then, we have four indisputable facts (1) the name of the saint corresponds with the name of the Pagan goddess; (2) the shrine is erected at a spot where a druidical temple stood, which name it has since continued to bear; (3) the rites attendant upon her worship were a continuation of the old fire-worship of the Pagan Irish; and (4) that this was the usual course of procedure.

in converting heathen rites and festivals into Christian ones.

Another curious parallel allied to this subject is to be found in its Priapean aspect. Payne Knight has indubitably shown that indecent rites were an accompaniment of the worship of Mylitta of the Assyrians, and of Aphrodite of the Greeks; and "while the temples of the Hindoos possessed their establishments, most of them had bands of consecrated prostitutes, called the Women of the Idol, selected in their infancy by the Brahmas for the beauty of their persons". Brand, *Popular Antiquities*, vol. i., p. 357, Bohn's Edition, says: "In imitation of heathenism, the Romanists assigned tutelary gods to distinct professions and ranks of people (some of them not of the best sort), to different trades, etc. It is observable in this place how closely Popery has in this respect copied the heathen mythology. She has the Supreme Being for Jupiter; she has substituted angels for genii, and the souls of saints for heroes, retaining all kinds of demons". Then follows a list of the saints, and the diseases and trades they preside over, common women having for their patrons "St. Magdalen, St. Afra (Aphra or Aphrodite), and St. Brigit". In Payne Knight's great work on "the Worship of Priapus" there are engravings of most disgusting figures of women taken from Irish churches, which the natives call "bad Bridgets".

It may therefore be taken as an established fact that this saint, honored in many lands on the 1st of February, is no other than the Pagan concept which honored a passion and a vice now happily regarded with abhorrence. Much as the writer desires to see self-rule in Ireland, he cannot conceal the fact that real progress and prosperity is unattainable there until legends like this of St. Bridget and many others are exploded, and the inhabitants of that over-religious country are indoctrinated with Freethought.