

The Contentious History of a Holiday

by Sir Knight Frank Conway, Ph.D.

Did you know that the oldest, most revered religious festival of the Christian Church, a festival observed from the very beginning of Christianity, is named after a pagan deity, and that the Church has forbidden this festival to be celebrated on the calendar days on which it actually occurred?

By the 2nd century A.D., the Christian Church had become organized and powerful enough to begin establishing its own universally observed religious festivals. For the first two centuries of the Church's existence, there was only one such festival, a loosely-observed commemoration of the suffering, death, and resurrection of its founder, Jesus of Nazareth. This series of events had become the first traditional religious observance among early Christians, a festival that had begun during the very first days of Christianity, one that predated Christmas by several centuries. The events that the festival celebrated lasted four days, from the evening of the Last Supper until dawn on the Day of Resurrection. According to Matthew 28:1, the Day of Resurrection occurred on the "first day of the week," our Sunday. Counting backwards, that placed the Last Supper on Thursday evening. Now Jesus was a Jew, and the Last Supper was the first of two Seder feasts that open the Jewish holiday of Passover.

The celebration of Passover, an eight day holiday, begins on the 14th day of the Hebrew month Nissan (March-April), usually the night of a full moon. Since the Hebrew calendar is lunar, the first evening of Passover - the first Seder feast - occurs on a different date from year to year. If the Church kept the date of the Last Supper on the first day of Passover, the Day of Resurrection would fall on a different day of the week every year and usually on a weekday rather than on a Sunday. The very early Christians in the Middle East had mostly been former Jews, so following the passion and resurrection of Christ according to the Hebrew calendar, by which they regulated their lives anyway, presented no problem. They just regarded the observance of Christ's death and resurrection as an addition to their Passover celebration. Many of these early Jewish-Christian intellectuals looked upon Jesus as a very special man, the Son of David, a man anointed by destiny to liberate the Jewish nation by virtue of his spiritual perfection that he had attained through suffering. He was their moshiach, their messiah (anointed one), directly descended from David and therefore the legitimate king of Israel, but many still regarded him as only a man.

Many Judaic Christians in the early Jerusalem Church had not yet accepted the Pauline Doctrine and did not regard Jesus as truly divine. Those who believed that He had arisen from the dead on the morning of the first day (and there were many who doubted this) did not credit the miracle to the divine power of Jesus himself. They thought that the resurrection had been entirely the work of Yahweh, done as a favor to his Chosen One. Others considered the resurrection to have been a purely

spiritual event, not the actual arising of Christ's physical body. These early Judaic Christians still followed halacha, the Jewish Law, and kept the Sabbath on Saturday; Sunday was just another day, as far as they were concerned, but by the 2nd century, many Gentiles had joined the Church, and they saw Sunday as a special day, their Sabbath. They very much wanted to celebrate the "Day of Resurrection" on that day and no other. When some of these Gentiles succeeded to the Papal throne, something clearly was going to be done.

There were two divisions of Christianity in the first century after Christ, the Roman Church and the Eastern Church. The older of the two was the Eastern Church, centered first in Jerusalem and later, after the Roman destruction of the Temple, in Antioch. This Church consisted almost entirely of Christianized Jews, and they began their observance of Christ's Passion on the 14th day of Nissan, no matter which day of the week it fell on. For this reason, they were called Quartodecimans ("Fourteeners"). In addition, they tended to focus their observance on the crucifixion, in which they saw Christ as the willing substitute for the Jewish Pascal lamb, offering himself to Yahweh to free the Jewish nation from the yoke of Rome. They discounted the resurrection that they saw as being celebrated on every Sunday of the year in the Christian Mass anyway, with no need of having a special day during the Passover dedicated to it. So if the Day of Resurrection fell on a weekday, it didn't bother them.

Pope Victor (c. 189-199) disposed of the Fourteeners sometime around A.D. 190 with a stern letter to the Church of Antioch. If they wanted to remain in good grace with the much more powerful Roman Church, they would have to focus their observance on the Day of Resurrection, an all-important day to Gentile Christians. Also, henceforth the resurrection was to be observed throughout the Christian world on a Sunday, not on a weekday. Although the Pope, as Bishop of Rome, had no real temporal authority at the time, the patriarchs of Antioch saw the wisdom of going along with Rome, and they capitulated to Victor's demands. Those Jewish Christians who continued to observe the Passover found themselves unwelcome in their own churches. One generation later, the Fourteeners had disappeared from Church history. Sunday was now the official Day of Resurrection.

The next question was: "Which Sunday?" Should it be before the 14th or after? Should it have no relation to the Passover at all? At the Council of Nicaea, convened by the Emperor Constantine in A.D. 325, the bishops agreed upon the vernal equinox, the first day of spring, as the pivotal day. They decided that the Day of Resurrection would be observed on the Sunday following the first full moon on or after the spring equinox. To determine this, they resorted to the astronomical science of the day. Now, everyone knew that the best astronomers in the Roman Empire were those who practiced in Alexandria, Egypt, so the Emperor commissioned them to determine the exact day of the equinox. After careful consideration and many calculations, they came up with March 21st. The learned men of Alexandria labored under a considerable handicap, however. Although ancient Greek astronomers had long suspected that the earth was round, Christian cosmology of the day was geocentric and held that the earth was a flat disk with

Jerusalem at its exact center. The disk stood at the center of the universe, and the sun, planets, and stars were thought to revolve around it. This led to some interesting results when the Alexandrian astronomers tried to forecast the date of the full moon for years or even centuries ahead.

There was another provision: The full moon had to occur before the agreed-upon Sunday. If the full moon happened to fall on that particular Sunday, then the entire four-day holiday was to be postponed until the following week. Under no circumstances did Rome want Our Lord's Resurrection to coincide with the beginning of the Jewish Passover. Rather an odd proviso, considering that Jesus had told his disciples (Luke 22, 15), "I have greatly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer." The Church was already beginning the de-Judaization of its founder.

The imperial backing of Constantine gave the Pope, for the first time, temporal as well as spiritual authority; he now had the military might of the Roman army behind his decrees. He no longer had to depend on stern letters and sermonic tongue-lashing to make his point. The punishments for what had come to be called heresy (literally "the wrong choice") became much more severe, sometimes extending even to torture and execution. After Nicaea, the entire Roman world was celebrating the four days of the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of Christ at the same time, but there were other worlds besides the Roman one, and there was one more controversy that remained to be resolved.

Sometime during the seventh century, the Roman Church discovered that it had yet another wayward Christian culture to contend with, the Celtic Church. Ireland had become mostly Christian by the year 500 thanks to the missionary work of one Patrick, Bishop of Armagh. In the following century, Irish monks sailed over to England, Wales, and the islands off the west coast of Scotland and founded monastic communities along the seacoast. From those monasteries, many of which became respected centers of advanced learning, the Irish bishops and monks attempted to complete the Christianization of the British Isles that St. Augustine, along with a party of forty monks sent by Pope Gregory, had begun in 597. They were not entirely successful.

Due partly to its geographical isolation and partly to the disintegration of the Roman Empire, the Celtic Church had developed largely on its own, outside the circle of the Roman Church's influence. Their brand of Christianity was considerably laid-back and included many pagan Celtic practices and personalities of which Rome would have disapproved. For instance, recognizing that the Irish country people were especially devoted to the goddess, Brigit, the bishops simply canonized her as St. Brigid and turned her shrine at Kildare into a Christian church where nuns would keep her sacred oak fire burning for the better part of a thousand years. The goddess' symbol was a sun wheel shaped like a primitive swastika, traditionally woven from rushes, that even today is hung over Irish hearths and that can readily be purchased as a "Brigid's cross" in any store specializing in Irish goods. Celtic monks had their own form of tonsure, the hair on the front half of the

head shaved off and that on the back half allowed to grow long and untrimmed. They had their own eschatological traditions too, one of which held that, in the Second Coming, Christ would be born as a woman, but the real sticking point with Rome was, once again, the date of the Day of Resurrection.

The Celtic clergy, not having the benefits of astronomical advice from Alexandria, relied on complex tables of lunar cycles (which neither the Celts nor the Romans really understood) to make their holiday calculations. Consequently, the Roman and the Celtic Day of Resurrection were usually a week or two apart, with the Celtic one coming first. This meant that for decades, there were two Days of Resurrection celebrated in the British Isles, one on the Celtic date and one on the Roman date.

The matter, a subject of heated disputes between all parties, was finally resolved, not by venerable bishops or holy monks, but by a spat between a husband and wife. A local king, Oswy of Northumberland, had married the Princess Eanfled of Kent. She had been baptized on the Roman Resurrection Sunday, and she and her retinue all observed the Roman dates for the holiday. Oswy, on the other hand, still adhered to the Celtic dates, and as a result, he and his courtiers had usually broken their Lenten fast and were enjoying a hearty dinner of ham and mead and roast goose while Eanfled and her party still had a week of fasting to look forward to. As the aroma of Oswy's feast filled the castle, his queen was not amused. In addition, the Lenten rules of the time forbade sexual relations, even between married couples. Now it was Oswy who was not amused. This was an untenable situation, and it didn't take Oswy, egged on by his hot-tempered son, long to resolve matters. He presided over an ecclesiastical council held at Whitby (twenty miles north of Scarborough on the North Sea coast) in 663. There he threw his support with the representatives of the Roman faction, and Rome carried the day. The whole Christian world was finally united in the observance of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Meanwhile, the Roman bishops had noticed an oddity on the part of their Celtic brethren. The local people as well as the Celtic monks and bishops kept referring to the Day of Resurrection as "Easter's Sunday." Easter? Who, the Romans wondered, was Easter? Another of the innumerable Celtic saints who populated Irish legends?

Not exactly. The Celts were invoking the name of the northern European dawn goddess, Easter. St. Bede, the 8th century scholar-monk, tells us in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (written around 731) that her name ("She who appears in the East") is the Anglo-Saxon form of the Scandinavian Ostra, the Norsemen's Eostur, or the Teutonic Ostern. These all became Eastre in the language of Anglo-Saxon Britain. Her festival, Ostara in German, became Easter when the Germanic Saxons settled in England. It was celebrated on the dawn following the first full moon on or after the spring equinox and is thought to have been the beginning of the pagan Germanic year, just as Samhain (Halloween) was the beginning of the Druidic year. Our month of April was called Eosturmonath (Easter's month) in Anglo-Saxon. The holiday itself was called Eostreblot (Easter's

Blessing) by the Saxons and Sigrblot (Blessing for Victory) by the marauding Vikings.

Easter herself was represented in art as a tall, fair-skinned, blue-eyed blonde woman who wore only a fish-net draped around her shoulders and stood holding out her left hand, offering her worshippers the apple of immortality. Her sacred animal was the rabbit, which was supposed to provide her worshippers with bright red-colored eggs (symbols of fertility) to celebrate the joy of the returning warm weather. She was usually accompanied by a prophetic raven, an oracular bird that predicted the fortunes of the coming year. Sometime in the 12th century, the monks of Coventry Cathedral carved a scene on a choir seat that portrays a naked woman wrapped in a fish net, holding an apple, and riding on a goat with a rabbit running by her side and a black bird flying overhead. This image is "Christianized" today in old guide-books where it is explained away as an early attempt to illustrate the legend of Lady Godiva. This is probably because the cathedral had been founded in 1043 by Leofric, Earl of Mercia, and his wife, Godiva, but the woman in the carving is without doubt the goddess Easter.

Easter's festival meant that it was spring, when the villagers could begin planting their crops and when domestic and wild animals came into season and mated. In the early pre-dawn hours preceding her sunrise epiphany, the people built bon-fires on the hillsides to welcome her. After the sunrise services, they decked themselves with flowers and danced around a tall pole - the Maypole, as we call it today - that had a cut evergreen tree lashed to the top. The congregation then sacrificed a goat to the goddess and shared the meat among the poorer families.

Easter was a form of the ancient Proto-Indo-European dawn goddess, Ausos, "The Shining One," the most powerful and widely revered pagan deity whose worship had survived from Stone-Age Europe. She and her joyous spring festival were so beloved by the people of the northern countries that they did not formally abandon her worship until the 1400s, centuries after they had adopted Christianity. Unknowingly, we have not totally abandoned it yet. To this day in America, we still acknowledge her sacred rabbit with its colored eggs as an enduring mascot of the holiday. On a recent spring river cruise along the Rhine, the author has seen her Maypoles, one in the center square of every German town and village, each pole bedecked with long colored ribbons for the people to hold as they danced and each with a freshly cut pine tree at its tip. It is only in English, German, and a few other Northern European tongues that the holiday is still named after the goddess; in most other European languages its name is some form of Pasch (such as the French Pâques or the Italian Pasqua), derived from the Hebrew Pesach (Passover).

Since Easter's epiphany occurred on the dawn following the first full moon after the spring equinox, and the Church fathers had decided to fix the celebration of Christ's day of resurrection on the dawn of the first Sunday after the first full moon following the equinox, the goddess' feast usually fit in quite nicely with the Church's timing. This method of reckoning kept the Last Supper Seder in place on Thursday, and the crucifixion would always happen on Good Friday. Also, because

it was pinned to the spring equinox, the holiday would usually occur close enough to the Jewish Passover to keep the seasonal relevance of the Gospel accounts intact. So, even though the Christian Easter was a movable lunar feast, it kept the sequence of daily events in the desired order, ending with the resurrection at dawn on the Christian Sabbath, as desired.

After the Reformation, Easter got short shrift from most Protestants, who looked upon it with suspicion as just another concession of Rome to accommodate converted pagans by replacing their accustomed holidays with Christian festivities, just another Halloween or Lughnasadh ("LOON-ah-sah," a harvest festival of the Celtic god Lugh, still celebrated in Ireland). Easter did not catch on in the American colonies for several generations. New England Puritans, who recognized that most of the holiday's secular customs smacked of a pagan springtime fertility rite, suppressed it along with Christmas. Then, around the middle of the 19th century, America saw an influx of German, Irish, and Eastern European Catholics, all of whom celebrated Easter with gusto, even reinstating the custom of dancing around the Maypole. German immigrants, both Catholic and Lutheran, introduced their custom of coloring Easter eggs and hiding them in the forest for children to find. Many Protestants looked askance at all of these outlandish goings-on. It was clear to them that these newcomers were having entirely too much fun for people celebrating a solemn religious holiday. It looked as if they regarded Easter as just another excuse for a jolly feast complete with chocolate bunnies, jellybeans, and alcohol. Finally, after the Civil War, when all of America was in need of renewed hope and inspiration, both Presbyterians and Catholics led an initiative to revitalize Easter, and they managed to bring it into the American catalogue of religious celebrations.

Despite its pagan source, the goddess' name has become established as the official name of the holiday in the English language. It is used by priests, bishops, cardinals, ministers, and even Church scholars in their learned writings on the subject. We have Easter Masses, Easter services, Easter candles, Easter sermons, Easter baskets, Easter parades, and of course, Easter Sunday itself. Perhaps the best way to end this article would be to wish all my fellow Knights and their families a Happy and a Blessed... Easter!

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Sir Knight Frank Conway, Ph.D. is a member of Crusade Commandery No.23, Haddonfield, New Jersey. He resides at 25 Edgewood Drive, Cherry Hill, NJ 08003 and can be contacted at: fconway10@comcast.net

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