Brigid: Bridge between Worlds.

A Feminist Examination of the Significance of Brigid (as Irish Saint and Goddess) in Contemporary Australian Women’s Spirituality

Catherine Connelly

Master of Arts – Minor Thesis
Melbourne College of Divinity
Supervisor: Dr Anne Elvey
Assistant Supervisor: Dr Claire Renkin
Statement:
I affirm that this thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other institution. To the best of my knowledge, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

Signed                      Date
Acknowledgements

This thesis emerged out of a long-term fascination with the figure of Brigid. For many years I had been facilitating workshops on Celtic spirituality, the cult of the Goddess and the non-violent Christianising of pagan Ireland. I was drawn further into the topic because of the potential Brigid seems to have in enabling conversation between people of Christian faith and those who have largely rejected institutional Christianity and would identify as Australian ‘neo-pagans’.

The work could not have reached completion without the invaluable assistance of several people. Perhaps the genesis of the whole project lay with Sister Maureen Minahan, now deceased. Maureen’s enthusiasm and gentle guidance will never be forgotten. Heartfelt thanks are also due to the Brigidine community at Kildara Centre in Malvern, Victoria – for unrestricted access to their archives and willingness to discuss the topic over several months.

Thanks also to supervisors Drs Anne Elvey and Claire Renkin for their patience, wisdom and attention to detail.

Finally, many thanks to Mel Roffey for inspiration, sustenance and editorial assistance.
## Contents

Prelude ......................................................................................................................... 1

Chapter 1 .................................................................................................................... 4
  1.1 Introduction ........................................................................................................... 4
  1.2 Boundaries and Assumptions .............................................................................. 8
  1.3 Existing Scholarship on Contemporary Women’s devotion to Brigid as
      Saint and/or Goddess ......................................................................................... 11
      1.3.1 Sociological / Anthropological / Psychological Approaches .................. 11
      1.3.2 A Feminist Approach .................................................................................. 13

Chapter 2 Feminist Scholarship ............................................................................... 14
  2.1 Feminist Theory as a Response to Patriarchy ................................................... 15
  2.2 Feminist Critiques of Sainthood ....................................................................... 17
      2.2.1 Liberating Aspects of Saint Veneration .................................................. 20
  2.3 Feminist Theory through the Lens of Goddess Worship .................................. 21
  2.4 The Significance of ‘Experience’ ....................................................................... 24
      2.4.1 A Methodology of Experience .................................................................. 26

Chapter 3 Socio-cultural historical background ..................................................... 30
  3.1 Celtic Christian Spirituality .............................................................................. 30
  3.2 Brigid as Saint .................................................................................................... 34
  3.3 Brigid as Goddess .............................................................................................. 39
      3.3.1 Excursus: Thealogy – Study of the Goddess ............................................ 41

Chapter 4 Brigid in Contemporary Australian Women’s Spirituality ....................... 45
  4.1 Saint Brigid – Liberating Others .................................................................... 45
  4.2 Saint Brigid – Liberating Self .......................................................................... 49
  4.3 Goddess Brigid – Liberating Others ................................................................. 51
  4.4 Goddess Brigid – Liberating Self .................................................................... 55
  4.5 Brigid as Threshold Figure .............................................................................. 58
  4.6 Brigid and Contemporary Australian Spiritualities .......................................... 63

Chapter 5 Conclusion ................................................................................................. 73

Appendix .................................................................................................................... 79

Bibliography ............................................................................................................... 86
Brigid: Bridge between Worlds.

A feminist examination of the significance of Brigid (as Irish Saint and Goddess) in Contemporary Australian Women’s Spirituality.

Today this spirit of Brigid is calling all of us to carry that fire towards a new vision for the world, a vision which rests on mutual care of human beings for each other and for our natural universe.¹

Prelude

Two scenarios give an insight into the veneration of Brigid as both saint and goddess. The first relates to the seven chapels situated behind the High Altar at St Patrick’s Catholic Cathedral in Melbourne. Each one is resplendent with stained-glass windows, mosaic floors and carved altars. One is known informally as “St Brigid’s Chapel”. Carved into the reredos is Brigid.² Surrounding her are other female Irish saints, Dympna, Reyna, Bees and Ita. Below are situated the other great characters of Irish sainthood, Patrick and Columba.³ Above this altar is a colourful window depicting St Brigid surrounded by children and adults. Various Christian symbols surround her – a Bishop’s crosier, grapes, wheat, a lamb, a chalice. There are also symbols that specifically relate to the iconography of Brigid. These include an oak tree, a cloak, animals, a church and fire.⁴

² Throughout this thesis the figure of Brigid will be referred to constantly. Brigid may be identified through many different spellings. Brigit, Bridget and Bride are the most common alternatives. There will also be reference to Brigid as Saint and as Goddess. Where clarification is needed, or in quoting a source that uses a substitute spelling of the name, the appropriate title will be included. At other times, ‘Brigid’ will appear without this descriptive title.
³ Columba is often recognised by his Irish language name of Columcille.
⁴ The oak tree and church symbolise Kildare, meaning literally ‘Church of the Oak’. According to archaeological research, this monastery was founded c.480 CE beneath an ancient oak tree that survived until the tenth century. The cloak refers to the legend whereby the King of Leinster, after much persuasion, agreed to give Brigid as much land for her monastery as her cloak would cover. Miraculously, it stretched to cover the whole of Kildare’s Curragh area. Geraldus Cambrensis, The
stained-glass window depicts a representation of Brigid as the centre of attention for all those who surround her. This chapel held a special place in the hearts of those who designed the Cathedral. Known originally as the “Children’s Chapel”, children of Melbourne Archdiocese collected pennies to assist in the construction of an altar dedicated to this beloved saint.\textsuperscript{5}

One reading of the symbolism associated with Brigid in this space is provided by the leaflet available to visitors of St Patrick’s Cathedral.

The Chapel of St Brigid and the Irish Saints. The statue of St Brigid stands beneath a window depicting St Brigid teaching the children. On either side of her, windows show St Patrick receiving his mission from the Pope and landing in Ireland.\textsuperscript{6}

An entirely different reading of the window, the carvings and the altar is one which reflects many of the images of Brigid that so excite Christian women in Australia today. From this alternative perspective, the window portrays Brigid, a woman, with a bishop’s crosier. This is a symbolic reference to the story of Brigid being mistakenly consecrated Bishop at the time of her profession as a nun.\textsuperscript{7} The Eucharistic symbols thus come to refer specifically to Brigid. The window becomes a depiction of St Brigid consecrating the Eucharist and sharing the bread and wine amongst the people who gather around her. The presence of

\textsuperscript{5} Topography of Ireland. Translated by Thomas Forester. (Cambridge, Ontario: In parentheses, 2000), 53-54. The fire, originally maintained by worshippers of Goddess Brigid and continued by St Brigid and her nuns, was strictly a woman-only domain.
\textsuperscript{6} T.P. Boland, \textit{St Patrick’s Cathedral: A Life} (East Melbourne: Polding Press, 1997), 46.
\textsuperscript{7} St Patrick’s Cathedral: Melbourne, Leaflet available as a guide to viewing the cathedral. Undated. (Collected February, 2004.)

\textsuperscript{7} When the time came for her (St Brigid) to take the veil from Bishop Mel, it came to pass then, through the grace of the Holy Spirit, that the form for ordaining a bishop was read over Brigid. MacCaille said that a bishop’s order should not be conferred on a woman. Bishop Mel replied: “No power have I in this matter. That dignity has been given by God only to Brigid, beyond every other woman”. ’ See Donncha O hAodha, \textit{Bethu Brigte} (Dublin: Institute for Advanced Studies, 1978), 24.
animals may well represent the stories that relate to animals in the various "Vitae" of Brigid that include dogs, cattle, goats, pigs, fish and ducks.  

The second scenario that depicts an honouring of Brigid in the spiritual lives of women in Australia relates to the reverence of Brigid as goddess. In May 2004, I was one of approximately one hundred and fifty women who attended the ‘Goddess Conference’ at Mount Waverley Municipal Centre, Victoria. During the opening ceremony, we processed around the inside of the large hall numerous times, chanting and invoking the names of many goddesses, calling them to be present with us throughout the weekend. Isis, Hecate, Kali, Astarte and Aphrodite were all invoked, as was Brigid, asking her protection and guidance during our celebrations.

The weekend unfolded in conventional conference format, offering various lectures and workshops, but uniquely, each event started by creating a sacred space, a circle of protection that called on the presence of the goddesses. Brigid, much mentioned by the participants, was particularly revered. The 2006 Census stated that 29,392 Australians (or 0.1% of the population) identified as adherents of ‘Nature Religions’, an Australian Bureau of Statistics classification that includes paganism and Wicca/witchcraft.

---

8 Walter Berschin writes that ‘I dare say that there is no other Latin vita of the early Middle Ages, where a biographer has so continuously told stories about his saint’s involvement with animals… Brigit’s miracles prove, as Cogitosus says, “that the entire nature of the beasts and cattle and birds was subject to her command”.’ Walter Berschin, ‘Radegundis and Brigit’, in Saints and Scholars: Studies in Irish Hagiography, ed. John Carey, Máire Herbert and Pádraig Ó Ríain (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001), 74.

CHAPTER 1

1.1 Introduction

This thesis examines the past and present relevance of Brigid, as both saint and goddess, exploring what it is about this figure that continues to engage the imagination and passions of women as they venerate or invoke Brigid in their contemporary Australian spiritual activities. The thesis delves into how for some Brigid is a symbol or metaphor, but for others, she is a real being lynchpin who continues to act – as both/either goddess and/or saint – within and upon the lives of people today. For some, she provides a connecting point between the two disparate worlds of Celtic Christianity and neo-paganism – Brigid is the. For others she is a major liberating force within their lives. Certain women within the traditions of Christianity and neo-paganism find a deep connection to her. I investigate these two aspects of Brigid’s resonance and relevance for women in twenty-first century Australia.

The first section examines Brigid and her significance for Christian women. As my research resources for this, I inquire into documents and articles of the Congregation of St Brigid (Brigidine sisters) in Australia. This includes the mission statements, published newsletters, Internet resources, booklets, books, poetry, published letters, seminars and journals of the Brigidine sisters. It is my intention here to identify Brigid’s importance within the spiritualities of Brigidines in Australia and amidst other women who claim St Brigid as a major influence in their lives.

The primary sources for exploring the Christian perspective on Brigid include the principal journal of the Brigidine Sisters in Australia, Brigidine Focus (formally published as Strength and Gentleness), and Tain: The magazine of the Australian Irish Network. This latter journal focuses on informing its readers of the Irish
significance of events in Australia. Further primary sources were obtained from the extensive archive library of the Brigidine Sisters of Australia housed at Kildara Centre, Malvern, Victoria. Many leaflets, pamphlets and liturgical prayers were made available through this centre.

The Brigidine Sisters are a Catholic religious congregation specifically following the example of St Brigid. The Congregation began in Tullow, Ireland, on St Brigid’s Day, 1807. Local Bishop Daniel Delany established the Brigidine Congregation for the specific purpose of ‘providing a dependable source of teachers for the Sunday schools he had established during the previous two decades’. The community was based on the pre-existing Order founded by St Brigid. Bishop Delany insisted that he was not founding a new Congregation, but rather re-establishing the Sisters of St Brigid. In Australia today, the Brigidines, through their words and actions, exhibit a life imbued with an understanding of what St Brigid herself professed.

In conversation with other women during the research for this paper, it is obvious that many women who are not Brigidine sisters also claim a love of St Brigid as a central part of their spiritual journey, but these are not the primary focus of the present analysis.

The second section explores the relevance of Brigid to women in an age when Christianity ceases to be the major referent of spiritual experience in Australia.

---

12 The Brigidine Sisters of Australia remain focused on St Brigid as the exemplar of the model of ministry for their Order. See http://www.brigidine.org.au/about/who.asp
13 ‘Christianity remained the dominant religion in Australia, although non-Christian religions continued to grow at a much faster rate. Since 1996, the number of people reporting that they are Christian grew from around 12.6 million to 12.7 million, but as a proportion of the total population this number fell (from 71% to 64%). Over the same period, those affiliated with non-Christian faiths increased from around 0.6 million to 1.1 million people, and collectively accounted for
In this context, those who adopt a neo-pagan spirituality are the focus of study, for Brigid is a primary goddess within the Celtic pantheon. For these women, the contemporary revival of the goddess has become ‘an alternative understanding of a feminine divine, intuitively and consciously related to the land, the body, sexuality, relationship, psychic depth, and forms of women’s spiritual power.’

For many of these women, the Goddess image in all its variety and depth has been important… not to worship or to appropriate or adopt in any literalist sense, but as a way of exploring different aspects of subjectivity and possibilities for women’s lives outside the cultural and psychic domination of a monotheistic male divinity and mythology.

The potential for Brigid to become a model of contemporary feminist spirituality is powerfully clear.

This thesis will analyse the numerous ways those who venerate her understand this expression of Brigid. Various journals, web-sites and newsletters are published within Australia’s neo-pagan community. These include *The Australian Witchcraft Magazine, Pan Gaia/Sage Woman, Goddess Rising, Pagan News* and *Pagan Times*. Following the same research methods and analysis used to explore those who revere Brigid as saint, these sources will be investigated for clues as to the relevance of Brigid for the spirituality of women in Australia today.

The primary sources that were used for research into neo-pagan perspectives on Brigid as Goddess included the internet-based Pagan Awareness Network Inc., Australia. This website provides topical information for Australia’s pagan

---


community. An earlier newsletter of the Pagan Awareness Network, used in this research, was *Pagan Times: The Voice of Paganism in Australia*. A further resource was *The Australian Witchcraft Magazine: Magic, Myth and Mystery*. This monthly magazine, available throughout Australia, provided articles, advertising and networking regarding witchcraft/neo-pagan activities. The magazine ceased publication in 2005. Much of the primary material came from *Ord Brighideach International: An Order of Flamekeepers*. This is a virtual community of women dedicated to honouring Goddess Brigid. A further primary source is *Keepers of the Flame*, a website maintained by Daughters of the Flame. Their aim is to make available significant articles pertaining to Brigid, seeking and reclaiming spiritual direction in the stories and symbolism of Brigid in her many guises.

Any research project has inherent limitations concerning the selection of a representative sample. Inevitably there are limitations in relying on the selected documents rather than engaging in extensive interviews with their authors. I acknowledge that when applying a feminist methodology to a study of women’s spirituality in Australia it is not something one can find primarily in books. The reality of a relationship with Brigid occurs, rather, ‘in the daily, urgent, sometimes desperate exploration, reassessment and recreation of meaning which women are continually making in their lives.’ The fluid, dynamic nature of a journey lived emerges from the selected research documents.

---

17 See Ord Brighideach: http://www.ordbrighideach.org. This on-line community consisted of 373 women (as at 20 January 2009) divided into cells, each cell comprising 19 women who have dedicated themselves to tending a flame in honour of Brigid (http://www.ordbrighideach.org/home/ (accessed 20 January 2009).)
1.2 Boundaries and Assumptions

This thesis makes extensive use of the word ‘Celtic’. The Celts were a varied race of people who were only united in language and belief. Indeed, today Irish, Scottish, Welsh, Cornish, Manx and Bretons all call themselves Celtic peoples. The use of the word ‘Celtic’ in this essay is understood to refer to the Celtic race as it came to be known within the Irish context. It is not within the scope of this paper to explore Brigid’s significance outside her Irish origins. The figure of Brigid does appear in other Celtic nations, particularly in Scotland, but further expressions and veneration of her have expanded out of the Irish context.

The term ‘pagan’ is also used extensively throughout this thesis, and to a lesser extent, the term ‘Wicca’. Paganism is a nature religion that understands the divine – expressed through both god and goddess – as immanent in all aspects of life. Pagans attempt to live their lives attuned to the cycles of nature: the seasons; life; and death. The web-based Pagan Federation International defines paganism as

a spiritual way of life which has its roots in the ancient nature religions of the world. It is principally rooted in the old religions of Europe, though some adherents also find great worth in the indigenous beliefs of other countries. We celebrate the sanctity of Nature, revering the Divine in all things: the vast, unknowable spirit that runs through the universe, both seen and unseen… Paganism stresses personal spiritual experience, and Pagans often find that experience through their relationship with the natural world that they love … We believe that we should meet the Divine face to face, within our own experience, rather than through an intermediary… In these days of environmental concern and eco-awareness, Pagans are often at the forefront of Green awareness. We encourage free thought, creative imagination and

---

practical human resourcefulness, believing these to be fundamental to our spending our lives in harmony with the rhythms of the natural world.\textsuperscript{21}

Wicca is based on the symbols, seasonal days of celebration, beliefs and deities of ancient Celtic society, and is the modern name for witchcraft. Wicca differs from paganism in that it is a recreated religion that aims to reestablish the ancient practices of witchcraft, whereas paganism is the umbrella term for many earth-based beliefs and practices. Wicca is a recently-recreated religion that can be traced back to Gardnerian Witchcraft. This movement was founded by Gerald B. Gardner, a scholar of magic in the United Kingdom during the 1940s. Added to Gardner’s covens and textbooks – amongst material derived from English and Celtic Folklore – were Masonic and ceremonial magical components from recent centuries. In this respect, Wicca is a religion that traces its roots back almost three millennia to the formation of Celtic society circa 800 BCE.\textsuperscript{22}

A goddess-centred spirituality is often a solitary form of religious expression, primarily practised alone. Unlike a Christian faith that insists that the community of Christ – the church – is central to being in relationship with God, neo-paganism is often purposefully private. Interestingly, this has led to the anonymity provided by the internet as a key entry-point into understanding the neo-pagan devotee. To the best of my knowledge, the only specific neo-pagan communities dedicated to the goddess Brigid are the international web-based ‘virtual’ communities of Ord Brighideach and Keepers of the Flame.

The third parameter is to declare that a feminist reading has been applied. As such, the questions that are asked of the selected sources address issues of liberation and oppression. This feminist reading insists that


all knowledge is ‘context bound’ and that the issues of gender and sex are crucial factors in locating context…[thus] feminists are attempting to unmask the hidden agendas behind the power struggles and to deconstruct those ideologies that continue to oppress women today.  

The focus on the liberating aspects of Brigid as both saint and goddess is a primary theme. Three streams of feminist scholarship are relevant to the current work. These consist of feminist theory: as a response to patriarchy; as expressed through veneration of the saint; and as expressed through goddess worship.

A further parameter concerns the definition of ‘liberation’, one of the key terms used in this study. Whilst a broad understanding of the term implies the act of liberating someone or something, the term has a specific meaning within a Christian context. With its roots in Liberation Theology, a feminist Christian understanding of liberation finds in the Gospel a call to free people from social, political and material oppression. Liberation therefore includes transforming both the individual and the culture in which people live. Liberation also consists of the freedom to express oneself. This paper explores ‘liberation’ in the context of women’s relationship to the figure of Brigid.

The final consideration is to declare that the researcher is Christian, from an Anglo-Celtic, middle-class, Australian background, at a time when there are many different models of spirituality available to Australian spiritual seekers. I find the particular style of Celtic Christianity that emerges from Ireland to be an exciting model, based upon a living faith. As such, the socio-cultural model of Irish Christianity has much to offer the institutional church of our time. This unique expression of Christianity is one of inclusiveness, respect for nature, a high regard for learning, art, music and poetry that incorporates an overwhelming recognition of God as intimately concerned with the creation. I seek ways of discovering the

---

feminine voice within the traditions I claim, despite my own discouragement with present church structures and policies. I desire ways to make the Church more accountable to women’s ways of worshipping the divine, liberating women from the grip of a predominantly patriarchal system and perhaps showing the Church positive aspects of other ways of worship. This perspective inevitably informs the research methodology and the insights gleaned from the resources studied.

1.3 Existing Scholarship on Contemporary Women’s devotion to Brigid as Saint and/or Goddess

One way of categorising the scholarship on devotion to saints and goddesses, including that of the figure of Brigid, is to highlight the research that comes from sociological/anthropological/psychological perspectives and then to make reference to the studies that academics have made on their considered response to encountering Brigid.

1.3.1 Sociological / Anthropological / Psychological Approaches

Looking first at research on devotees’ relationship with saints, Seán Ó Duinn examines the continuing practices of Brigid devotion throughout Ireland.²⁴ Exploring contemporary folklore, he reveals an active continuation of Brigid veneration. In contrast, Séamas Ó Catháin suggests that devotions to Brigid whilst once prolific, are now ‘swept into oblivion by the new culture of the twentieth century’.²⁵

Rather than research the contemporary impact of devotion to St Brigid on women, most of the research on Brigid has been historical in its interests. A wider survey of contemporary scholarship on sainthood highlights Robert Orsi’s exploration of

women’s devotion to St Jude. Orsi argues that through devotion to St Jude, women are able to discover new ways of accessing spiritual strength, leading to control over their own situations. He contends that devotion to a saint – in this instance, St Jude – may be liberating and empowering.26

Studies on women and their devotion to the Goddess appear to be more prolific. Whilst not focusing specifically on Brigid, Tanice Foltz explores the connection between Dianic neo-paganism and healing, finding that many women discover the potential of feminist spirituality for transformation, re-integration, and healing. She further interviews ‘spiritual feminists in an effort to find out how these women became involved in such groups, to what extent they were involved, whether they were inspired to political action, and how they employed their beliefs and practices in their lives.’27

In a further example of feminist neo-pagan research, Lynda Warwick examines the contours and dynamics of Wiccan spirituality in the United States.28 She draws on the empowering aspects of Wiccan practice, but also highlights the negative aspects of a spirituality that is potentially both eclectic and racist.

Alternatively, Valerie Cole, a New York psychotherapist and lecturer, discusses the power of neo-pagan ritual, arguing that therapeutic ritual ‘allows the client to deepen and strengthen their faith in a power outside themselves while at the same time becoming more self-empowered and mature’.29 The case study that Cole presents portrays the client desiring ‘faith in both her own power and strength to follow her creative path and in the belief that a divine force would support her on

her spiritual journey to find herself”. Brigid was the goddess chosen by the client, as embodying the power and creativity that she wanted to cultivate within her own life. My thesis further explores the themes of transformation, healing and empowerment in relationship to Brigid.

1.3.2 A Feminist Approach

Feminist researchers may be required to examine their own motivations, inspirations and reactions towards the subject of research. In this vein, Audrey Whitson examines her deeply personal response to, and discovery of, Brigid during a visit to Ireland. Her experiences included walking the Turas Deiseal at Brigid’s Well at Kildare and joining a retreat for women who look to Brigid for strength and inspiration through their shared despair at feeling excluded from the Church. Whitson also describes the spiritual strength she found when, on returning to her homeland, she called on Brigid in times of grief and change.

Similarly, Linda McKinnish Bridges speaks from a deeply personal position. Coming from a Christian tradition that, according to McKinnish Bridges, relegates the contribution of women to the lesser tasks of church administration, she explores the impact of Brigid in the lives of Irish women and her own spiritual transformation. She discovered ‘God could speak through the feminine and that my experience of God would be strengthened if that concept could break through my andocentric faith experience.’ An emphasis on personal experience is fundamental to the feminist methodology utilised in this thesis.

---

31 See Section 2.4 for further exploration of the significance of experience.
32 The ‘sunwise’ pilgrimage around sacred sites.
CHAPTER 2

Feminist Scholarship

To explore the impact of Brigid on women’s spiritual journeys over the past decade, a feminist methodology has been selected. This is to determine if the figure of Brigid has indeed been an emancipatory, liberating, empowering force in the lives of both Christian women and neo-pagans in Australia.

This feminist focus makes for a most appropriate tool by which to examine the relevance of Brigid to the spirituality of women today. Whilst some aspects of a spiritual tradition may arguably keep women bound to an infantile belief system, love of Brigid needs to excite the devotee. She must emerge as an energising life-giving force so that her role in a life-journey is continually moving the disciple to a deeper, more freeing sense of self and the divine. To this end, the concept of liberation is incorporated into the research methodology. A Christian feminist research methodology also recognises that ‘whatever diminishes or denies the full humanity of women must be presumed not to reflect the divine.’\(^{35}\) The research agenda must be underpinned by ‘the human flourishing of women’ as a ‘centre of gravity that unifies, organises, and directs’ the attention of theological reflection.\(^{36}\)

This thesis therefore explores the corresponding suggestion that the role of Brigid in the lives of contemporary Australian women is indeed liberating. Questions explored here include whether the experience of Goddess Brigid is positive within neo-pagan spiritualities and whether Christian women find in St Brigid some of


the joy of existence that they seek as women in a church primarily structured around a patriarchal hierarchy.

Researching any topic from a feminist perspective is highly politicised, sharing an ideological commitment to obtaining and using knowledge to redress inequality and empower oppressed groups. It is therefore a form of advocacy, recognising that no research is neutral, that ‘all theology, knowingly or not, is by definition always engaged for or against the oppressed.’ A feminist methodology will therefore view humans as active, self-reflective collaborators who play a critical role in their own life-stories. Such a methodological stance acknowledges that the research process may affect the individuals and systems studied. Insights revealed through the research may contribute to the spiritual journeys of all participants in this project, possibly becoming a source of empowerment for Australian Brigidines and the neo-pagan community.

Three streams of feminist theory underpin the current study: a feminist response to patriarchy; feminist understandings of sainthood; and feminist goddess spiritualities.

2.1 Feminist Theory as a Response to Patriarchy

The first of these is a traditional feminist critique of patriarchy as a paradigm that is inherently inequitable. Feminism aims to restore the balance by liberating people from any oppressive system – social, religious, economic, philosophical, or familial – that rests upon male privilege and power and perpetuates a model of relationship founded upon domination and subordination.

---

It must be acknowledged that there are several branches of thought within this mode of social critique. Modern feminism emerged in the 1880s with Australia’s suffragette movement. Since the 1960s, there has been a sustained movement in which some branches of feminism have continued to seek equality of both opportunity and access to resources. Issues such as equal wages, paid maternity leave and equal opportunities to advance in the workforce remain key concerns. Alongside this, other feminists became more militant and focussed on rectifying or overthrowing two thousand years of perceived patriarchal domination.

Within a Christian paradigm, a feminist theological critique would observe that the historical model of Christendom is also inherently patriarchal. As a result of predominantly androcentric Christian theology, God has been understood to be male, largely to the exclusion of ‘female’ divine qualities such as nurturing, compassion and wisdom. This theological paradigm has impacted on women in different ways throughout history, often detrimentally. A feminist critique of scripture highlights the suppression of female experience – either systematically or unwittingly.

It is hoped that the principal beneficiary of feminist research is women, in particular those women who have been silenced or subordinated through the practices of the Christian church. A feminist perspective provides a ‘comprehensive ideology, rooted in women’s experience of sexually-based oppression, that engages in a critique of patriarchy as an essentially dysfunctional system, embraces an alternative vision for humanity and the earth, and actively

---

41 See the works of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Amy-Jill Levine, Marianne Blinkenstaff and Margaret Fells.
seeks to bring this vision to realisation’. Feminist theologians such as Elizabeth Johnson and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza have for decades been restoring the female voice in biblical story and hermeneutics. Within the academic discipline of Christian Spirituality, Sandra Schneiders is a notable feminist voice in this field.

2.2 Feminist Critiques of Sainthood

Within a feminist methodological stance, two distinctly different approaches emerge in the veneration of canonised women and men. The first declares that venerating saints promotes a theology that diminishes women. Three streams emerge within this feminist critique of sainthood. The second approach, which I will discuss in section 2.2.1, claims that the model of female sainthood provides positive opportunities for women to be in life-giving relationship with God.

The first approach argues that veneration of female saints, especially the Virgin Mary, is essentially about keeping women placated, subdued and narrowly defined. Worship of virginal, female saints can be seen as a tool to domesticate women – to control and quash their ‘rebellious spirits’. If the role of women in our society is to be a helpmate to their male partners and ‘educate daughters into decency and not political subversion’ then modelling the feminine on a sexless, plaster statue may indeed be the appropriate response. Marcella Althaus-Reid proposes that virginal saint veneration serves to bring ‘resignation and false consciousness into our lives under the guise of liberation.’ She points out that numerous apparitions of the Virgin in South America never portray St Mary speaking out about endemic oppression and poverty or demanding that the government of the day provide free health care or adequate schooling. In contrast,

44 Althaus-Reid, Indecent Theology, 52.
the Virgin asks that the citizens of South America develop ‘good manners and obedience to ecclesial hierarchies’.  

If the Virgin of Guadalupe is powerful, but also poor, I as a disempowered but poor woman have something in common with her (social class status). Due to my worshipful attitude towards her (or what she represents, since the Virgin does not have a life outside of our theological imagination) she may share her power with me. However, this empowering circle is a short circuit, because in worshipping Mary women need to go through a spiritual clitoridectomy, in the sense of mutilating their lust, in order to identify with the Virgin, get her approval for their behaviour and never question the social and political order built around such ideology.  

Althaus-Reid argues that the only empowerment that comes from worship of St Mary/ the Virgin is the power to endure the oppression that the church has put on women throughout the centuries. There is nothing holy about poverty, and poverty rarely equates with virginity.  

A second feminist critique of the veneration of saints concerns practices that have been used to justify and give credibility to war. When the Spaniards invaded South America in the 1500s, visions of St James provided the official sanction for such action. We read: ‘[in] this hour of need our Lord was pleased to favour His faithful with the presence of the blessed apostle St James, the patron of Spain, who appeared to the Spaniards... on a splendid white horse, bearing a shield showing the arms of his military order and carrying in his right hand a sword... Thus the Spaniards took heart and fought on, killing innumerable Indians who could not defend themselves.’ In our own time, the Union Jack, the flag of Britain that combines the English, Scottish and Irish saints of St George,
St Andrew and St Patrick, remains as a symbol of invasion, oppression and genocide for many Indigenous Australians.

A third feminist critique concerns negative attitudes towards women from the writings of men who have been sainted through the centuries. St Thomas Aquinas (c.1225-1274) for example, held the view that ‘the male is ordered to the more noble activity, intellectual knowledge, whereas the female, although possessing a rational soul, was created solely with respect to her sexuality, her body, as an aid in reproduction for the preservation of the species’.\textsuperscript{49} He also asserted that ‘the girl represents a defective human being, the result of an accident to the male sperm, which was thought to contain the complete human being in potentialia and to reproduce by nature the likeness of its origins, that is, another male’.\textsuperscript{50} St Augustine (354-430), who wrote of women’s subordination to men in the order of nature and women’s special disorder and carnality in sin,\textsuperscript{51} is another man on whom the Church conferred sainthood. Certainly both Aquinas and Augustine have contributed much to the theological world, but a feminist critique must ask why the Church has never revoked their status as saints nor publicly challenged these oppressive assumptions about women.

These critiques pose challenges to a thesis that proposes that the feminine and virginal St Brigid is a liberating, empowering force in the spiritual lives of women. In that she is lovingly known as \textit{Muire na Gael} – Mary of the Gaels – she is at risk of being appropriated by the church as a symbol of virginal obedience and submission.

2.2.1 Liberating Aspects of Saint Veneration

In contrast to the above feminist critiques of sainthood, other feminist theologians speak out about the liberating aspect of a veneration of saints. In acknowledging that sainthood has remained the domain of the religious – in that lay people are rarely amongst those who are canonised – both women and men are able to attain sainthood through membership of a religious order. Sainthood, throughout history, has provided Christian women with opportunities to choose vocations other than as wife and mother.52 Schüssler Fiorenza affirms sainthood in that ‘the “lives of the saints” provide a variety of role models for Christian women. What is more important is that they teach that women, like men, have to follow their vocation from God even if this means that they have to go frontally against the ingrained cultural mores and images of women.’53

Throughout history, there are occasions when St Brigid has been employed as a symbol of liberty. Both the Inghinidhe na hÉireann in 190054 and Cumann na mBan55 in 1917, were placed under the protection of St Brigid for, as English Countess Markievicz (active leader in the Easter Rising of 1916) wrote, ‘such a good suffragist should get recognition’.56 A contemporary example of St Brigid as a liberating role-model can be found in campaigning during the 2002 Irish referendum on abortion. Journalist Judith Maas writes in The Irish Times, ‘St

---

54 The Inghinidhe na hÉireann (Daughters of Erin) was a women’s nationalistic and cultural society founded by Maud Gonne in 1900. One of its highlights was to organise a picnic for schoolchildren as an alternative attraction to Ireland’s official celebrations during a visit by Queen Victoria. Over 30,000 children attended (Maud Gonne and John Quinn, Too Long a Sacrifice: The Letters of Maud Gonne and John Quinn, ed. Janis Londraville & Richard Londraville, Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 1999, 11).
Brigid would vote *No* to the proposed amendment in the abortion referendum. Brigid, the goddess of fertility and patroness of Ireland, was willing to help women in a crisis pregnancy. According to the first record of her life, she made the foetus in the womb of a nun *disappear*. She was a feminist avant-la-lettre.¹⁵⁷

The way we rescue female saints from patriarchy is by finding female saints who are sexual beings, who are mothers or virgins, heterosexuals and lesbians, executives, home-dwellers and revolutionaries. Then the image of sainthood may be said to represent women.

2.3 Feminist Theory through the Lens of Goddess Worship

Those who worship the ‘Goddess’ in all her manifestations fall primarily into two broad categories. Whilst the boundaries between the two groups often overlap, the first group has come to the Goddess as part of a radical feminist stance, often rejecting patriarchal Judaeo-Christian institutional religions for their perceived oppressive social structures and life-denying attitudes.

Emily Culpepper accurately represents this viewpoint: ‘we are women who may have grown up in a religion and left it, tried several, or never been part of an organized religious tradition. What we have in common is a depth perception of our life path as a feminist journey. The transformative feminist insight that “the personal is political” has also become for us “the personal is political is spiritual”.’²⁵⁸ Culpepper adds:

> a feminist perspective highlights vast global patterns of patriarchy and the interconnectedness of patriarchy in the structures of personal, political,


religious and secular forms… Courage is a necessary part of this path. It can be frightening and overwhelming at times to feel the necessity to move beyond the boundaries of so many centuries of meaning. But it feels even more frightening to shrink from the task, trying to redefine all of the old religious meanings so that they are said to mean something else entirely. Let these religions have their place in history. It is a massive one. But let us not cling to them because of their longevity or through some sleight of heart that neutralises the witness of centuries of pain.\textsuperscript{59}

Culpepper turns to the Goddess because she finds that goddess images reflect the sacred within and in doing so, ‘heal wounds inflicted by the dogma that women are second-best to God’s image and servants in a man’s world’.\textsuperscript{60}

The second category of goddess worshippers are those women who understand the goddess as a force that is inherently life-giving in their spiritual journeys – a deity that mirrors many of the female qualities of the devotee. ‘A growing number of people are satisfying this need by turning to what they see as pre-Christian religious beliefs, reviving ancient mythologies, pantheism and animism, but at the same time acknowledging a universal presence.’\textsuperscript{61}

Carol Christ, for example, has adopted one form of goddess spirituality and its inherently freeing possibilities of worship. She describes her journey thus:

For me and for many others, finding the Goddess has felt like coming home to a vision of life that we had always known deeply within ourselves: that we are part of nature and that our destiny is to participate in the cycles of birth, death, and renewal that characterize life on this earth. We find in the Goddess a compelling image of female power, a vision of the deep connection of all beings in the web of life, and a call to create peace on earth. The return of the Goddess inspires us to hope that we can heal the

\textsuperscript{59} Culpepper, \textit{Journey}, 152.
\textsuperscript{60} Culpepper, \textit{Journey}, 153.
deep rifts between women and men, and between “man” and nature, and between “God” and the world, that have shaped our western view of reality for too long.62

A critique of Christ’s stance that the world is a non-dualistic regenerative power over and through which a female deity moves, comes from Val Plumwood. She argues that if ‘nature is treated as fully sentient and as having, through its possession of spirit, human qualities… nature is anthropomorphised in fact or fancy, and the human is taken as the basic model.’63 Plumwood argues that such a position does not succeed in genuinely escaping a dualistic and human-centred model. She argues that such a vision is at risk of supplanting one conventional form of deity with another – perhaps God is just found in a skirt.

Indeed, the Goddess herself is not a feminist. Rita Gross makes the radical assertion that the Goddess ‘is neither feminist nor non-feminist since she does not exist as an independent, autonomous entity, but only in relationship to those who know her, revere her, and follow her bidding – as they understand it.’64 Gross continues that ‘I have long argued that the first function of goddesses is not to provide equal rights or high status, but to provide psychological comfort, and that nothing is more basic to psychological comfort than the presence of a positive female imagery at the heart of a valued symbol system’.65 This is the very perception that has informed much of the following research on Brigid.

Nonetheless, Brigid has also been cited as patron of feminists as she represents independence, integrity and protection (of women, children and animals). She has the reputation of lending her fiery power whenever there is a need to stand up and

challenge authority or the conventional way of doing things. Although Brigid is occasionally linked to a male consort, she is a strong, autonomous female figure who does not need a male partner to make her credible.

2.4 The Significance of ‘Experience’

The three preceding models of understanding feminism – as a response to patriarchy and as veneration expressed through goddess and saint – provide the background for the focus of the present study. All three modes inform an exploration of spiritual life in which experience is the key determinant of meaning. A feminist reading ‘begins with our stories, the stories of our lives.’

This means that our own lives, individually and communally, serve as text and source for our theologising and thealogising. The stories of our lives and how we live, what it takes for us to live, survive, and do battle with and transform patriarchy, are taken seriously as theological text. “The consideration and response to ‘women’s traditional experience’ is the affirmation and celebration of the unique experiences of women – primarily embodied – analysed and disentangled from patriarchy and reclaimed as a source for personal and socio-cultural wisdom and transformation.”

---

The academic discipline of Spirituality proposes that:

the distinguishing formality of spirituality is its focus on ‘experience’. Spirituality as a discipline does not seek to deduce from revelation what Christian spirituality must be, or to prescribe theologically its shape, character, or functioning, or even necessarily to promote pastorally its exercise. It seeks to understand it as it actually transforms its subjects towards the fullness of life in Christ, that is, towards self-transcending life-integration within the Christian community of faith.71

This is a crucial point. The impact of both Goddess and St Brigid on the spiritual journey of women in Australia rests with these life stories. It is for this reason that the personal accounts by women through journals, poetry, and prose have been chosen. It is from such media that stories of struggle and transformation may be gleaned. ‘The locus or place of divine revelation and grace is therefore not in the Bible or the tradition of a patriarchal church but in the ekklesia of women and the lives of women who live the “option for our women selves”. It is not simply “the experience” of women but the experience of women (and all those oppressed) struggling for liberation from patriarchal oppression.’72

This emphasis on experience also implies relationship. ‘Human experience is the starting point and the ending point of the hermeneutical circle. Codified tradition both reaches back to roots in experience and is constantly renewed or discarded through the test of experience. Experience includes experience of the divine, experience of oneself, and experience of the community and the world, in an interacting dialectic.’73 Understanding the life-stories of the Brigidine sisters and those women who express a post-Christian understanding of the Goddess Brigid also requires an understanding of their experiences.

73 Ruether, Sexism and God-Talk, 12.
Such a project requires a willingness to allow for the creative acceptance of experiential sources that go beyond the confines of traditional social science data collection. Women’s experiences require a kaleidoscopic vision as one gathers together the plethora of stories that make up the subject matter. The image of the kaleidoscope suggests a multiplicity of approaches, a variety of sources, and a diversity of norms through which the mystery of God and the God-world relationship are studied, understood, and articulated in dialogue with the unity and diversity of women’s experiences.\textsuperscript{74}

It would appear that studies in feminist theology and spirituality are a call to be comfortable with – to sit within – the uncertainties of so many different ways of being. This is a constantly creative approach, moving far beyond easy categorisation, because life itself is grounded in story, situation and experience. A corollary is that it is more difficult to categorise the results of such research, just as it is difficult to place boundaries around one’s story.

2.4.1 A Methodology of Experience

Any analysis would be limited if the experience of Brigid in women’s lives were confined to quantitative data analysis. This would miss the depth of experiences, hurts, pains, joys and celebrations of women’s journeys. It is therefore qualitative analysis that is required. In utilising \textit{experience} as the primary research methodology we have a challenging, yet truly feminist, point of departure from much traditional empirical research.

Whilst this agenda is intentionally life-honouring, there are also difficulties in using ‘women’s experience’ as a basis for analysis. By definition, the boundaries are ambiguous. This makes it difficult to extrapolate results. Such enthusiasm for

creating opportunities for empowerment does, ironically, provide scope for inappropriate academic conclusions.

As Gloria Schaab says,

Generally, those who situate themselves within religious traditions such as Christian, Jewish, or Buddhist have recourse to a usable foundation of communal texts, traditions, and teachings in which to ground their normative principles. However, those feminist theologians who claim ‘women’s experience’ as a primary or sole normative principle – as well as a revelatory source – are confronted with a quandary of definition and applicability because of the particularity of women’s experiences. Since these experiences originate in specific historical and social milieux, their appropriation as criteria of adequacy or inadequacy has caused considerable methodological and philosophical difficulties.75

Sandra Schneiders approaches the same interpretive issue from within the discipline of spirituality, recognising the inherent difficulty in formulating one specific strategy. She argues that:

in effect, spirituality as a discipline does not have a method. I would argue that it has an approach which is characteristically hermeneutical in that it seeks to interpret the experience it studies in order to make it understandable and meaningful in the present without violating its historical reality.76

To analyse intuition or experiences of the transcendent if they are so confined to the subjective worldview of the researcher and the ‘specific historical and social milieux’ of women’s experience I have chosen to provide parameters on ‘women’s experiences’ by looking at documents, books, journals and mass media as the primary sources. By choosing this approach, I work within the assumption that the authors of these sources, having spent time in committing thoughts to

---

75 Schaab, ‘Feminist Methodology’, 342.
paper, provide a considered representation of that individual’s perspective, thus representing the essentials of their story.

A further consideration of the limitations of this methodology is that feminist research models value some form of collaboration between researcher and subject. I am aware of any lack of inclusivity, or potential misrepresentation that may arise through selecting to review documents rather than allow individuals to speak for themselves, however written sources presumably reflect the author’s position.

For all this, any analysis of another’s spirituality must be mindful of the role self-implication plays. I am not neutral to the chosen topic. ‘What we study, how we study, what we learn, is rooted in our own spiritual living. In this context, spiritual living does not necessarily mean adherence to a defined religious or spiritual tradition. It does mean, however, that one attends with as much authenticity as one can muster to the truth of one’s own experience.’

To become fully aware of the reality of Brigid in another’s journey, the researcher has to be open to Brigid’s presence in her own spiritual expression. Indeed, I have become intrigued with Brigid – in all her manifestations – and have, on occasion, sought guidance from her. My own spiritual journey has been enhanced by her presence – that which was once a topic of academic interest has entered into my reality as part of the personal spiritual journey.

This is the interiority of which Lonergan writes. It is to acknowledge that

we cannot recognise the constructed expressions that radically engage the human spirit except on the basis of our own radical engagement. This does not mean, of course, that every time we engage in the study of spirituality we are seized with contemplative ecstasy. Rather, it means that methodologically, we must begin by acknowledging that when we select,

---

claim understanding of, or evaluate something, as ‘having to do with spirituality’ we do so based on our own living of spirituality – that is, our own spirits fully in act… By naming interiority the uniquely defining methodological principle of the academic discipline of spirituality, we are basically saying that our primary means of access to knowing ‘the human spirit fully in act’ is through standing inside, and coming to know, the lived reality of our own spirits… On the practical level, this is why our ‘lived spirituality’ is both where we stand and what we look at – and it is why the study of spirituality is necessarily a self-implicating discipline.\

The fundamental purpose of selecting a qualitative approach, to provide boundaries around the experiences of Brigid in Christian and post-Christian contexts, is to allow women sufficient autonomy to express these experiences, to search for women’s alternative wisdom and to risk new interpretations in conversation with women’s lives. To achieve this, it is necessary to look beyond the parameters of one particular academic discipline. My own research, whilst grounded in the discipline of spirituality, draws on the insights of sociology, feminist theory, religious studies and Irish history.

---

78 Bernard Lonergan, as summarised by Frohlich, ‘Spiritual Discipline’, 75.
79 Johnson, She Who Is, 29.
CHAPTER 3

Socio-cultural historical background

3.1 Celtic Christian Spirituality

Fundamental to understanding the worldview of Irish Celtic Christian spirituality within which Brigid may be understood is a recognition of the pagan religion that preceded Christianity. To put it into context, a summary of the core characteristics of Irish Celtic Christian spirituality follows. Celtic Christianity is commonly understood as a spirituality that gives rise to the unique love of Brigid and explains her role as being a liminal figure who embraces elements of both pagan and Christian Irish beliefs.

Irish Christian spirituality emerged during the period from 400 CE to 800 CE. Within Ireland, this was the crucial time when the country moved from being a people who lived within a comprehensive, successful pagan belief system to developing a unique expression of the Christian religion. Prosper of Aquitaine, in the year 433, tells us: 'Palladius was consecrated by Pope Celestine, and sent as the first Bishop to the Irish believing in Christ.'80 Palladius lived from 368 to c431, thereby indicating that Ireland had contact with Christianity before St Patrick arrived there c429. However, it appears that early attempts to Christianise Ireland met with only marginal success, for Christianity was largely unheard of before the arrival of Patrick.

It was not until St Patrick (c. 390–461) began his systematic missionary work throughout Ireland that Christianity became firmly established. As a vital

---

lynchpin to the events that Christianised Ireland, Patrick shines as both historical figure and powerful symbol of the swift change from paganism to Christianity. In the thirty-two years that Patrick was a missionary in Ireland, he probably baptised tens of thousands of people and established at least fifty-five churches in the province of Connacht alone.⁸¹ The early seventeenth century book, *Annals of the Four Masters*, reports that Patrick’s mission planted about seven hundred churches, and that he ordained perhaps one thousand priests. Within his lifetime, thirty or forty of Ireland’s one hundred and fifty tribes became substantially Christian.⁸²

Much of the spread of Christianity in Ireland can be attributed to the zeal for establishing monasteries. Indeed, the only feature on the Irish landscape approximating a town was the larger monastery during this period. These monasteries grew to become great centres of learning and academic life, and we see Christianity emerging as the dominant paradigm within Irish society.⁸³ The monastic institutions were training schools of clergymen and missionaries, and workshops for transcribing sacred books.⁸⁴

The monasteries became the centre of the New Ireland. They were places of learning, led usually by a man, but occasionally by a woman. Indeed St Brigid’s monastic community at Kildare was unique in sixth-century Ireland as being a double monastery for both men and women, each group living within the community that was led jointly by the abbess and the bishop-abbot.⁸⁵ The monasteries were places of great learning, for the monks had access to the

---

⁸² Liam de Paor, *Saint Patrick’s World: The Christian Culture of Ireland’s Apostolic Age* (Notre Dame, Ind: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), 129.
⁸⁴ O’Loughlin, ‘Christianity in the Celtic Countries’, 410.
writings of many of the classical authors and eastern texts, as well as the lives of the European saints. It is argued extensively in modern scholarship of Irish monasticism, that it was the Irish nuns and monks who played a major role in retaining the vital texts that make up so much of our present knowledge through their diligent duplication and dissemination of these major works.\(^\text{86}\)

In 603, St Augustine of Canterbury (d. c. 604/5) was given orders from Pope Gregory the Great to insist on the supremacy of Roman ways over those of indigenous Celtic religions.\(^\text{87}\) This included converting pagan temples into churches so that the sacrifice of humans would be replaced by the sacrifice of the Mass, for throughout this period of Christianising Celtic countries, pagan religions continued to be practised. Many people continued to draw deeply from their pagan traditions whilst at the same time adopting aspects of their new-found Christian faith. Gregory’s directive added fuel to an on-going conflict between these two traditions.

The unique stamp of Celtic Christian spirituality met with a major setback following the Council of Whitby (664), at which King Oswy decreed that the church would follow the Roman style of Christianity rather than the indigenous model.\(^\text{88}\) In reality the Irish church continued to embrace elements of Celtic Christianity until the ninth century, by which time the church had, at least within the hierarchical structure, adapted to the format of continental Christianity.


\(^{88}\) Pagan King Oswy was married to Christian Queen Eanfleda. At her insistence a Council was held to clarify the two different styles of Christianity. Under discussion was the opposing method of calculating the date of Easter and the differing style of haircut between the monks of powerful Rome and those of indigenous Celtic Ireland. During the Council, the Celtic advocates, Colman and Cedd, urged Oswy to consider a model of spirituality that used the image of St John with his head resting on Jesus’ chest ‘listening to the heartbeat of God’. In reply, the Roman advocate, St Winifred, reminded Oswy of the power of the image authorised by Rome of St Peter, the holder of the keys to the Kingdom. Oswy was persuaded by the argument of gaining access to admission to heaven. Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1967), 256.
It is important to be aware of the recent critique of Celtic Christian spirituality. This is the movement within scholarship to question whether there ever was a model of Christianity that could be called uniquely ‘Celtic’. This new insight is based on assumptions that there was travel and trade amongst peoples and the Celts were not so isolated as to develop an ‘unpolluted’ doctrine. Some of the elements of ‘Celtic Christianity’ can be found in other places, such as earth-based expressions of spirituality that appear across several parts of the world. For all this, there are numerous elements of Celtic Christian spirituality that differ from the Christianity of Roman origins and these differences point directly to the unique role of Brigid within Ireland and, in our contemporary time, here in Australia.

One of the fundamental aspects of this spirituality is a love for creation. God’s voice is revealed through the natural world. All of creation gives witness to God’s presence. This sense that God is to be found within and without the Church is reflected in the art and stonework of 400-1200 CE. The distinctive intertwining of much Celtic art, shining most proudly in works such as the Book of Kells and the Lindisfarne Gospels, symbolises a God that encircles all. The knot-work, the stone crosses, the poetry and the writings of the early Church in Ireland all give testimony to the creativity inspired by a theology of God in all things, particularly as revealed in the Christian Holy Scriptures. Also significant is the extraordinary scale of highly skilled artisanship within Ireland before the arrival of Christianity. Indeed, this is one of the fundamental aspects of this spirituality.

---

91 Herren and Brown, ‘Christ in Celtic Christianity’, 229.
92 Herren and Brown, ‘Christ in Celtic Christianity’, 5.
93 The National Museum of Ireland in Dublin (visited by me in 2004 and 2007) has extensive displays of pre-Christian hoards containing Irish jewellery and ornaments, whilst passage graves
characteristics of Celtic spirituality – that the Christians were able to redefine the culture that existed (in this case, Goddess Brigid) and to transform it into an expression of Christianity (that is, St Brigid).

3.2 Brigid as Saint

A saint may be described as someone who is recognised by the Church as being both close to God (as a result of their holiness) and accessible to humanity (in that they share the same nature), acting as a powerful intercessor able to assist the faithful in their quest for spiritual and physical healing. A saint’s whole existence is caught up in their desire to fulfil the will of God. The heart has been so captured by God that their desire and intention is to live a life imbued with the indwelling of the Spirit of God. Such a description can be used of Brigid. Indeed, it is argued that this role as intermediary is particularly pertinent to Brigid; in her, ‘two elements come together – the eternal and the temporal – and she is seen as a female warrior trampling on demons and on the forces of evil in her efforts to lead a person over the dangerous bridge of this present life to the gleaming country of heaven’.

Despite it not being possible to verify the actual historical existence of St Brigid, extensive material exists that describes her as an historical figure. An amalgam of stories form the portrait we have about this woman. The first three hagiographies of Brigid provide the basis of the information we have. The oldest of these is the *Vita Sanctae Brigidae*, written by Cogitosus, a monk of Kildare around 650 CE. Two more lives of Brigid, both anonymous, appeared in the eighth century. The
first of these, *Vita Prima*, appeared circa 750 CE. The other *vita, Bethu Brigte*, existed by the end of the ninth century.\(^97\)

These hagiographers were not trying to provide a chronological description of Brigid’s life, but rather, their role was to ‘follow birth stories with categorised miracles. Writers of saints lives wanted to build their readers’ amazement miracle by miracle, each saintly deed leading to another, more wondrous feat, all couched in vivid language replete with references to Jesus, other saints and the Bible.’\(^98\)

The *raison d’être* for the *vitae* was not so much to demonstrate the historicity of Brigid’s life, but to build a political justification for Irish religious leadership.\(^99\)

For example, *Bethu Brigte* informs us:

> After that she healed the old peasant woman who was placed in the shadow of her chariot at Cell Shuird in the south of Brega. She healed the possessed many who had gone round the borders. He was brought to Brigit afterwards. **Having seen her, he was cured.** Brigit went afterwards to Cell Lasre. Lassar welcomed her. There was a single milch ewe there which had been milked, and it was killed for Brigit. As they were [there] at the end of the day, they saw Patrick coming towards the stead. ‘May God help us, O Brigit’, said Lassar. ‘Give us your advice’. Brigit replied: ‘**How much have you?**’ She said: ‘**There is no food except twelve loaves, a little milk which you have blessed and a single lamb which has been prepared for you.**’ This is what [they do]: They all go into her refectory, both Patrick and Brigit, and they were all satisfied. And Lassar gave her her church, and Brigit is venerated there.\(^100\)

According to the *vitae* we glean that Brigid was born either 452 or 456 to a Christian mother and Druid father. Refusing marriage to a chieftain, she founded a joint monastery at Kildare.\(^101\) From this centre, she led a life dedicated to


\(^{100}\) Donncha Ó hAodha, *Bethu Brigte* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1978), 42-44.

\(^{101}\) I am aware that it has not been possible to identify definitively the historicity of Brigid’s existence; however, this thesis concerns itself with the legends surrounding Brigid and the stories
hospitality and service. By the time of her death around 526, many women had joined the monastery at Kildare and it had become a prosperous centre of learning and pilgrimage. The main emphasis of Cogitosus’ *vita* is on ‘Brigid’s faith, her healing powers, her skill with animals, her hospitality, her generosity and especially, her concern for the poor, the oppressed or the embarrassed’, 102 all very ‘saintlike’ qualities.

In many respects, Cogitosus’ *vita* portrays a saint in similar vein to many hagiographies of the time. It is the other two *vitae* that best show us why Brigid has become known as both goddess and saint. Whereas Cogitosus claims Brigid’s authority on her innate virtue, *Vita Prima* and *Bethu Brigte* claimed a different kind of authority for Brigid,

based on literary allusions to her pre-Christian past. In short, these two vitae slyly made the very first hints that Brigid’s sanctity was greater, not despite but because of her gender and pagan reputation. They hinted that her very femaleness gave her territorial and numinous powers both Christian and Other and, further, that she governed the landscapes of Ireland long before Patrick and Christianity ever came to Ireland. Without the body of the saint to bolster her cult, these hagiographers and their audiences located the bodiless saint’s powers directly in the ground beneath and the landscape surrounding them. 103

This hints at the link between the pagan world and the Christian religion which was to follow. Brigid is a bridge between numerous worlds. In particular, she links two distinct things: the pagan and Christian world and the temporal world with the Otherworld/heaven.

The five centuries from 300 to 800 CE saw the shift from a culture that venerated Goddess Brigid to one that came to love and adore Brigid as saint. As Lisa Bitel tells us of St Brigid, summarising a life wherein – amongst many other miracles –

that have been built upon those legends. The historical accuracy of the existence of Brigid is not relevant to the current study.


Brigid even used the moonbeams on which to dry her laundry, ‘Brigit obeyed God and men, and thus men, women and animals, and even the forces of nature obeyed the saint. Pigs and wolves did her biddings, kings and bishops abided by her will, and even rivers moved when she prayed hard enough.’\textsuperscript{104}

Whilst Christianity is fundamentally Trinitarian, triple-goddesses were a familiar concept within the Irish pagan pantheon, with Brigid being the pre-eminent example.\textsuperscript{105} Thus, Trinitarian theology was entirely compatible with pre-existing pagan Celtic belief systems.

Smooring the Fire is an early, anonymous poem collected by Scottish folklorist Alexander Carmichael in the eighteenth century.

\begin{center}
\textbf{Smooring the Fire}
\end{center}

\begin{quote}
The sacred Three to save, to shield, to surround
The hearth, the house, the household,
This eve, this night,
Oh! This eve, this night,
And every night, each single night.
Amen.\textsuperscript{106}
\end{quote}

In a continuation of the Trinitarian theme, this poem affirms the centrality of hearth and home.

The ceremony of smooring the fire is artistic and symbolic, and is performed with loving care. The embers are evenly spread on the hearth – which is generally in the middle of the floor – and formed into a circle. This circle is then divided into three equal sections, a small boss being left in the middle. A peat is laid between each section, each peat touching the boss, which forms a common centre. The first peat is laid down in name of the God of Life, the

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{104} Bitel, ‘Body’, 215.
\textsuperscript{105} Hunter, \textit{The Celtic Way}, 20, 21.
\end{flushleft}
second in name of the God of Peace, the third in name of the God of Grace. The circle is then covered over with ashes sufficient to subdue but not to extinguish the fire, in name of the Three of Light.107

Such references suggest links with goddess figures, in that pagan goddesses were also invoked to protect the intimate aspects of daily life. Brigid, in both her aspects of goddess and saint, is patron of fire and hearths. The references to the Trinity likewise infer a connection with pagan triple-goddesses.

The Goddess Brigid is a triple-goddess, appearing sometimes with two sisters, also called Brigid. The idea of the triple goddess is of

a mythological and metaphysical paradigm [that] centres around the idea that deity, in order to experience itself, splits, clones, births, or creates the other by some other means. Deity does this in order to experience its own divinity. The other provides a mirror. Essentially, the Mother Goddess does the same, in that each of her aspects adds to her overall form. Instead of a vague, ambiguous one-dimensional image, she takes shape as a real being in the three-dimensional world, as evidenced by her three faces: maid, mother, and crone. Each of the many aspects of the Mother Goddess is a reflection of the whole, of her totality, and of Oneness.108

Brigid is primarily known as maiden109 and mother, for in Irish Celtic spirituality, the crone is represented by the Cailleach or hag.

107 Carmichael, Carmina Gadelica, 234-235.
109 This idea of Brigid as maiden is picked up in the virginal state of Saint Brigid as chaste nun. Indeed, much of the anti-Christian sentiment of neo-pagans is directed at the perceived diminishment of a fecund goddess into a virginal, non-childbearing saint. See Lisa M. Bitel, ‘Virgin to Goddess’.
3.3 Brigid as Goddess

Brigid as goddess is lesser known in Australia than Brigid as saint. White Australians are generally more in touch with our Western Christian heritage than our neo-pagan Celtic roots.

Recognising Brigid’s significance to contemporary Christians and neo-pagans, we have to be aware of the danger inherent in reading a twenty-first century interpretation onto a first, second and third century peoples. The danger is that we will provide an interpretation quite different from that of the original Celtic pagans. Indeed, it is important to note that information on Goddess Brigid was transmitted orally until Ireland became Christianised in the fifth century. It was not until monks began collating stories of pre-Christian events that we obtained records of Goddess Brigid. This created the interesting situation whereby the pre-Christian sagas – the charter stories of ancient Ireland, based on oral tradition – were written down and preserved mostly by Christian monks and nuns whose theological worldview arguably conflicted with the one they were recording.\(^\text{110}\) Their agenda was to actively promote Christianity over the dominant pagan religions.

As a triple-goddess, Brigid was goddess of poetry, smith craft and healing. ‘The Irish, realizing that anything less failed to do justice to the complexity of the divinity, gave their goddesses a triple form,’\(^\text{111}\) hence Brigid is recognised as three sisters all bearing the name of Brigid. In Cormac’s Glossary, Brigid is defined as:

A female poet, daughter of the Dagda.\(^\text{112}\) This Brigid is a poetess, or a woman of poetry, i.e. Brigid is a goddess whom poets worshipped, for very great and very noble was her superintendence. Therefore, they call her Goddess. of poets


Wells and streams were also closely associated with the Goddess Brigid. Rivers were important because they were 'the womb openings of the Great Mother, the symbol of life, and often bore her name in different forms.' Indeed, numerous wells continue to exist across Ireland as places of veneration to both Goddess Brigid and the saint by the same name. Almost all Irish rivers continue to have female names and the water that irrigates the land is seen as a female force.

In the same manner, the goddess was often imaged as a celestial cow that nourished the earth with her milk. It is also possible that 'in the earlier life of the Celts, goddesses held a more important place than gods, possibly because the arts of civilization were mostly in the hands of women, who could naturally have female deities to watch over their activities'. Fertility cults existed that worshipped the earth-goddesses. These may at first have been mainly observed by women. Later, a god took the place of a goddess, or was joined with her as a consort, and both women and men were able to participate in worship.

In Kildare a cult developed, through which a fire was kept perpetually burning. Nineteen women were rostered to keep the fire burning throughout the night, but on the twentieth night the fire was left unattended, the women believing that the goddess Brigid herself would maintain it on this night. No males were allowed near Brigid’s fire. Legend has it that one young man had his leg wither the moment he put it over the hedge towards the fire. Another man blew on the fire

---

118 MacCulloch, *Celtic Religions*, 61.
and went totally mad, running around repeating the words ‘See! This is how I blew on Brigid’s fire.’ When his friends caught him and took him for a drink in the stream to quell his thirst, he drank so much that he ‘burst in the middle and died.’

Regardless of the historicity of such anecdotes, this all points to the high esteem in which Goddess Brigid was held by the Celts. It remains relevant because it is the foundation of the spiritual practice of many neo-pagans in Australia today. For those neo-pagans who choose a path based on the Celtic tradition, rivers, fire, wells and trees remain as places that act as conduits between the known and unknown worlds. So, too, does the goddess continue to hold fundamental importance in the spiritual lives of contemporary Australian neo-pagan women.

3.3.1 Excursus: Thealogy – Study of the Goddess

Thealogy, as the name implies, is the study of the Goddess. Yet having said this, immediately the definition is far too limiting, for many people who worship the Goddess actively seek not to be defined by doctrines or dogma that may restrict their understanding of She whom they invoke. Nor is it at all easy to locate exactly who is meant by goddess, for thealogy is very different from theology in that it does not try to explain the Goddess in all her aspects, but rather, looks at the symbols that are associated with the Goddess. Devotees are invited to explore and interpret these symbols for themselves.

Starhawk expresses this fluidity within thealogy:

> It all depends on how I feel. When I feel weak, she [the Goddess] is someone who can help and protect me. When I feel strong, she is the

symbol of my own power. At other times I feel her as the natural energy in
my body and the world.\textsuperscript{120}

Starhawk writes further, ‘I have spoken of the Goddess as a psychological symbol
and also as manifest reality. She is both. She exists, and we create Her’.\textsuperscript{121}
Indeed, this fluidity of definition is indicative of the unwillingness of neopagans
to be limited by doctrine. For some women, the notion of a single goddess is too
monotheistic – at risk of being an anthropomorphised substitute for a male
God.\textsuperscript{122} These women prefer to worship the Goddess in many manifestations.
Other women do not identify the Goddess as an existing deity with self-
originating divinity. Rather, these women see the Goddess as a liberating
archetype exemplifying a model of emancipatory woman-strength.\textsuperscript{123}

Melissa Raphael argues that the manner in which thealogy continually shifts, or
the nature of the Goddess herself continues to alter, is perhaps deliberately
ambiguous. Thealogy dislikes exclusive either/or dilemmas, finding power in the
more inclusive mysterious ambiguities of both/and.\textsuperscript{124} In line with this, Asphodel
Long suggests that many women may only become concerned with the
ontological status of the Goddess when they are ‘well advanced into goddess
culture and actions and are interested in debate on the subject. It actually bothers
very few seekers.’\textsuperscript{125}

Carol Christ summarises the essence of Goddess spirituality thus:

\begin{quote}
The power of the Goddess is… neither omnipotence nor omniscience,
qualities attributed to the God of theism by virtue of his alleged
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{120} Starhawk, ‘Witchcraft and Women’s Culture’ in \textit{Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in
\textsuperscript{121} Starhawk, \textit{The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Religion of the Great Goddess} (New York:
Harper & Row, 1979), 81.
\textsuperscript{122} Elizabeth Puttnick, \textit{Women in New Religions: In Search of Community, Sexuality and Spiritual
\textsuperscript{123} See Melissa Raphael, \textit{Introducing Thealogy: Discourse on the Goddess} (Sheffield: Sheffield
\textsuperscript{124} Raphael, \textit{Introducing Thealogy}, 55.
transcendence of nature and history. The power of the Goddess is a limited power that operates within a finite and changeable world. She cannot transform the crises that the world faces – historical injustice, environmental destruction and pollution, the threat of nuclear catastrophe – without the cooperation of all those who affect and are affected by them. Because her power is not coercive, the Goddess depends on us, as we depend on her. But her power is real, and her power becomes greater when we work in conjunction with her… The power of the Goddess is the intelligent embodied love that is the ground of all being. This intelligent embodied love under girds every individual being, including plants, animals, and humans, as we participate in the physical and spiritual processes of birth, death, and renewal… To say that the love of the Goddess is ‘embodied’ means that concrete relation is the ground of all being. Embodied love is grounded in senses, in seeing, hearing, tasting, touching and smelling, and in the emotions and passions that arise from the senses. Embodied love is not the dispassionate, moralistic concern sometimes identified as Christian love or the love of God. Embodied love is rooted in deep feeling: In this sense, it is erotic.\textsuperscript{126}

A fundamental aspect of the ‘embodied love’ that Carol Christ refers to extends to the concept of the Goddess residing in the world. ‘The unity of birth, death, and rebirth… are the basis of the Goddess’ teachings. They are reflected daily to us in cycles of night and day, waking and sleeping, creating and letting go. Thus the Goddess is she who gives life and, when the form is no longer viable, transforms it through death. And then, through the exquisite pleasures of creativity and sexuality, she brings forth new life.’\textsuperscript{127} It is this tangible, bodily, earthy aspect of goddess spirituality that is a major attraction for women to neo-paganism and its earth-centred rituals.

Christ’s very personal account of goddess worship is outlined below:

When I speak the name of the Goddess, I believe I come into a relationship with a power who cares about my life and the fate of the world. The more I

\textsuperscript{126} Carol Christ, \textit{Rebirth}, 106-108.
sing to the Goddess, pray to her, and invoke her name in my daily life, the more certain this conviction becomes. I could attribute this feeling to suggestion and interpret the voice that speaks in me and the power that acts in synchronous events that happen to me simply as projections of my own experience and deepest self. But it makes more sense to me to understand the Goddess as a kind of person, fully embodied in the world, with whom I am in relation. For me, the Goddess has not by any means ‘worked herself out of the picture’. Quite the contrary, she has become a more and more living presence in my life.  

Neo-pagans believe the Goddess is ever-present in creation. She may be known by many different names and revealed in many different forms, but the Goddess is not remote, unapproachable, punitive nor is she an all-powerful interventionist. She soothes and comforts. She is a strength, a confidante and compassionate. She may also be rebellious, a wild-woman, offering anger, clarity and analysis. She is a symbol of hope and may be invoked through feelings and thoughts.

This poses the issue of how Brigid, as the concept of an all-embracing deity, translates into individual, different female deities. In Ann Marie Gallaghar’s experience,

When I am teaching, explaining things, marking essays (etc) I sense that it is Athena-within who is guiding me with her keen intelligence and flair for seeing patterns in things. When I am making something, like bread or a decoration for a festival, and a feeling particularly inspired, I know that it is Brighid-within at work. I know that logic and creativity come from within me, and I choose to identify those parts of myself as Athena and Brighid, respectively.  

As this experience suggests, referring to the Goddess as One Being, does not preclude referring to her as individual goddesses.

---

128 Christ, Rebirth, 104.
129 Gallaghar, Way, 119.
CHAPTER 4

Brigid in Contemporary Australian Women’s Spirituality

This thesis has adopted a feminist methodology embodying the inherent concept of liberation, an important aspect of the phenomenon of Brigid. The thesis is that the figure of Brigid, as both goddess and saint, engages the imaginations of Australian women in ways such that their spiritual lives are deepened and enlivened. What follows is an exploration of the personal stories of women as found in the journals, poems, articles and web-sites describing the impact that Brigid has had on their lives, their faith and in particular, their spiritual journeys. Whilst both groups of women hold Brigid as an important focus, it is in the examination of the role of liberation in her veneration that we see a substantial difference between the impact of Brigid in the lives of Christians and neo-pagan women.

4.1 Saint Brigid – Liberating Others

A feminist epistemology insists that our life-stories must be our starting point. In Australia, the Brigidine Sisters sit beside refugees in detention centres, work in hospitals and schools and act as advocates for justice. Throughout their work they are hearing and responding to the stories of the plebs sanctus Dei – the holy, common people of God. In their efforts to work ‘with, not for, the oppressed (whether individuals or peoples) in the incessant struggle to regain their humanity’, the sisters listen to the stories of these people. As with the circle of praxis that emphasises the ongoing relationship between reflection and action, listening leads to reflection. Reflection leads to action. Action leads back to

---

reflection. In the veneration of St Brigid, this translates as deeply-held beliefs informing social justice activities, in turn shaping belief in a reflective hermeneutic of experience.

Twenty four of the forty references from the primary source material imply that the reason St Brigid is important is because she acts as a model for the liberation of others. The link between the motivation for prophetic social action and the example of St Brigid becomes apparent in the following excerpt:

Brigid’s story, our own story, inspires us to continue our quest to be just people, healers of the brokenness in our world. We are challenged to give away the ‘choice apples’ and let love, compassion and justice reign. Brigid’s power, our own power, is the ability to empower others as we live out her beatitude of mercy.

The same theme emerges in the writings of Brigidine Sister Maureen Minahan:

As Brigidines we try to emulate St Brigid who was so fired up with the love for people, and who welcomed everybody into her community and who shared whatever she had.

In the same manner, Brigid Arthur, a prominent figure within the Australian Brigidine community writes:

First, we come to see Brigid as the woman of justice …Where is power exerted unjustly today? Who is willing to intervene for the poor who have made mistakes?

---

132 See Appendix.
Second, Brigid is a woman of authority with a little feminine ruse or two… The possibility for increased influence in church and society of the feminine may be part of the sea-change that we need.

Third, Brigid is a woman of contemplation and action… She sees the beautiful and the good; she makes something happen… She gives credibility to the thousands of acts of kindness, the working together, the forgiving and starting over again…

Fourth, Brigid is a friend of the poor… In a vastly unequal world Brigid reminds us that giving away the choice apples may not be practical but it is always an option.

Fifth, Brigid is a peacemaker… As we watch with amazement the story unfolding about weapons of mass destruction not actually existing but lives lost each day in a war that just happens to be in the second largest oil producing country in the world, we maybe think we need something of the fearlessness of a Brigid…

Sixth, Brigid was a hearth woman or a person of hospitality… Where do we need to extend hospitality?... So where is the safest place in the world for those fleeing persecution?135

Elsewhere Arthur writes:

Brigid … is an inspiring figure in these days when economic rationalism is the new panacea of all ills! I think Brigid would play havoc in Jeff’s Victoria if she were here today136

In addressing the centrality of hospitality, Australian Brigidines view:

the whole idea of hospitality as an expression of love that is central to Brigid, the Hearthwoman. To welcome a stranger to your own fireside is to follow

the example of Brigid, who made a welcome for all and made the Abbey a safe place of refuge and sanctuary.137

Gail Donovan, an artist who finds inspiration through St Brigid in many of her silk paintings, continues the connection between Brigid and the motivation for action that heals the earth and its people.

As we are called to renewed awareness of our need to care for the earth, and as poverty crushes three quarters of the world’s population; as materialism becomes so intoxicating that we are being numbed to feelings of sensitivity, compassion, and the great strength of gentleness; as resources are wasted in creating instruments of death, instead of creating instruments of life; and as the pursuit of increasing wealth is causing irredeemable damage to Mother earth placing in jeopardy the welfare of future generations and the delicate ecosystems upon which all life depends, the memory of Brigid offers courage and inspiration – a model for a new world.138

In an international context, a North American mission statement declares:

we are women religious, committed to be a caring and prophetic presence in our world, living simply, accompanying the needy and the oppressed in their lives and struggles in the spirit of Brigid and the Beatitudes, enabling them to build communities of sisters and brothers in justice and love, in order to promote the reign of God on earth.139

These women are just a few who look to St Brigid as a model and an exemplar of liberation. Traditionally, St Brigid was a woman of abundant generosity who worked tirelessly to improve the lives of those she came into contact with. It is through her example that many women, both within the Brigidine community and those influenced by the Sisters, dedicate their lives to improving the situation of others.

This would confirm that St Brigid is a liberating influence for lives committed to the emancipation of others. The aforementioned Brigid Arthur is a Sister who has immersed herself in the fight to have refugees released from detention centres and properly supported within the Australian community. Arthur gained notoriety in 2002 when she escorted the two Bakhtiyari children to the British consulate in Melbourne after their break-out from Woomera detention centre.\(^{140}\) She is a remarkable woman who puts her faith into action in tangible, inspirational ways.

In their own contemplation of the stories of St Brigid’s unfailing generosity, the challenges to repressive authority figures and the strong desire to emulate Jesus’ compassion and healing to the marginalised, the Brigidine Sisters embody the work of liberation in their communities. The long and exemplary list of activities in which the Brigidine Sisters are engaged attests to this shift from reflection to action. Brigidine Sisters meet regularly, engaging in reflection days that focus on their mission, their community and their vision for liberation and social inclusion.

This suggests that Brigid, as saint, offers a model of generosity, compassion and advocacy for the underprivileged. As such, she provides the motivation for Brigidine Sisters to continue their work of liberating those in the wider community who are vulnerable or disadvantaged. Brigid’s motto ‘What is mine is theirs’, provides the catalyst to follow the calling of Jesus in contemporary Australia. St Brigid also becomes the inspirational channel through whom others may be persuaded to act.

4.2 Saint Brigid – Liberating Self

From the stance of a feminist theological methodology, the individual and communal lives of women are a sourcebook of reflection, revelation and liberation.

The primary sources tell us that Brigid’s ‘appearance brings joy and hope to our lives’,¹⁴¹ that ‘she brings us new hope, the strength of the oak’¹⁴² and that she is able to ‘strengthen what is weak within us’.¹⁴³ For all this, of the forty selected resources, only one Australian woman made specific reference to the role that St Brigid plays as a personal source of liberation – even then the reference is more communal than individual in its focus. Gail Donovan writes:

(Blind's) life of boundless love, generosity and hospitality continues to inspire us today, as women and men of this new millennium... Brighid dances her dance of life, love, joy and hope. Her appearance brings joy and hope to our own lives as she spreads light and colour before her... she heralds the Spring, as she emerges from the darkness of Winter into the dawn of a new day... Brighid, you were a woman of justice, a woman of peace. You reverenced the earth, sharing its gifts with those in need. In your strength, and in your gentleness, you offer us a model for a new world. We look to your light to lead us into the future – to lead us to know our God more fully in all that we do.¹⁴⁴

This is in stark contrast to the numerous references to the self-liberating role Goddess Brigid plays in the life of the neo-pagan community, as will be explored. Those who write about Brigid as saint would appear to primarily identify her as an historical figure who acts as inspiration for the work of liberating others.

This understanding of St Brigid – as inspiration rather than invocation – is congruent with the role that Christianity assigns to the Communion of Saints. Richard McBrien argues that since the 1980s there has been a renewed interest in the serious study of the theology and spiritual practice of saints. He notes that the ‘heightened value of experience as the locus... of theological understanding

---

¹⁴³ Minehan, Rekindling, 24.
would have to be counted among the leading factors\textsuperscript{145} for this renewal. Such an approach sees a shift away from an emphasis on saints as miracle workers towards saints as models for living a Godly life. As a model of what is possible, Brigid is ‘one who in this or that extreme cultural circumstance says, by life or word, that there is a way in which the life of the Gospel can be lived’.\textsuperscript{146} St Brigid may well be seen by the women of this study, as one ‘whose life is a presentation to his [sic] own age of the message that heaven is sending to it, a man who is, here and now, the right and relevant interpretation of the Gospel, who is given to this particular age as a way of approach to the perennial truth of Christ’.\textsuperscript{147} In this context, Brigid’s transformative significance in women’s Christian spiritual journeys is powerfully evident. Similarly, Brigid is not only a conduit of the gospel message, she may also operate as a nexus – facilitating a conversation between Christian and neo-pagan belief systems that might otherwise not occur.

4.3 Goddess Brigid – Liberating Others

The exploration of Goddess Brigid as an active force in the spiritual lives of women in Australia’s neo-pagan community indicates many women highlight Brigid’s role in their personal liberation.

Lynne Hume, in her extensive research into witchcraft and paganism in Australia, observes that ‘Goddess worship has lured many women from patriarchal monotheism which has left them feeling disempowered, spiritually devoid and, in some cases, extremely angry that deception has occurred on so large a scale for such a long time… The goddess movement provides them with the freedom to

\textsuperscript{146} Lawrence Cunningham, \textit{The Meaning of Saints} (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980), 171.
explore both their femininity and their spirituality. Brigid becomes part of that expression of liberation in which women become free to experience their femininity and sexuality through a spirituality that offers alternative images of hope, power and inspiration.

One of the most prolific and respected North American neo-pagan writers and a great advocate for social justice, Starhawk, is confident that there is a link between Goddess Brigid and the work of justice and liberation. Reflecting on her involvement at the height of a campaign to protest the election of Ronald Reagan as President of the United States, she writes about her deliberate selection of Brigid as patron of her actions. This detailed passage provides a clear insight into the world of the neo-pagan and the power of ritual, as understood by neo-pagan practitioners.

Many years ago, in a year not so different from this one (the year Ronald Reagan was first elected), many of us in our then-seedling Reclaiming community found ourselves in a state of political despair. Being Witches, we conceived the radical notion of offering a public ritual to transform despair into some other more positive state.

With Reagan’s inauguration planned for January 20 [1981], we chose the festival of Brigid on February 1 as the time for our ritual… Brigid is the Goddess of the forge, of the fire of inspiration that is poetry, and of healing. She seemed a fitting power to address the prospect of our country being led by someone who believed nuclear war was Winnable.

On the eve of Brigid, also called Imbolc, we gathered about a hundred people in a large, open room in the college I was then attending. We grounded, cast a circle, called directions, and sang a chant to the goddess Brigid. Then we asked people to break into small circles. Each circle passed a bowl of salt water counter clockwise, and people named their feelings of powerlessness. We raised energy to transform the water, and passed the bowls back, sunwise this time, as people shared where they felt power in their lives...

Listening to the voices, my own thinking about power crystallized into a new understanding that more than one kind of power exists. Power over, or domination, is limited: If I have power over you, you don't have power over me. I can control your resources or options and punish you if you do wrong. But the kind of power I heard in that second round was power—from-within, creative power, akin to what we call spirit. And that kind of power is unlimited. Indeed, if I find power in speaking my truth to you, it may awaken your power to speak truth to me, and others.

We darkened the room except for a cauldron in the center. As our fire blazed up, we drummed, and people took candles, came forward, and lit them from the cauldron while making pledges to Brigid. Light after light was kindled, and we danced with our candles like stars wheeling and spiraling in the night.

The ritual worked in the way magic works: It brought opportunities to take actions that would transform our despair. Later that year, a blockade was called at the Diablo Canyon Nuclear Power Plant, built on an earthquake fault in central California. Many of us participated, offering rituals in the camp, on the blockade itself, and eventually even in jail. By the next year's Brigid feast day, which fell on the eve of a blockade at the Livermore Nuclear Weapons Lab, our ritual was transformed into one of empowerment.

Over the years, we worked ourselves up from despair to action to hope to empowerment, back to despair, up again to vision… Last year, I spent five days in jail in Seattle after the World Trade Organization protests. I decided to join the solidarity efforts that meant we would go to trial and not accept a deal that would have given us probation for a year. My trial was scheduled for Brigid Day.

We are heading into challenging times, for Pagans and for the earth. A Brigid ritual can be as simple as lighting a candle and asking yourself these questions: What do I need to forge in my life? Where do I draw inspiration? What do I need to heal? What is my pledge for this year, and where can I find the courage and support I need to keep it?

In the Northern Hemisphere, the light is beginning to return. Brigid marks the time when we can notice the days becoming longer. The last months have taught us that we can't afford to be complacent about our rights, or to assume that our
freedom is guaranteed. May Brigid inspire us to forge the alliances we need to build. May she inspire us to speak truth to power, to bring poetry and magic and art to even the most bitter of struggles. And may she bring us the healing that we need in our own lives that we may be healers of this wounded earth.149

This is an extraordinary passage, for it portrays a relationship with Brigid that evokes the communal nature of her power. A large gathering of peacemakers consciously chose her as their patron, believing that in Brigid is found the energy and imagery needed to focus the group in their peace-work.

A further insight that comes from Starhawk’s article is her description of ‘power-from-within’ as compared to ‘power-over’. If Brigid can be the source of inspiration so that these women, in their work for a nuclear-free future, find the power to speak the truth to both themselves and others, then in claiming that power-from-within they are truly finding a way of being released from those who would seek to oppress.150

The excerpt from Starhawk’s article is also educational. Those of us who have little experience of beliefs and neo-pagan practices can glimpse here the way in which goddesses may be invoked through ritual. The casting of a circle, the invocation and chant to the goddess, the use of symbols such as water, candles and drums, and the resultant pledge of commitment, are all common elements within contemporary neo-pagan celebrations.

The evidence that Australian women within the neo-pagan community are collectively harnessing the energising power of Brigid is difficult to find from the

150 Feminist scholar Sarah Hoagland has a similar concept to Starhawk as power-from-within as a positive, life-affirming, and empowering force that stands in stark contrast to power understood as domination, control or imposing one's will on another. See Sarah Lucia Hoagland, Lesbian Ethics: Towards a New Value (California: Institute of Lesbian Studies, 1988).
available sources. There are numerous pagan gatherings around Australia,\textsuperscript{151} but entry into private rituals is more by personal invitation than general publicity. Whilst the pagan community is very friendly and welcomes enquirers, they are a community that also attracts criticism from some of the more conservative sectors of Australian society and therefore are understandably cautious about publicly advertising events.\textsuperscript{152} That I have not been able to trace any Australian public celebration of the Goddess Brigid may point more to the neo-pagan community’s tendencies to preserve privacy than the actual absence of such celebrations.

4.4 Goddess Brigid – Liberating Self

If St Brigid is \textit{Inspiration}, then Goddess Brigid is \textit{Invocation}. Many Australian women are attracted to paganism, worship and invocation of the Goddess because of ‘the focus on the Earth as nurturer, the egalitarianism, freedom of expression, and the celebratory aspects, which they felt were all in great contrast with the hierarchical nature of a patriarchal, removed God, and a view of the world as a sinful place from which they needed to be saved.’\textsuperscript{153} It is important to discover if Brigid, as goddess, can be identified as aiding in this liberation.

Twenty seven of the forty-five women who wrote about the Goddess Brigid\textsuperscript{154} spoke of her as a present reality – as an active force and tangible presence in their lives. This awareness of a living, present deity is exemplified in the following two excerpts. The first is cited in the Australian \textit{Witchcraft} magazine.

\begin{quote}
You need not go over the same ground again next year if you put in the hard spiritual work and manifest Brid’s power at Imbolc… Brid demands you be fresh, new and mindful… From Imbolc to Beltane is the time for Brid’s energy
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{151} The website www.paganawareness.net.au/index/html (accessed 27.3.08) is an informative site for pagan activities around Australia.
\textsuperscript{153} Hume, \textit{Witchcraft}, 91, 92.
\textsuperscript{154} See Appendix.
to set behind plenty of meditation, spirituality, and laying the seeds for your life over the next year.\footnote{Lucy Cavendish, ‘Imbolc: The Maiden Brigid is come’, \textit{The Australian Witchcraft Magazine} 33 (2003): 18.}

The second excerpt comes from the work of Australian scholar Annabelle Solomon.

At Imbolc, the Goddess Brigid, also known as Bride, is encouraged to come forward in her white veil, bringing the fulfilment of the promise made in the depths of winter for renewed life. She is surrounded by and crowned with candles.\footnote{Annabelle Solomon, \textit{Seasons of the Soul: The Wheel of the Year in Quilts} (Winmalee: Pentacle Press, 1997), 36.}

It is clear that these women see Brigid as a present reality.

In addition to offering hope, healing and the lifting of malaise, Brigid offers self-liberating experiences. The Ord Brighideach is one of a series of international networks, comprising at least six hundred women who are divided into cells, each with nineteen members. The women connect via the internet to honour the Goddess Brigid. Stories, poems and anecdotes are shared amongst the members of this large network. Many of these women commit themselves to keeping a perpetual candle flame burning, taking turns to tend the flame. It has been mentioned that in 1185 Giraldus Cambrensis described a possibly fanciful legend that in pre-Christian Ireland, nineteen women took turns guarding Goddess Brigid’s fire throughout the night, with the belief that Brigid herself would take responsibility for the flame on the twentieth night. What this legend ‘does attest to is the continuity of Brigid’s community as a convent for nuns.’\footnote{Dorothy Anne Bray, ‘Brigit’, \textit{Encyclopaedia of Monasticism}, ed. William M. Johnston (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 2000), 184.} This tradition continued at Kildare until the mid-fourteenth century, with the flame not being relit until 1993 by the Brigidine nuns in Kildare. Contemporary worshipers
of Goddess Brigid similarly commit to keeping a perpetual fire ablaze, remaining anonymous yet building relationships via the Ord Brighideach website.\textsuperscript{158}

Through Ord Brighideach many stories emerge of the Goddess Brigid as liberator of self. One such example is from Deanna who relates how, at a time of personal difficulty, she became aware of the presence of Brigid as a source who nourished and healed her soul.

Saturday, my godfather... passed on. Tending [Brigid's] flame all night helped me come to terms a little more quickly, (although the wound is still tender... as I'm sure it will be for quite some time), Our Lady being such a comfort in the pain... I lit a flame for him, from Brighid's, to see him over, and spent a good portion of today in the woods drumming, saying my goodbyes... And at all times I have felt Her mantle around me... found comfort in Her touch, solace in Her words... I find great solace in the knowledge that he is with Brighid, and finally knows peace. Love, Light, and Brighid's Blessings.\textsuperscript{159}

For Deanna it is evident that Goddess Brigid has become a vessel of hope and transformation in her time of need.

Another example is from Epona Moondancer in this story from Ord Brighideach.

Dearest Brighid, On a grey wet day in May almost two years ago, very far from home, my dreams shattered, my heart heavy, my spirit at a low ebb... you My Lady, first came into my life. I was invited to join a Brighid Healing Ritual at Circle Sanctuary, Beltaine 1998. The procession arrived at the spring, healing waters, dedicated in your name, dear Brighid. The chanting began, your blessed waters scooped up in our bowls. We anointed ourselves with your holy water, washed our faces, refreshed our souls, hung our ribbons with whispered prayers, chanting, chanting - my tears mingling with your water on my cheeks. I then felt your presence, dear Brighid, everywhere! My subdued sobbing opening the damned up emotions inside of me, it all spilled out, my cleansing and healing

\textsuperscript{158} See Ord Brighideach, http://www.ordbrighideach.org/home/.
had begun. As the destructive essence drained from within me, your warmth began to fill the void - I actually felt it, flowing like warm water into my chest, filling me slowly with your love and understanding. Your flame has shaped and tempered me, it has nourished and healed my soul, you continue to incite and inspire me daily.160

For Moondancer, Goddess Brigid became foundational to her spiritual journey.

It is possible that the appeal of Goddess Brigid lies in a desire to re-enact ritual. Water, flame, celebrating the shift from winter to spring, song, dance, blessings – all these are rich symbols that allow for the tactile, experiential expression of what it is to be a woman. ‘Western patriarchal culture is almost devoid of any ritual that speaks to the heart and touches the minds of women. It is a culture that is primarily interested in the hearts, minds and bodies of men, so there is no ritual that addresses the particularity of women’s lived experience.’161 A ritualised celebration of the Goddess in her manifestation as Brigid provides that tangible connection to the Great Mother.162 In neo-pagan spirituality, the power of invoking Goddess Brigid redresses this lack of existential expression.

4.5 Brigid as Threshold Figure

Of all the metaphors that have been ascribed to Brigid in the selected resources, the most fascinating is that of ‘threshold woman’, for here is found the essence of the contribution Brigid may make in one’s spiritual life.

162 Padraigín Clancy raises the same observation of the opportunities that Brigid offers for ritual and celebration in her discussion about the renewal of interest in Brigid as saint. Her ideas are detailed below.
Threshold – the Liminal Place

Joseph Campbell defines the threshold state as being ‘betwixt and between’, in which the person striving for maturity and wisdom crosses a threshold into the unknown, meets many obstacles as well as helping spirits along the way, and returns home as ‘master of two worlds’ with a ‘treasure’ or ‘blessing’ that is shared with the community. It is a stepping into the unidentified beyond which ‘is darkness, the unknown, and danger’. Moving into a threshold place is ‘not only with transition but also potentiality, not only “going to be” but also “what may be”’. This is a liminal place.

John O’Donohue talks about the instinctive urge to cross the threshold, saying that ‘your longing for the invisible is never stilled. There is always some magnet that draws your eyes to the horizon or invites you to explore behind things and seek out the concealed depths… When you enter the world you come to live on the threshold between the visible and the invisible… You are both artist and pilgrim of the threshold.’

The idea of ‘threshold’ can be equated with the notion of a ‘liminal’ place. This concept has its origins in the work of Arnold van Gennep. His work on community defined three stages within the initiation rites of anyone within a particular society: separation (moving away from the society to begin the initiation), liminality (the experience of being in the rite) and reintegration (the return to the society from which the initiates left). These concepts were developed further by Victor Turner who explored the initiation rites of young boys within Ndembu society in central Africa. He found that in the liminal stage

---

that marked the transition between boyhood and manhood, these adolescents existed in ‘a special, social and spiritual threshold’. Whilst in this liminal state the boys discovered the deepest sense of community. They discovered that there was the ‘spontaneous experience of intense intimacy and equality. It was an undifferentiated, egalitarian, non-rational community.’

The intensity of the liminal experience – as a collective of participants – has been termed *communitas*. It was found that ‘this supercommunity also included or was stimulated by the quest for and presence of a sacred space, god, or spirit. Initiates refer to a transforming experience of connection with oneself, with others, and with the universe.’ Brigid, by her very nature of being ‘betwixt and between’, also provides the threshold experience through whom people can experience the sacred and build community.

The liberation experienced within such threshold events sows the seeds of regeneration that feed back into mainstream society. Turner sees that the dialectic that emerges between those who are prepared (or forced?) to live in *communitas* (anti-structure) and those who live in ‘normal’ society (structure) as the ‘hope for the future of that society’. He argues that ‘people or societies in a liminal phase are a kind of institutional capsule or pocket which contains the germ of future developments, of societal change.’

The Brigidine sisters live in *communitas*, a place that is neither warm nor relaxed, but rather, ‘requires commitment, integrity, hard work and courage. In short, *communitas* is about love.’ Alan Hirsch, in his following description of Christian *communitas*, evokes the Brigidine Sisters’ ethos;

---

Communitas... is a community infused with a grand sense of purpose; a purpose that lies outside of its current internal reality and constitution. It’s the kind of community that ‘happens’ to people in actual pursuit of a common vision of what could be. It involves movement and it describes the experience of togetherness that only really happens among a group of people actually engaged in a mission outside itself.¹⁷²

Rather than the inward focus of a community intent on nurturing a closed population that develops a safe place of encouragement and sanctuary, the activities of the Brigidine sisters push our societies forward through living out the mission of St Brigid: ‘What is mine is theirs’. Brigidine women who may not have anything else in common come together to live on the margins of society, choosing a career on the margins because of their vocation as religious sisters.

The concept of threshold has sustained Brigid’s relevance across several historical contexts and cultures. Brigid was born during the transition from paganism to Christianity in Ireland, where mythology claims she was literally born on the threshold of her pagan father’s home. Her Christian mother, in giving birth on the doorstep, metaphorically had one foot in the druid’s house and the other in the newly Christianised world. Brigid’s birth at dawn also symbolises the threshold time when, at the start of a new day, new potentialities await. As a bold metaphorical symbol, ‘she was born on the threshold of hearth and heath, past and present, cult and Christianity, druid and deacon.’¹⁷³

However, Brigid is also much more than a link between the Christian and pre-Christian worlds. She becomes an unmistakable link between this world and the next. Of all the saints, only two make an annual return to earth – St Nicholas at Christmas and Brigid at Imbolc. On the topic of this annual return, Seán Ó Duinn writes:

It must be asked if it is the normal practice for a Christian saint to return to earth on his or her feast day. The answer is quite clear – it is not the custom for a saint to come back on this occasion. The annual return of a saint is not part of the tradition of the Catholic Church. Generally speaking, saints have had a hard time in this world, they have had their fill of it, and display no great desire to return to it... In this ecclesiastical tradition, the saints, while they intercede for us who are on earth, remain firmly established in heaven.\footnote{174}{Ó Duinn, \textit{Rites}, 40.}

Whilst it is unusual for saints to act liminally, annually reengaging with earthbound peoples, it is not unfamiliar for gods, goddesses and other supernatural beings. Remaining with the Celtic tradition, the Tuatha Dé Danann (the people of the goddess Dana) have been regular visitors. They are the threshold figures who repeatedly pass through the barriers separating this world with the Otherworld.\footnote{175}{Fergus Fleming, \textit{Heroes of the Dawn: Celtic Myth}, (London: Duncan Baird, 1996), 29.} The most vital times of this crossing are at the changes in the seasonal calendar, the ‘thin’ places at Bealtaine (May eve), Lughnasa (Assumption eve), Samhain (All Hallow’s eve) and Imbolc (Brigid’s eve).\footnote{176}{Nuala Ahern, ‘Celtic Holiness and Modern Eco-Warriors’, in \textit{Celtic Threads: Exploring the Wisdom of our heritage}, ed. Padraigín Clancy, (Dublin: Veritas, 1999), 173-4.} At these times the space between two worlds shifts and the presence of the folk from another place becomes palpable.

Brigid’s time, Imbolc, is a special threshold time. Like Samhain/Halloween, ‘it is neither day nor night, neither winter nor summer; it is a brief interval of chaos before cosmic order is again established.’\footnote{177}{Ó Duinn’s research has led him to believe that ‘the return of Brigid from the Otherworld at Imbolc may be situated within this context of the breakdown of barriers and the visitation of pre-Christian deities at sacred seasons of the agricultural year.’\footnote{178}{Ó Duinn, \textit{Rites}, 45.}}

Here is the annual incursion from the Otherworld/ heaven of a significant goddess/ saint, who by this eruption is able to bring the powers of this other place
to bear upon the present. It is because she returns that she is able to bless the crops, the animals, the land and the people. The traditions and rituals that continue to surround the annual return of Brigid are extensive. These include the preparation of special food, cleansing rituals, taking the Brídeog - the large doll or image of Brigid made of straw and cloth – from house to house and the making of Brigid crosses out of straw and reeds.\(^{179}\)

By existing within two worlds – the Christian and the pagan – Brigid becomes for many the conduit into another place or state of mind. Women who are inspired by Brigid tell us that ‘in her femininity, Brigid inclusively embraces many kinds of cross currents, some of them apparently contradictory – the ancient and the new, the pagan and the Christian, the animal and the human, the rich and the poor – and from this it is clear that her ample cloak can accommodate all kinds of apparently irreconcilable differences’.\(^{180}\) As one neo-pagan author writes, ‘in her we have the true mother understanding of social co-operation and caring, of support, of respect and understanding between one person and another, one tradition and another, one generation and another, and indeed between the whole of humanity and the land itself.’\(^{181}\)

4.6 Brigid and Contemporary Australian Spiritualities

Irish scholar and folklorist Padraigín Clancy suggests four distinct reasons why there is so much interest in Brigid in our contemporary culture.\(^{182}\) Initially it is in part a response to the interest in all things Celtic. When many Australians can claim Celtic ancestry, there is a deep sense of connection with our past. Allied with this is the rediscovery of our stories. The Irish diaspora – brought about

\(^{179}\) Ó Duinn, *Rites*, 84-94, 121-135.


\(^{182}\) Padraigín Clancy has lectured in Australia on Celtic spirituality, most recently in November 2007.
through a combination of poverty, the potato famine and politics – saw over 1.5 million people leave Ireland between 1846 and 1855 to settle in the United States of America, whilst another 200,000 – 300,000 people settled in Canada. In our efforts to reconnect, we seek stories that echo the need to belong. Brigid is one such powerful figure who emerges from that need. Women are empowered when we remember and honour this saint and goddess from our collective history. It is part of being exiles who return, if only through myth, ritual and prayer, to our own land.

When we, as Australians, begin to unfold the layers of our individual Celtic heritage we also find that there is a strong feminine voice echoing through the ages. When we remember herstory within our history, we can find Brigid at the centre. In Brigid we unearth an archetypal female figure who helps us discover the feminine voice in a predominantly androcentric society. It is in this context that Australian Brigidine sister Anne Boyd is able to record:

At Kildare, I spent a good deal of time sitting in the fire temple in the cathedral grounds where Brigid built her first monastery. I could feel the vibrant spirit of this woman who was steeped in the sacred story of her land. She was so animated by the God who brought the land and its creatures into being that she inherited the powers of the feminine creativity of that God. She


184 Our own history of white settlement in Australia is comparatively short. The Brigid story is part of white woman story. Not blackfella, not whitefella. White woman. I am born here in Australia and love this country dearly. I have experienced some of the thin places of this land and have an enormous affinity with the land and her people. But I know that a major part of my own personal and family story originates in the Northern hemisphere. When I explore my own roots, England and Ireland are both an essential part of this story. Aileen Moreton-Robinson argues that it is impossible for a white woman to speak from any perspective other than that of a member of an implanted race. She states that ‘our claims to land invoke different sets of relations between land, place, people, spirits and history which form the basis of irreducible differences and incommensurabilities between white feminists and Indigenous women’. Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *Talking up to the White Woman: Indigenous Women and Feminism* (St Lucia: University of Queensland, 2000), 178.
modelled herself on the person of Jesus who so faithfully drew attention to God’s urgent desire for fullness of life. It is the same creative God who is now offering us energy and vitality for the task at hand. As the lamp continues to burn in her [Brigid’s] honour, may we be constantly aware that the fire finds its source in the life-giving energy of our star, the Sun — giving forth its energy constantly, that our planet might live.185

In Clancy’s second typology, Brigid stands as a symbol of women’s empowerment. We find references to this in the earliest vitae of St Brigid. These vitae inform us that, at a time when the betrothal of women was in the hands of male family members, Brigid stood up against this patriarchal tradition, determined to become a nun. When her father and brothers were organising suitable spouses and dowries, Brigid was in the habit of thwarting such advances by giving her father’s possessions away or by purposefully disfiguring her body to appear unattractive.

This is revolutionary. To stand up against an oppressive system for what you believe, takes courage and a dedicated sense of the truth of your convictions. The fact that so many women promptly joined the Brigidine community shows that her actions were prophetic and worthy of emulation. To put this into context, whilst excitement is often expressed about the positive status of women in early (400-800 CE) Irish culture, the reality of the legal status of women under early Irish law was less attractive than surviving folklore suggests. Indeed

… her father has charge over her when she is a girl, her husband when she is a wife, her sons when she is a widowed woman with children, her kin when she is ‘a woman of the kin’ (i.e. with no other guardian), the church when she is a woman of the church (i.e. a nun). She is not capable of sale or purchase or contract or transaction without the authorization of one of her superiors.186

Brigid shines out as an independent woman who was able to maintain a large and prosperous monastery whilst at the same time settling disputes, performing miracles, helping the poor, befriending animals, standing up for the underprivileged, challenging kings and preaching the gospel. It is also significant that folklore has her consecrated a Bishop, with all the male Episcopal authority that this signifies.

The third typology of Brigid is as the regenerator of life. In this context, ‘it is said that the lark begins to sing on St Brigid’s Day and the blackbird also, and that all the birds of the air begin to mate from St Brigid’s Day onwards.’ Clancy understands this as a portrayal of Brigid as cosmological mother. As such, Brigid is seen as the unseen force, driving the cycle of life from behind. Whilst a modern scientific approach might reject this reading of the power behind the seasons, in the realm of spirituality it is a powerful feminine image of strength, creativity, immanence and a deep connection with the planet.

From the perspective of a Brigidine sister we read:

When I think of Brigid
I think of milk and the slosh of milk between buckets,
Of milk churned quietly into butter,
Of generous milk poured out for the wayfarer:
I think of oatcakes and griddle cakes readied for the stranger;
I think of oak groves and a chapel rising from the forest;
I think of green rushes plaited into crosses;
Of fragrant turf and a fire kept long burning;
A sword melted and its opals sold to feed the hungry;
I think on generations looking up from their troubles
And a sheltering cloak spread warmly over the world.

---

187 Irish Folklore Collection, IFC 900: 39; Ciarán Ó Síothcháin, Cléire, Co Choraí. Quoted in Ó Duinn, Rites, 21.
This is an earthy, tangible image of a woman/saint/goddess who is fundamentally linked to the cycles of nature, to growth and fecundity. Brigid’s importance as an archetypal mother goddess, intimately connected to the seasons, can be seen in the following extract. It is part of a ritual to celebrate the full moon at Imbolc:

Now is the time of year when the process of planting begins. We know that it may not look like it. But the expansiveness of the seasons is already in motion. Farmers repair equipment and plan what they will grow. It is the season of lambing, when some of the first new life comes into being. You have been through the contemplative time in the heart of the dark days, the time of the Dark Night of the Soul when the earth is still and we are confronted with the darkness of our own hearts, the necessary dark that comes before the breakthroughs of birth and dramatic transformation... Now is time to nurture new growth, make new magic, and expand your awareness. Now is the time of year to be claimed by the Goddess Brigid. She embodies the everlasting embers that survive the dark nights and ignite the new day’s flame.  

In the contemporary collection ‘Imbolc Poems’, Jill Hammer presents a very fecund image of Brigid as the one who brings spring back after the harsh winter. The imagery is of Brigid teasing the earth, as a woman draws out the cow’s milk by caressing the breast.

The Feast of Brigid
The red-haired girl draws milk
in a pail from the earth.

The earth is a spotted cow
with teats that are geysers
and anthills and rotten logs.

The red-haired girl

---

strokes and strokes
the dark soil.

When the milk rises in spurts
she catches its arc of white froth
to give out to visitors.

At the gate of the farm
the world holds out its hand,
while in a field rimed with frost

the first snowdrop toddles from the ground.\(^{191}\)

Brigid is at the threshold of the seasons – by caressing the earth, she is able to enter the Otherworld where life does not cease for winter. Whilst we wait for spring, Brigid crosses the threshold to return with new life for our frozen world.

Brigid veneration makes sense in an Irish context, but the issue remains as to why women here, in Australia, find her inspirational. Two thousand years later, on the other side of the planet, the concern exists as to the concept of the Celtic calendar, with all its rural connotations – where Imbolc is the commencement of lambs milking – of light out of the darkness of winter, and to its meaning alongside the calendar of our southern hemisphere. Possibly part of a response to this is addressed by Australian writer Meg McNena who argues that the fire of Brigid is reflected in the rejuvenation that follows Australian bushfires, that ‘Australia could sure use some of Brigid's sway with nature… to renew our sunburnt country’ and that the ritual of an Australian summer barbecue is not unlike the celebrations around an Irish cauldron.\(^{192}\)

The deep sense of connection to ‘mother’ earth that is central to both Christian and pagan Celtic spirituality, links Brigid to the forces that bring light, warmth


\(^{192}\) McNena, ‘Making Sense’, 12.
and growth back to a dormant world. Clancy suggests that a further reason why Brigid is an inspiration for us today is because of her truly ecumenical nature.\textsuperscript{193} In her Christian context, Brigid is an Irish holy woman who existed before the Reformation. Without the division between Catholicism and Protestantism, she belonged to all people. Post-Reformation devotion to Brigid continues. Today, St Brigid’s Cathedral of Kildare is currently a Church of Ireland building and Kildare town’s \textit{Solas Bhríde} (the Christian community centre for Celtic spirituality) whilst being part of the Brigidine congregation, is deeply ecumenical in its activities.

This thesis has noted the significance of Brigid as an interfaith bridge between the two worlds of Christianity and neo-paganism. Coinin Carroll writes of this from a neo-pagan perspective:

\begin{quote}
One of the reasons I love Ord Brighideach, is that we are drawn together, people of different paths, by the warmth of Brigid’s flame. I do not think that this harmony can be found anywhere else, and my prayer is that it spreads, like the fire and the heat of the hearth fire.\textsuperscript{194}
\end{quote}

Both neo-pagan practitioners and Christians reach out to that which is beyond them through prayer.

Clancy’s fourth reason for the contemporary importance and relevance of Brigid lies in the re-vitalisation of personal and religious celebrations. Clancy argues that the primary symbols associated with Brigid – the holy wells, fire, Brigid’s cloak and cross – can all be used to revitalise liturgy, whilst stories of Brigid can be understood alongside the parables of Jesus.\textsuperscript{195} The \textit{vitae} of Brigid were quick to make such connections, promoting their saint by connecting her actions with those of Jesus. Brigid, because of her belief in Jesus, also acted as a healer and miracle worker.

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{193} Clancy, Muire na nGael, 47. \\
\textsuperscript{195} Clancy, Muire na nGael, 48, 49.
\end{flushright}
Brigit went to a certain church in the land of Teffia to celebrate Easter, when on Maunday-Thursday Brigit took to washing the feet of the old men and the feeble folk who were in the church. Four of the sick people there, were a consumptive man, a madman, a blind man, and a leper. Brigit washed the feet of the four, and they were straightway healed from every disease that was on them.  

Biblical references that parallel these miracle stories of Brigid refer to Jesus healing the blind (Mark 8: 22-26), the deaf (Mark 7: 31-38) and a leper (Mark 1: 40-42).

Regular liturgy for the Brigidine sisters in Australia includes citing these stories of Brigid. The following excerpt asks the blessing of Brigid for Daniel Delany’s Day celebrations with the invocation:

Brigid of the mantle, encompass us
Lady of the Lambs, protect us.
Keeper of the hearth, kindle us
Beneath your mantle, gather us,
And restore us to memory.  

A liturgical prayer from an annual Brigidfest celebration requested that ‘Brigid of the sunrise, rising in the morning you are the connecting link between the groups gathered this morning, be with us today and throughout the year as our inspiration and as our model in the service of other people.’ Two years later, the Brigidfest liturgy asked, ‘What would Brigid say to us today as we continue to spend our money on weapons of war instead of feeding the poor people of the world?’

Within Australia’s neo-pagan community, ritual also plays a vital role. Australian Lynne Hume argues that part of the attraction of neopaganism is the opportunities provided for creative ritualistic expression. She argues that, ‘as well as being a response to church dogma and the established barriers to an active priestly role for

196 Stokes, Middle-Irish Homilies, 69.
199 Anon., Prayer from the Liturgy, Brigidfest, Brigidine archives, Kildara Centre: Malvern Victoria, Australia February 9, 2003, 1.
women, [neo-paganism] answers the existing lacunae of female rites of passage which have been seriously missing from mainstream church liturgies.\textsuperscript{200} Seen as empowering action in which women focus upon having their needs met as well as learning the ability to ask for what those needs might be, ‘rituals tend to be written or improvised for each celebration and may include aspects of theatre, dance, art, poetry, singing, and creative ways of interacting among group members.’\textsuperscript{201}

The celebratory potential of incorporating Brigid into neo-pagan gatherings and individual rituals is powerfully expressed in these two passages.\textsuperscript{202}

Imbolc recognises and honours the Maiden aspect of the triple goddess – the fresh, the young, the naïve, the new, even a little unawakened, distant and cold, for some. Her Celtic name is Brid. By embracing the positive aspects of this energy, you can approach situations and people and your own negative qualities with open eyes and an open heart… You need not go over the same ground again next year if you put in the hard spiritual work and manifest Brid’s power at Imbolc. Please make a note to mark the weeks between Imbolc and Beltane on your calendar and swear to yourself that you will, come what may, meditate and spell work and chant to clear your own lessons. Brid demands you be fresh, new and mindful… From Imbolc to Beltane is the time for Brid’s energy to set behind plenty of meditation, spirituality, and laying the seeds for your life over the next year. It’s so important for any Witch to really work on themselves at this time. Growth and happiness and enrichment will be yours if you do.\textsuperscript{203}

And:

This morning as I was doing my incants under my healing/prayer tree I was blessed with such an energy that it took my breath away. The energy was so strong, I could actually see it. Under my healing tree I have a little stone altar on which I have painted a picture of our Lady in blues and white surrounded by waves of healing. As I was lighting the incense to start my incants a small globe of

\textsuperscript{200} Hume, \textit{Heretics}, 40.
\textsuperscript{201} Warwick, \textit{Feminist Wicca}, 123.
\textsuperscript{202} The focus of the following two extracts is primarily on individual ritual. Community ritual invoking the power of Brigid has been highlighted in the previously cited article by Starhawk.
\textsuperscript{203} Cavendish, ‘Imbolc’, 18.
bluish pulsing light began to hover and pulse just above the altar stone. I immediately put my hands under the globe (about the size of a tennis ball) and lifted it carefully, holding it over my head I allowed it to enter through the top of my head. At this point two raven landed at the end of the grove and started making such a racket, flapping their wings wildly. Then in a few minutes they took flight cawing as they went into the distance. Blessings All! Brighid’s Kiss...204

In this context ‘our Lady in blues and white’ is understood to be Goddess Brigid, not the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Interest in Brigid in a range of contemporary Australian spiritualities remains strong. Clancy suggests that, as a response to the interest in all things Celtic, as a symbol of women’s empowerment, as the regenerator of life, and as the revitalisation of personal and religious celebrations, Brigid offers a lens through which to understand this interest.205

There emerges within women an inner strength wherein ‘the internalising of images of female divinity… gives women the strength to effect change in their personal lives and the strength to merge collectively to incite social and political change and provides a position from which to challenge the dominant construction of reality.’206

CHAPTER 5

Conclusion

Brigid is surrounded by and also connects all the elements of creation – of the Cosmos. Earth – Air – Fire – Water. Masculine and feminine. Her deep Celtic spirit places her in relationship with them and it is this which provides her strength and gentleness. She senses God in all of creation. She is nurtured and sustained by this awareness. She knows love in this awareness. She feels God’s love for her in this awareness. She, in turn, reaches out to others. She is a woman empowered to express her strength with gentleness and her gentleness with strength.207

This thesis has explored the role Brigid plays in contemporary Australian women’s spirituality. It has looked at personal and communal liberation for women in Christianity and neo-paganism. What we find with those women who claim St Brigid as a driving force in their spiritual lives are continual examples of women who speak out against structural injustice whilst working tirelessly to eradicate poverty in their communities. Maybe this is partly because St Brigid remains portrayed as an earthy, gutsy woman, who, despite her virginal status as a religious nun, insists on turning water into beer,208 gets her hands dirty by milking the cows209 and argues with Kings when she disagrees with them.210 It is also significant that St Brigid was never Romanised. She remains an indigenous saint, existing in Ireland before Roman Christianity became the leading theological model. Certainly the Roman Catholic Church has dominated Irish religion for centuries, but, as this thesis suggests, Brigid remains closely linked to her pre-Christian and early Christian roots.

209 Anon., ‘Tales 1625’, chapter 1, paragraph 3.
210 Anon., ‘Tales 1625’, chapter 5, paragraph 2
One of the most exciting aspects of Brigid is that she may be able to operate as a nexus of conversation between Christianity and neopaganism. Conversation between these two groups has often been hostile. Many neo-pagans appear angry at a Christian Church that has allegedly stolen their pagan heritage, either watering the heritage down by belittling the more lusty, earthy aspects of their religion (the fecund goddess dissipating into a virgin saint) or systematically removing any hints of a pre-existing pagan religion. Many neo-pagans have chosen to move away from a religion that appears to be life-denying, with a punitive emphasis on sin and eternity. As one neo-pagan advocate writes:

I discovered Paganism after Christianity failed to fulfil my needs. There was something lacking in Christianity. I am unsure whether it was because I couldn't comprehend God or sin, or whether the whole notion of redemption after death was so daunting. I wanted to feel the magic whilst I was still alive not after I was dead.211

For this neo-pagan, a more life-giving belief system involved an honouring of all that appears celebratory – love of nature, delight in a pantheon of male and female deities and celebration of the wonder of the human body.

At the same time, the Christian Church remains wary of engaging with neo-pagan devotees, despite limited dialogue between neo-pagans and Christians.212 In particular, the more conservative elements in the institutional Church are quick to equate neo-paganism with satanic worship, whilst a shroud of fear and misinformation has arguably prevented many more moderate Christians from engaging in conversation with their neo-pagan sisters and brothers.

The unifying capacity of a belief in Brigid as both/either saint and/or goddess is summed up in the following quote.

---

211 Hume, Witchcraft, 85.
I can value Catholicism as the religion of my heritage while still honouring the earth as sacred mother… So it was a relief and a wonder to visit Kildare in Ireland to celebrate St Brigid’s Day on February 1. There were many pagans drawn to revere the Celtic Goddess Brigid, and there were many Christians honouring the saint… We lit our candles and circled around while chanting her name. By the fire in the centre, a woman sat and wove reeds into Brigid’s Cross. By the well, we sang, listened to stories of her life, shared poems and prayers. One of the women danced about with Brigid’s green cloak, covering us and waking the earth to spring. And then there was time to sit around the bonfire and learn each other’s stories. Numbered among the Mass-goers the next morning were quite a few of the pagan persuasion drawn along by the desire to acknowledge the Christian aspect of this revered woman… One woman commented that ‘Brigid belongs to everyone’. It did seem that way, as though the holy Brigid spreading her green cloak over us all could not be contained by the artificial boundaries drawn between state and religion, between Christian and pagan, between Catholic and Protestant, between one perspective and another. She crosses between worlds, bearing the same message of generosity, compassion, justice, caring for the earth, healing, creativity, tolerance and understanding for each other. I felt confirmed in a faith that is less a finite or definitive object – to be labelled Catholic or pagan or anything else – than an organic experience that is always in the process of becoming.\textsuperscript{213}

Brigid is also a figure who attracts followers in both pagan and Christian traditions because of her unique significance as threshold figure: linking this temporal world with an existence beyond, within and around – the liminal space – as well as the threshold that exists between pagan and Christian worlds. Because of her unique history and nature, Brigid traverses this shift from pre-Christian to Christian spirituality. In the neo-pagan stories cited, times of isolation, depression or desperation are able to be overcome as a direct result of invoking Brigid. Rituals based upon veneration of Brigid were understood as powerful ways of reversing personal oppression, transforming suffering and strengthening one’s spirit. Similarly, Christian women find in Brigid a wellspring of personal strength – a model of autonomy, compassion, right relationship and social justice. As both

saint and goddess she is uniquely placed as an empowering figure in contemporary Australian women’s spirituality. It is this shifting nature of Brigid that is endlessly fascinating.

It has been shown how the Christian saint took on many of the characteristics, folklore and rituals surrounding Goddess Brigid. Brigid has become bridge between the two worlds of Christianity and paganism. Perhaps it is partly because some Christians and many neo-pagans are prepared to live (and hopefully delight in) in the liminal space of ritual, that there is the possibility for discourse within and between religious belief systems. The liminal nature of this figure allows the mortal saint and the deified goddess to be spoken of as the one being. Something in Brigid’s nature makes it possible to claim that she is both uniquely saint and goddess whilst being at the same time saint/goddess - there is no clear delineation.

It is the aforementioned feminist methodology, with an emphasis on ‘experience’, that reconciles any ambiguity. It is not possible to define this characteristic as saint-like without recognising the context of the saint as emerging from pre-history and folk-lore in which Goddess Brigid was a major player within the Celtic pantheon. The metaphor of Brigid as threshold woman, linking the two worlds of Christianity and paganism, is one of the most crucial aspects of the significance of Brigid.

One highly challenging question that arises when we see Brigid as being both saint and goddess is whether a goddess can reveal something of the nature of the reign of God. Can there really be an honest discussion between contemporary Christianity and neo-paganism? Is there really any point of connection between these two seemingly disparate world views? The answer is both yes and no.

It is difficult to find a point of commonality between this paradigm and the Christian religion if there is an explicit rejection of evil, sin and the need for redemption. From the perspective of neo-paganism, the role of Jesus as redeemer
becomes largely unnecessary and the Incarnation becomes a Christian myth, the date arguably hijacked by Christians who stole 25th December from the pagan Celtic festival of winter solstice.

In turn, Christianity may find little point in a shared discussion with a dissimilar group of men and women who reject belief in the One, True God, and who look beyond the Judeo-Christian God of five thousand years to a goddess civilisation dating back over twenty-five thousand years.

A potentially reconciling view is presented in *Gaudium et Spes*,

that which is truly freedom is an exceptional sign of the image of God in man [sic]. For God willed that man should ‘be left in the hand of his own council’ so that he might of his own accord seek his creator and freely attain his full and blessed perfection by cleaving to him. Man’s dignity therefore requires him to act out of conscious and free choice, as moved and drawn in a personal way from within, and not by blind impulses in himself or by mere external constraint. Man gains such dignity when, ridding himself of all slavery to the passions, he presses forward towards his goal by freely choosing what is good, and by his diligence and skill, effectively secures for himself the means suited to this end. 214

In this, might there not be opportunity for dialogue that is attempting to reach agreement ‘destined to liberate those engaged in discussion from their solitude and their mutual distrust, and to induce a truer fellow-feeling, mutual reverence and esteem’?215 One of the texts for this study addressed the role of Brigid as mediator between Christianity and Paganism.

There is much to say about Brigid the Goddess and Brigid the saint. I believe the two are the same. The Saint, who came to this earth in human


form, embodied the qualities of the Goddess – much in the same way people describe Jesus the man, embodying the qualities of Christ God… One of the many things I love about Brigid is she seems to be able to bridge the apparently vast chasm between Christianity and Paganism.\textsuperscript{216}

What is clear is that veneration of Brigid – as saint, goddess, or both – has played, and continues to play, a diverse, but always powerful role in the spiritual journeys of many Australian women.


\textsuperscript{216} Joe Mullally, ‘Saint Brigid’, paragraph 2.
Appendix

Brigid as Saint

The following references comprise the forty primary sources, cited in the body of the thesis as expressing significant experiences of Brigid as Saint.


12. ‘Brigidine Goes for Gold’. 2004


23. Maas, Judith. 2002. ‘St Brigid would vote No if faced with this referendum’, The Irish Times (5 March).


Brigid as Goddess

The following references comprise the forty-five primary sources, cited in the body of the thesis as expressing significant experiences of Brigid as Goddess.


42. Willowraven. ‘Third Watch Flame Tender’. *Cell of the Fir.*


45. Wyche, Freya. 2006. [Untitled]. *We are the Keepers of the Flame of Brighid.*
BIBLIOGRAPHY


*St Patrick’s Cathedral: Melbourne.* Leaflet available as a guide to viewing St Patrick’s Cathedral, Melbourne Australia. No date provided. Collected February 2004.


