Motherhood(s) in Religions: The Religionification of Motherhood and Mothers' Appropriation of Religion

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Back Home and Back to Nature? Natural Parenting and Religion in Francophone Contexts

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Abstract: New entanglements between parenting (in theory and practice), environmentalism, religion, spirituality, and secularism are at the core of the analysis presented in this article. In francophone contexts, discourses by practitioners, advocates and detractors of natural parenting contribute to associating this specific style of parenting and several of its key practices with religion and spirituality. After documenting and defining natural parenting by listing its characteristic practices and underlining its values as well as its important overlap with attachment parenting, this article examines the historically religious roots of movements linked to several practices still regarded as typical of natural parenting (natural childbirth movements, natural family planning or fertility awareness, and breastfeeding advocacy). Along with feminist and medical strands of criticism, within these highly secular contexts, the association with religion and spirituality participates in the criticism of this style of parenting which combines the key tenets of attachment parenting with a strong environmentalist agenda implemented for the most part in the domestic sphere and around women's bodies.

Keywords: Parenting, Motherhood, Environmentalism, Nature, Gender, Secularism

1 Introduction: Studying Natural Parenting from a Perspective of Religious Studies

In francophone contexts, the association of "natural parenting" with religion or spirituality[1] is not always explicit but it is, nevertheless, pervasive. Without exhausting the analysis of its multiple and complex dimensions, this article seeks to document and examine natural parenting as a cluster of representations, discourses, and practices related principally to fertility, pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding, and extending to child-rearing practices, education, and choices in healthcare, diet, or consumption in general. Known in English as "natural family living," "sustainable motherhood," "ecoparenting" or "green

1 I use the contested term "spirituality" to refer in general terms to worldviews and practices of individuals, groups, or even structured movements that are not necessarily rooted in or associated with historically established institutions, such as the Roman Catholic Church, or broader religious traditions, such as Islam. For debates about the relevance of the terms "spirituality" vs. "religion" in research focusing on women, see Fedele and Knibbe, "From Angel in the Home to Sacred Prostitute" and Zwissler, "Spiritual but Religious." In the context of studying nature-based spiritualities, see note 27 and the reference to Bron Taylor's work.

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mothering," this type of parenting has rarely been studied as such in francophone contexts. Moreover, most of the previous research on closely related topics generally focuses on *one* precise component of natural parenting: for instance, "sacred pregnancy,"[2] spiritual and religious imagery of childbirth,[3] more specifically homebirth[4] and alternative modes of birthing,[5] breastfeeding,[6] or washable diapers.[7] Selected aspects of natural parenting in France have been analyzed through the lense of a criticism of "intensive mothering."[8] Yet, in spite of a necessary deconstruction of the ambiguous notions of "nature" and "the natural" (in French: *la nature* and *le naturel*), especially in connection to women's gestating, birthing, and lactating bodies, these studies rarely place a strong focus on the environmentalist and religious or spiritual dimensions of natural parenting. Anna Fedele points out to the scarcity of studies on such topics,[9] and, in her own work on "spiritual mothering" and "holistic mothers,"[10] she investigates more particularly homebirth,[11] without bringing the sustainable or environmentalist dimensions of these styles of parenting to the forefront.

Another notable exception to this trend in researching *one* specific aspect or practice only, Chris Bobel's book, *The Paradox of Natural Mothering* (2002)[12] remains the only extensive study that offers a more general survey. Based on fieldwork conducted in the USA in the 1990s, before the rise of Internet-based communications and social media, her study examined the coherence of practices, discourses, and representations of what she and her informants called "natural mothering."

While building upon such previous works, this article apprehends natural parenting from a broader and more encompassing perspective in religious studies. The purpose of the broader research on which it is based (see below) was to underscore the common values and worldviews that bind together in a fuzzy cluster eclectic practices that are recurring and recommended, but never mandatory. This type of parenting gives rise to discourses that are not only cultural or political but also moral, ethical, religious, spiritual, medical, environmental, and technological. Whether ascribed by detractors or, more rarely, reclaimed by practitioners themselves, such dimensions have rarely been considered together. Thus, as a response to Kathryn Lofton's recent call to examine parenting as a relevant and revealing topic in religious studies, this article explains how natural parenting participates in "the specific strategies by which societies "bring forth, give birth to, produce" themselves in the discursive modernity defined by (…) genealogies of the secular."[13] In francophone and, especially, French contexts that have a particular understanding of secularism, why and how do some key practices of natural parenting remain associated with religion, most often in a negative way? Why are they included in a criticism of a trend in "going back to Nature" seen as dangerously essentialist and as threatening to resetting the status of women to that of earlier decades or centuries?

To answer such questions, following this introduction, sections 2 and 3 provide the framework and contextualization necessary to the discussion, in section 4, of the generally negative portrayal of natural parenting practitioners and advocates in francophone media, mostly from France, through the lexical field and imagery of religion and spirituality. As argued in the next section of this article, natural parenting can be defined more precisely through listing its typical practices (2.1) and through highlighting the values

2 Duncan, "Sacred Pregnancy."
3 Hennessey, *Imagery, Ritual, and Birth*.
4 Klassen, *Blessed Events*, and "Procreating Women and Religion"; Craven, *Pushing for Midwives*; Cheney, *Born at Home*; Fedele, "When Homebirth 'Goes Wrong.'"
5 Quagliariello, "L'accouchement naturel contre l'hôpital moderne?"; Quagliariello and Ruault, "Accoucher de manière "alternative" en France et en Italie"; Ingar, "Birth in France."
6 De Jager Ward, *La Leche League;* Faircloth, *Militant Lactivism?*, "Is Attachment Mothering Intensive Mothering?," "Between "le Corps 'Maternel' et le Corps 'Erotique'," "'Natural' Breastfeeding in Comparative Perspective."
7 Lalanne and Lapeyre, "L'engagement écologique"; Takeshita, "Eco-Diapers."
8 Paltineau, "From Intensive Mothering to Identity Parenting."
9 Fedele, "Spiritual Mothering in Portugal," 2.
10 Fedele, "Holistic Mothers."
11 Fedele, "When Homebirth 'Goes Wrong'"; also see Fedele and Pasche Guignard, "Pushing from the Margins."
12 Bobel, *The Paradox of Natural Mothering.*
13 Lofton, "Religion and the Authority," 808.

that inform them (2.2). The third section then highlights some of the originally "religious roots" of natural parenting. It takes natural family planning, natural childbirth movements, and breastfeeding advocacy as examples of practices that, historically, were indeed linked to specific religious groups or movements in their mostly anglophone (especially North American) contexts of emergence. The misrepresentation of key aspects and components of natural parenting, such as the negative portrayal of homebirth and alternative forms of childbirth, contributes to associating this style in parenting with ideology, dogmatism, and a form of "return to the past" for women. Consequently, its practitioners are assimilated to religious or spiritual worldviews or groups that are regarded as backwards, regressive, and even dangerous. Adding to an already heavy social and cultural disapproval of practices such as co-sleeping, long-term breastfeeding, or, particularly, homebirth, this association of natural parenting with religion and spirituality by its detractors often participates in its criticism in francophone contexts, where this style of parenting remains marginal. The reception of lifestyles that are regarded as technophobic and as allegedly bringing women "back to the past," "to nature," and "into the home" is more negative in the francophone contexts surveyed in this research than in many anglophone countries. These contexts, especially that of France, are more secularized than the North American or more broadly anglophone contexts in which some key practices of natural parenting first emerged. In the latter, both natural parenting and specific trends of ecofeminism developed as part of broader feminist and women's movements. The concluding section (5) goes back to such discussions and points to natural parenting and its practitioners as central to debates about new trends in society.

As mentioned above, the contextual sections 2 and 3 build up on previously published work[14] stemming from a broader research project entitled "Natural Parenting in the Digital Age: At the Confluence of Mothering, Religion, Environmentalism, and Technology."[15] For this study, in addition to a broad survey and cyber-fieldwork in a variety of publicly accessible online platforms and social media, I conducted semi-structured interviews with thirty francophone parents, between 2012 and 2016. Most of them were mothers in their late twenties to mid-forties, residing in France, Switzerland, Belgium, and Canada. To include the strongly transnational dimensions of natural parenting discourses and practices, a few francophone parents living as expatriates in North and South America were also interviewed.[16] Most of these interviews were conducted through Skype or by phone and lasted between 60 and 180 minutes. During a research stay in Switzerland, I was invited to visit six of my informants in their own homes, and I met in person with three of them in public cafeterias and parks. With a few exceptions, most of my interviewees held university or college degrees and four of them held PhDs or were completing graduate studies at the time of our conversations. Most were employed or were on maternity or parental leave and had the intention to return to the workforce in the future. Their socio-economic status ranged from stay-at-home mothers to self-employed entrepreneurs having (mostly) home-based businesses, employees or managers in various economic sectors or in the public sector (including academic research and teaching). Those with school-aged children often worked part-time, especially in the Swiss context where this would be usual. With a few exceptions, most of my informants were middle-class families, with a few working-class families as well. All women were married to or living with a male partner, except for one who was separating at the time of our interview. Though my broader survey showed that mothers in same-sex couples also participate in discussions about natural parenting, the parents whom I interviewed were all in heterosexual partnerships. Because all of my informants identified as cisgender (considering that their gender identity and expression correspond with their sex assigned at birth), I designate women and men who practice natural parenting as mothers and, when applicable, fathers. In conformity with standard ethical procedures for this type

14 Pasche Guignard, "The In/Visibility of Mothering Against the Norm," "Nurturing the Sustainable Family," and "Mediated Babywearing"; Fedele and Pasche Guignard, "Pushing from the Margins."

15 Two mobility and one return fellowships by the Swiss National Science Foundation funded this research, hosted at the Department for the Study of Religion at the University of Toronto and at the Faculté des Lettres at the Université de Fribourg (Switzerland).

16 Other francophone contexts, for instance those of Africa or the Caribbean, were beyond the scope of this research. The analysis shared in this article is thus limited to the mostly European francophone areas discussed below, with some materials from interviews of francophones living in Quebec, in Ontario, and elsewhere as expatriates.

of research, discourse and conversation analysis were applied to online material publicly available, and I secured informed consent from my informants before recording the interviews. All names used in this chapter are pseudonyms and identifying details have been altered.

This systematic collection of experiences through online spaces and interviews was supplemented with dozens of casual conversations about natural parenting with parents whom I met at events and places I visited, such as baby wearing workshops, specialized shops where the gear necessary to some practices of natural parenting was sold (e.g. babywearing wraps), as well as booths at festivals promoting sustainability. Conducting an ethnography in and through a variety of digital platforms and social media (such as forums, social media groups and pages, video-sharing websites, blogs, etc.) combined with some participant observation through fieldwork and visits to the homes of natural parents has allowed me to highlight the importance of digital media in the implementation and dissemination of natural parenting.[17] In line with this blended methodology for data collection, this article, especially section 4, focuses on how media, especially in France, disseminate generally negative images about natural parenting that include references to religion or spirituality.

2 Defining Natural Parenting: Practices and Values

Rather than a fixed list of mandatory practices, "natural parenting" is an umbrella term that designates a variety of representations, discourses, and practices related to fertility management, pregnancy, childbirth, breastfeeding, post-partum, child-rearing, education, nutrition, and choices in health, consumption, and lifestyle in general. One path towards a definition of natural parenting is to list its many common practices as examples of what it consists in (see 2.1). However, other parenting styles and cultures, especially attachment parenting, also feature some of these same practices. Moreover, some of them are increasingly becoming more mainstream, even in the francophone contexts surveyed in this research. For instance, breastfeeding past the first few months of life of the baby and up to two years of age remains quite uncommon in the mainly European francophone contexts studied in my research,[18] but medical professionals now recommend breastfeeding, ideally as soon as possible after birth.[19] Yet, other practices, and especially homebirth (see section 4), remain very marginal. Some practices are characteristic of natural parenting without being exclusive to it. Thus, to reach a definition of natural parenting, another line of inquiry consists in asking what motivates some parents to deviate, even so slightly, from what constitutes norms of (proper) parenting in their own culture, and what are the motives for naming this style in parenting "natural?" This section offers, first, a non-exhaustive list of practices and, next, highlights the key values and recurring motives that support them.

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17 For a more detailed analysis of the mediated dimension of natural parenting, see Pasche Guignard, "The In/Visibility of Mothering Against the Norm."

18 A study based on data collected in 2011 in France yields the following results: "Among the 70% of mothers, which [*sic*] initiated breastfeeding, the median duration was 17 weeks for any breastfeeding and 7 weeks for predominant breastfeeding. Only 19% of infants still received breastmilk at 6 months"; see Wagner *et al.*, "Durée de l'allaitement," 522. A similar study in Belgium found that 78% of newborns (children born between 2005 and 2011). were exclusively breastfed right after birth. This percentage dropped to 52% after 12 weeks, and at 24 weeks, the rate of exclusive breastfeeding was 19%; see Lebacq, "Allaitement maternel exclusif," 193. In Switzerland, recent data (though including all linguistic areas of the country) show that the breastfeeding initiation rate has reached 95%. This rate of exclusive breastfeeding drops to 71% during the first 2 months and only 62% of babies are still breastfeed at 4 months of age, down to 40% at the age of 6 months; see Gross *et al.*, *SWIFS – Swiss Infant Feeding Study.*

19 For Switzerland, see Commission de Nutrition de la Société Suisse de Pédiatrie and Société Suisse de Néonatologie/Swiss Society of Neonatology, "Recommandations," 7. For France, the most recent governmental program on nutrition and health mentions the raising of breastfeeding rates at birth and the lengthening of the duration of breastfeeding as objectives; see République française. Ministère des Solidarités et de la Santé, *Programme National nutrition santé, 2019-2023*, 15, 46-47, 82; and see République française. Ministère des Solidarités, de la Santé et de la Famille. *Allaitement maternel. Les bénéfices pour la santé de l'enfant et de sa mère*.

2.1 Defining Natural Parenting through Its Practices

As already mentioned in the introduction and as acknowledged by other scholars,[20] whereas some scholarship has examined specific aspects and practices of natural parenting (see the references given in section 1), few studies in the social sciences and even fewer in religious studies have researched natural parenting from a more comprehensive standpoint. This section of the article thus aims to provide a description of natural parenting in the contexts surveyed for this research (see note 16 and the introductory section), as well as some initial reflections. The following list is based on data from the interviews and from the analysis of materials collected over the course of the broader research from which this article presents selected aspects.

The following practices, preferences, or marked interests are commonly found and implemented, to various extents, in families who practice natural parenting:

- A preference for non-hormonal or fertility awareness-based methods of contraception;
- A preference for complementary or alternative medicines and drugs (e.g. naturopathy, homeopathy), a holistic approach to health and well-being in general, and a questioning or criticism of some of the systematic protocols of Western biomedicine (e.g. vaccine hesitancy, writing a birth plan in the case of a hospital birth);
- A preference for midwifery care during pregnancy, with medical interventions limited to what is regarded as necessary, and options for "natural birth" (e.g. in a midwife-led birth center) or, when medically possible and in line with the mother's wishes, homebirth;
- Breastfeeding (often on demand and "full-term" up until what is regarded as "natural weaning"), including through the help of technologies or accessories (breast pump and feeding breast milk through devices such as cups or special bottles);
- Alternative pedagogy and schooling (e.g. homeschooling and unschooling; private or cooperative schools inspired by Waldorf-Steiner or Montessori teachings; positive discipline and a rejection of ordinary educative violence);
- Attention to diet (often flexitarian and vegetarian ones), marked by a strong preference for seasonal, local, fair trade, and organic products (or, alternatively, the production of one's own food through gardening);
- A preference for homemade (meals, objects, remedies, cleaning products, cosmetics, etc.) or second-hand goods; a leaning towards lifestyles of voluntary simplicity or, at least, some attention paid to ethical or minimalist consumption, with an awareness of the environmental impact of one's choices; a preference for reusable items (typically washable diapers, menstrual cups or cloth menstrual pads);
- Other practices that center on the needs of the baby or child (e.g. baby-led weaning, baby-led introduction to new foods, natural infant's hygiene or "diaper-free" potty training).

In addition to these practices, all of the key tenets of attachment parenting (discussed below) are also regularly practiced. These include bonding, babywearing, keeping close proximity with the child through co-sleeping, etc.

In their own contexts, practitioners of natural parenting select these options among a range of other possible choices (e.g. regular public school vs. private school with a specific pedagogy, regular vs. organic food, babywearing vs. using a stroller, hospital vs. home birth, bottle feeding vs. breastfeeding). Though some discourses pit them against each other, many of these options are not necessarily antagonistic. Many parents whom I interviewed combine them to some extent, though there might be a preference for one over the other, at least ideally. Flexibility is not only admissible, but often a reality of practice. Over the course of my research, I never met with a parent who stated to have consistently and at all times implemented each one of the practices listed above. For instance, mothers stated that they would occasionally use disposable diapers, purchase industrial (though preferably organic) baby food, or use a stroller in addition to a baby-wearing wrap.

20 Fedele, "Spiritual Mothering in Portugal," 2.

The above-mentioned preferences thus are regarded as typical, albeit optional, components of this modular style of parenting, and not as a set of fixed, mandatory practices. Moreover, while most of the parents I interviewed and whose conversations I read online embrace this label, especially in their own specialized online spaces, others strongly reject it. While still implementing many of the practices listed above, not all self-identify with the label "natural parenting" or, in French, "*les mamans nature*" (one of the several designations). Furthermore, some of these practices are not "options" everywhere in the world: for instance, using washable diapers or no diapers at all in contexts where disposable ones are not available does not qualify as participating in natural parenting as discussed in this article. In addition, as a minority of the mothers whom I interviewed also acknowledged, socio-economic groups in the same society have different constraints when it comes to birth choices or child-rearing: one mother mentioned that the upfront expense of a pack of washable diapers might indeed be unaffordable to some families. In France, due to higher costs not being covered by health insurance plans or because of administrative issues, some mothers could not afford the homebirth that they wanted.

Contemporary natural parenting draws extensively from attachment parenting (based on theories developed in works such as those by William and Martha Sears,[21] or John Bowlby[22]). Natural parenting shares many of the recommended practices of attachment parenting, such as bonding after birth through skin-to-skin contact, breastfeeding, babywearing, and family bed sharing or co-sleeping. The attachment parenting model has risen to prominence in North America and has been criticized from a feminist perspective.[23] It is less widespread in most francophone contexts, with perhaps the exception of Quebec. In spite of media often picturing them together and thus conflating both trends, natural parenting does not completely overlap with attachment parenting. A mother can have an elective C-section, use disposable diapers, buy (too many) plastic toys that potentially contain harmful chemicals, and eat large quantities of meat from conventional agriculture and still meet the definition of an "attachment parent." Those who identify with or have some interest for natural parenting are more likely to make their own organic baby food or purchase second-hand toys. Most of the parents whom I interviewed in francophone contexts add this environmentalist dimension to attachment parenting. Some of them, but not all, do so out of a belief that doing their share in protecting the environment participates in a system of morality that they voluntarily contribute to: this idea of personal responsibility through ethical consumption in the domestic sphere and in family life, on a daily basis, participates in the religious dimension of natural parenting, as I will discuss below (see 2.2).

The intersection of two key influences marks natural parenting as different from other types of parenting, though with many coinciding practices: attachment parenting is central, and a strong environmentalist dimension is explicit in natural parenting. Natural parenting is distinct from other, more widespread modes of parenting that better correspond to social and cultural norms where they are practiced. Moreover, the work and experiences of parents, especially mothers, who engage in natural parenting shape their identities and transform them as individuals. For these reasons, natural parenting can be considered as a form of identity parenting.[24] In their own cultural contexts, many of the choices listed above are those of a minority, regarded as uncommon, marginalized, and sometimes categorized as undesirable and often the target of criticism (as discussed in section 4 of this article). Certain practices, especially homebirth, even encounter hostility from medical professionals, media, relatives, and society in general.[25] Mothers who speak openly about their choices turn to online platforms to find generally benevolent and often partially anonymous communities that offer support and advice that their immediate friends and relatives cannot provide.[26]

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21 Famously in Sears and Sears, *The Baby Book*.

22 For instance, in Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss*.

23 Friedman, "Everything You Need to Know about Your Baby."

24 Paltineau, "From Intensive Mothering to Identity Parenting"; Pasche Guignard, "Nurturing the Sustainable Family," 63-65.

25 A good example of such hostility against homebirth and all alternatives to hospital birth is Nisand, "Accouchement à domicile: qu'en pensent les obstétriciens?" For a detailed analysis of this hostile attitude, see Fedele and Pasche Guignard, "Pushing from the Margins," 140-141.

26 Pasche Guignard, "The In/Visibility of Mothering Against the Norm."

2.2 Defining Natural Parenting through Its Underlying Values and Worldviews

Natural parenting offers a holistic worldview that provides a coherent framework for extremely diverse practices in domains ranging from fertility management to food choices and health practices. Beyond the combined influence of attachment parenting and environmentalist discourses, highlighted above (see section 2.1), a critical analysis of discourses and images reveals the driving values of natural parenting that translate in efforts at the individual level, through changes in lifestyle and conscious consumption choices. These crystallize in three sites with blurred and often overlapping boundaries: nature or the environment, home or more generally the notion of proximity, and embodiment. All have established or emerging spiritual or religious dimensions, which advocates or detractors, and sometimes both, contribute to constructing.

2.2.1 Nature, the Natural, and the Environment

Central in the label "*natural* parenting" and in its discourses, "nature" is a fuzzy and polysemic concept. Nature remains an important symbolic resource in natural parenting. It is frequently referred to and valued as a guiding principle for a variety of lifestyle choices. Research on nature in relation to religious worldviews no longer is a new field in religious studies. Within the context of debates on the climate crisis and the anthropocene, the importance of exploring the many meanings of "nature" or "Nature" at the intersection with multiple expressions of religion and spirituality has increased, especially in the past ten years. Of particular relevance in religious studies are works by Bron Taylor. Not only does he address the theoretical issues with the traditional divide in defining "religion" and "spirituality,"[27] but he also provides a useful definition of "dark green religion" as one that "considers nature to be sacred, imbued with intrinsic value, and worthy of reverent care."[28] This definition only partially resonates with the discourses of my informants who did attribute intrinsic value to "the natural" or "nature," but did not engage in any of the practices of worship or deep reverence documented by Taylor. Published in earlier decades, studies on ecofeminism and its spiritual and religious aspects[29] mention mothers, in addition to the symbolism of birth and "mother nature." Some of these provide the necessary criticism of the often essentialist framing of environmentalism as a form of "women's maternalism" in spite of the fact that the latter "moves women from a symbolic, passive identity with Mother Earth to a position as active, political agents."[30] Although the term ecofeminism was initially coined in French by Françoise d'Eaubonne (1920-2005),[31] ecofeminism has always been and remains extremely marginal in France. It is still regarded as a "worrisome strangeness."[32] In contrast with groups of (mostly) women in earlier decades who had a strong political involvement, as I describe below, most of my informants did focus most of their actions in the domestic sphere and rarely participated in or led organized, collective environmentalist actions. More recent works on spiritual ecology or religious environmental activism with a focus on women, such as that of Sarah McFarland Taylor, often look at cosmic and divine maternal figures,[33] and at nature personified and sacralized as "Mother Nature." However, such scholarship at the intersection of nature, religion or spirituality, and women or femininity rarely considers the discourses of human mothers themselves on nature. Motherhood and parenting are seldom central topics, though metaphors of "nature as mother" and discussions on the symbolism of birth and nurturance are present. In the fields of spirituality, religion, and environmental activism, women act as sisters,[34] or in sisterhood, more so than as mothers or through their parenting practices. Though natural parenting cannot be directly considered as an expression of "green religion" or "dark green religion" as defined by Bron Taylor, it is nevertheless

27 Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, 3-4. Also see the references in note 2.
28 Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, ix.
29 Eaton and Lorenzen, *Ecofeminism and Globalization*.
30 Sturgeon, "Ecofeminist Natures," 115.
31 Larrère, "L'écoféminisme," 105; D'Eaubonne, *Le féminisme ou la mort*.
32 Burgart Goutal, "L'écoféminisme et la France," 67.
33 McFarland Taylor, *Green Sisters*, 140-147 especially.
34 The title of McFarland Taylor's book on nuns who engage in environmentalist initiatives is "Green Sisters."

relevant to examine the discourses of natural parenting with this conceptual background in religious studies: what are the meanings of nature and how far are the natural metaphors taken?

Writing specifically on "alternative" and "natural" childbirth (rather than on parenting in general), Quagliariello and Ruault report that their informants, in France and Italy, see "naturalness" (*naturalité*) in childbirth as a "biological fact, not an abnormality or a disease" and that such naturalness in childbirth becomes, for some women, "a strategy to conquer autonomy" in terms of giving birth.[35] This is consistent with previous studies[36] (in North American contexts) that demonstrate how nature and the natural during childbirth, whether in medicalized settings or at home, are associated with strength and empowerment for women against the medical establishment. Nature is a premise to criticize the medicalization of childbirth.

The perception of "naturalness" in the discourses of the parents whom I interviewed extends to other ideas which this section describes more precisely. "Natural" is not opposed primarily to "cultural," but rather to what is deemed "artificial," "technological," or even "toxic." It is regarded as something that should be preferred or prioritized, not feared or rejected. Nature and "the natural" are used in reference mostly to two key sites: on the one hand, the environment, the planet, or the Earth in general, and, on the other hand, human bodies, especially in reference to physiological processes of female bodies, in particular the menstrual cycle, birth, and lactation. The latter is associated with a belief that there is a "natural wisdom" in these processes and that technology (medical or otherwise) should not interfere with them.

Furthermore, natural parents tend to describe many of their practices as "ecofriendly" or as less damaging to the environment than what is the norm in the contexts studied for this research. Examples include the use of washable diapers and other reusable items, ranging from menstrual hygiene products to shopping or snack bags, and a preference for second-hand (rather than new) items. Many of the parents I interviewed paid a specific attention to their consumption in general, and to diet especially.[37] Their discourses, like their many public, casual conversations that I followed on specialized online forums, show a very conscious environmentalist effort in sustainability within the family, in the private and domestic sphere. These are implemented through reduced or minimalist consumption, simple or frugal living, zero-waste living, or ethical, conscious and engaged consumption.[38] Examples include consuming organic, seasonal, and local food[39] or fair-trade products.[40] These parents include their and their children's use and consumption of electronic devices (TVs, smartphones, tablets, computers, etc.) in this broader reflection. Thus, if there is indeed a large overlap with the most common modalities of attachment parenting, and especially some forms of breastfeeding,[41] natural parenting remains distinct from it because it also recommends paying particular attention to issues of consumption, ecology, and educating children about such issues, transmitting such values in this regard through everyday practices and choices. As one of my informants put it: "We are not just asking which planet we will leave to our children, but which children we will leave to our planet."

Sustainability and environmentalist issues were not central in the theories developed by William and Martha Sears and other advocates of early "bonding" practices in spite of a vocabulary of "the natural" to account for their recommendations.[42] Natural parenting adds this emphasis on sustainability and health, and it values whatever is deemed "natural," a polysemic and highly contentious term. This strong awareness and engagement with environmentalist issues have to be addressed critically from a feminist perspective. Parents, and especially mothers, are not just responsible for raising healthy and well-adjusted

35 Quagliariello and Ruault, "Accoucher de manière "alternative" en France et en Italie," 31.
36 Klassen, *Blessed Events: Religion and Homebirth in America*; "Procreating Women and Religion."
37 Pasche Guignard, "Nurturing the Sustainable Family."
38 Dubuisson-Quellier, *La consommation engagée*.
39 These criteria may contradict each other when added to the demand of eating a varied and sustainable diet and of meeting everyone's dietary restrictions (e.g. food allergies) and preferences.
40 Mothers mentioned imported staples such as coffee, tea, sugar, or bananas.
41 Faircloth, *Militant Lactivism?* and "Is Attachment Mothering Intensive Mothering?"
42 Friedman, "Everything You Need to Know about Your Baby," 138.

children, but they must do so while taking care of the environment as well, in broader cultural contexts that encourage consumption and may not be helpful in this regard. Furthermore, this environmentalist agenda is criticized for adding onto women a mental load and a moral pressure to engage in ecofriendly practices. Such criticism regards environmentalism as incompatible with feminism as mostly women implement many of such everyday ecofriendly efforts in the domestic sphere. This general strand of criticism conflates the environmentalist agenda with a naturalism that brings back an old form of oppression against women, emphasizing nature and domesticity.[43] However, can environmentalism be blamed for creating inequality between (heterosexual) partners in domestic, care, parenting, and food work? Gender inequality, especially in the domestic sphere, predates environmentalism, though the latter is perceived as threatening to exacerbate the former. The fact that the potatoes are organic does not in itself determine who will have to grow or purchase them, who will cook and serve the meal, and who will clean up the kitchen afterward. Environmentalism is criticized at its intersection with motherhood not because of what it recommends and demands, but rather, because its implementation rests mostly onto the shoulders of women, and especially mothers, in a context where gender equality in the domestic sphere is far from achieved.[44] Many of the mothers I interviewed indeed saw "home" as the best place to implement their environmentalist values to the fullest extent, in contrast to a society that fosters models of consumption damaging to nature and humans as well. None of my francophone informants explicitly referred to ecofeminist perspectives that denounces similar dynamics at work in the exploitation of nature and of women.

2.2.2 Home

Home birth, homeschooling, home-cooked meals, or homemade cosmetics, cleaning products and remedies: these composed names hint at the importance of the notion of "home" in natural parenting. Chris Bobel already noted in her study of natural mothering that the "sacred space of the home" was regarded "as a refuge worth of protection."[45] More recently, this emphasis on home marks it as the primary site of implementation of natural parenting and of upholding specific values on an everyday basis. Home is not only a "private space" (geographically) and a "private sphere" (socially), but also a domestic one. As such, home is still predominantly associated with women, especially mothers, rather than with men or fathers. This is also the case in religious movements that hold conservative views on gender roles in the family (the "stay-at-home" or, more recently, "work-at-home" mother as the primary caregiver and the father as the provider for the family) and in society in general.

This insistence on "home" might contribute to the association of natural parenting with a religious perspective and, in this case, with traditions that hold on to more conservative stances that do not advocate equality or even equity between men and women. As Mia Lövheim states, "women draw on the personal and intimate in their articulations of religion because the private sphere of the home and family has situated and still to a large extent situates their lives more than men, but women's articulations of religion also—more frequently than men's—become associated with private life and bodily aspects when taken up in a broader cultural discourse."[46] This is also the case with natural parenting that some feminists[47] in France see as an expression of "old school new trends" and a cause of concern, as women are pushed back into domesticity as a limiting space rather than as an empowering one.

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43 For examples of such criticism, see Badinter who in *Le Conflit*, writes of a "holy alliance of reactionaries," 45, and criticizes the "return to Mother Nature," 70. For a more recent example of feminist criticism that only briefly mentions motherhood (without addressing it centrally), see Bouazzouni, "Comment l'impératif écologique aliène les femmes."

44 For instance, in the context of France, a report on time spent by men and women on domestic and parental tasks, published in 2015 and comparing data from studies conducted between 1985 and 2010, concludes: "Women still remain primarily responsible for the good maintenance (*la bonne tenue*) of the household and family members" (Champagne *et al.* "Le temps domestique et parental," 236, my translation).

45 Bobel, *The Paradox of Natural Mothering,* 111.

46 Lövheim, *Media, Religion and Gender*, 185.

47 See for instance Badinter, *Le Conflit*.

In her chapter on the ideology of reproduction and the reproduction of ideology, Emily Martin states that there are

> [t]hree related domains in which there have also been ongoing struggles for control over women in western history (…): the mouth, the vagina, and the home. Who or what gets in, and who or what comes out, as well as how such events are described and constructed, have been fiercely contested.[48]

Francophone discourses of natural parenting tend to link these three domains as well: mothers are reclaiming control over what and who comes in or out, in terms of what they eat or say (mouth), how they birth (vagina), and where such actions take place (mostly at home). The natural parents in my study, both women and men, see home as the place where they have more control over their choices and where they can implement options that, to them, feel virtuous. They insist that their choices are not a drudgery or an effort only, but that this brings them an immediate reward and quality of life. For instance, a mother emphasized that cooking from scratch, rather than relying on the convenience of ready-made and heavily packaged food, not only was better for the planet, but that this also saved her money and that her meals were "healthier and tastier." She highlighted that she knew "where all of the ingredients came from," including her own garden, hinting at the other key notion of proximity (see below, 2.2.3).

Yet, such a domestic and private space, still culturally constructed as predominantly a feminine or maternal one, stands in contrast with a public space or sphere that mothers practicing natural parenting nevertheless also invest in visible ways. They can do so physically, through group meetings centered on specific practices. Examples include protest breastfeeding sit-ins or special events such as "La Grande Tétée,"[49] or a challenge consisting in having as many babies as possible wearing washable diapers at the same time, in the same public space. Outside of home, more so than fathers who are less visible in their parenting role, mothers also promote natural parenting through information booths at specific festivals and other public events. I witnessed this for instance at the "*Festival de la Terre*" ("Festival of the Earth") an annual event held in Lausanne (Switzerland) to promote sustainability. Associations by midwives, doulas, and other activists in the field of pregnancy and childbirth are official participants at this festival. In addition, mothers also invest the digital public sphere through presenting carefully curated aspects of their home lives, as mothers, through texts, images, or videos, on a variety of social media. However, since digitalization has contributed to further blur the boundaries between public, private, and even intimate spheres, such a contrast between the home and the rest is no longer so sharp.[50]

Home remains the first and most important place where one can adhere to and implement specific values. Whereas the use of common structures, such as daycares, schools, or hospitals, constrains parents to follow certain rules (e.g. vaccinating their children, providing disposable diapers, being subjected to medical protocols, accepting different food choices, etc.), the mothers whom I interviewed insisted that they had a greater freedom to carry out choices in accordance with their values at home, whether through birthing, breastfeeding, cooking, or educating their children.

Finally, a more symbolic and spiritual notion of "home" extends beyond that of the material notion of the household. Several informants also pointed out to the idea that we each have one home individually (our human and mortal body), and collectively (our planet). Care for the body through health practices and care for the environment often converged through conscious choices regarding food, cosmetics, or clothing. Again, the convergence of home, embodiment, and nature points to the coherence of the value system behind natural parenting, in spite of the diversity of its practices.

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48 Martin, "The Ideology of Reproduction," 300.

49 La Grande Tétée ("the big suckling") is a yearly gathering of mothers breastfeeding together in public. One of its purposes is to normalize public breastfeeding.

50 For a more detailed analysis of the digital dimensions of natural parenting, see Pasche Guignard, "The In/Visibility of Mothering Against the Norm," and "Mediated Babywearing."

2.2.3 Proximity

Closely related to the notion of home is that of proximity. I use this word to translate the French word "*proximité*," reminiscent of the meaning of "closeness." In attachment parenting, proximity applies to the bodies of the parent and the child. This type of parenting strategy is known in French as "*maternage proximal*" (without any reference to environmentalism). Natural parenting discourses extend this key notion of proximity to other domains, for instance that of purchasing locally produced foods and the idea of the interrelatedness of humans with their environments and, again, "Nature."

A further explanation of how several natural parenting aspects, especially attachment parenting practices and *maternage proximal*, are incompatible with "French parenting" is key to a better understanding of why proximity is a central value to my informants and why it is so frowned upon when implemented through embodied practices. Though it extends well beyond the national borders of France, I refer to the most widespread styles of child-rearing as "French parenting" because their principles can be considered as more typical of France than of most contemporary parenting trends in North America. Within the francophone contexts surveyed in my study, the combined influence of attachment parenting with "the ideology of intensive mothering," as defined by Sharon Hays,[51] are gaining some ground, but are not as strong as in North America. These specific, though not exclusive, principles of French parenting build upon the belief that child-rearing requires training and regular schedules, and that society's and adults' convenience, rather than the physiological needs of the child alone, should define these. As tenets of attachment parenting (though without any strong environmentalist dimension), bonding practices (see above, 2.1) are suspected of producing bad social outcomes: children might be rendered unruly and no longer fit to be cared for by any caregiver other than the mother (or the parents). This matters particularly in the French context of a common and guilt-free use (from the part of most mothers) of state-sponsored collective structures that promote early socialization in daycare (*crèche*) and schooling (école maternelle) at an early age (2.5 years old). This is also a factor in countries where maternity leave is shorter than six months and where most women who go back to paid work do so after only 12-14 weeks of maternity leave, for instance in Switzerland. Autonomy of the child is seen as a goal, and the emphasis on training to comply with instructions by parents and caregivers is strong.

In most of these francophone contexts, another important notion is that a woman should strive for self-realization and that she should find satisfaction not only through family and domestic life, but also through personal and professional activities, which contribute to financial independence. Thus, practices that require the parent (mostly the mother) to be available in person to breastfeed, share the same room or bed, or carry the baby in a wrap, or to engage in what is regarded as supplementary domestic work (such as more laundry of washable diapers or systematically cooking only homemade food), are regarded as socially odd. Natural parenting is also criticized from a practical point of view as demanding too much availability from mothers who risk to become "*mères fusionnelles*," mothers who cannot separate from their child, or even become slaves to them.[52] Moreover, breastfeeding remains associated with a choice that excludes the father from active participation right from the start. In a context in which women's bodies, even maternal ones, remain highly sexualized, one of the common objections to long-term breastfeeding (or even breastfeeding in general) is that breasts are eroticized and, thus, are regarded as "belonging" to the mother's (male) partner, not the child, and not even the woman herself.[53] In the same line, co-sleeping or bed-sharing to facilitate breastfeeding or, later, the child's sleep, are regarded as obstacles to sexual intercourse.

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51 Hays, *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*.

52 Faircloth, "Between "le Corps 'Maternel' et le Corps 'Erotique'," 68-69. The masculine equivalent "*père fusionnel*" is rarely mentioned.

53 See the analysis by Didierjean-Jouveau, "L'allaitement, le cododo et le couple." Didierjean-Jouveau criticizes the perspective of two French pediatricians Aldo Naouri and Marcel Rufo, on breastfeeding as an obstacle to sexuality (in the heterosexual couple). Both are famous in the French media landscape for their contentious positions on mothers and babies, and particularly breastfeeding.

A strong engagement with practices of natural parenting can even be considered as detrimental not only to the upbringing of the child, who might be "spoiled," but also to the mother herself, and to society at large. Thus, too much "proximity" is deemed suspicious within mainstream French culture and, more broadly, other European francophone contexts.

The case study of one of my Swiss informants provides an example of how the practices of natural parenting find themselves in a continuity of values and within a coherent framework to account for choices in very diverse domains. Johanne,[54] a Swiss mother of two children aged one and three at the time of our interview, emphasized that her uncommon choices were her own only, though she had the full support of her husband in every decision. She no longer took hormonal contraceptives, temporarily avoided vaccinating her children, used cloth diapers and washable menstrual pads. Johanne defined herself as "apolitical" and as a "non-practicing Christian." She insisted that she was not an active member of any religious, cultural, or environmentalist group or institution. Her family ate mostly organic food from their vegetable garden or purchased from local farmers, though they would also sometimes allow themselves exotic food staples, preferably organic ones. This mother characterized the choices that she and her family engaged in as an "effort," but she did not let a rigid environmentalist agenda dictate all of her choices. They embraced such choices with awareness rather than under constraint. Johanne's family engaged in a lifestyle of voluntary simplicity out of conviction, and not just because of the minimal income that she and her husband had at the time. She framed her choice to breastfeed as a gesture of independence and protest against a global system she saw as detrimental to women, mothers, and the planet: just like gardening or cooking from scratch, Johanne mentioned that breastfeeding was one of the practices that would free her from being dependent on big food industries, at least to some extent. In contrast with formula milk, and just like her home-grown vegetables, human maternal milk also "flows from the source" ("*il coule de source*") without being produced "one does not know where," and then shipped over thousands of kilometers. Like many parents whom I interviewed, Johanne also underscored that she believed her consumption choices to be impactful and empowering. She exclaimed: "I refuse to give my money to Nestlé!" Another mother, who had to use formula milk to supplement her own milk, mentioned how breastfeeding was a zero-waste practice.[55]

Some mothers framed breastfeeding as a conscious boycott against big industrial food companies and commercial products. Others saw their choice of a homebirth as part of a broader criticism, sometimes based on ethical perspectives, against the "business of birth" [56] or "industrialized birth"[57] with its technological and "technocratic" paradigms.[58] An obstetrician famous in the milieu of natural childbirth, Michel Odent (b. 1930),[59] already has shed light on the similarities between the industrialization of agriculture and of birth, with a focus on systemic issues rather than on the experience of parents themselves. In a North American context, about a decade later, Barbara Katz Rothman[60] analyzed the similarities in the dynamics and discursive strategies of resistance in "the food movement" and "the birth movement." Such a strong adherence to environmentalist ideals and a criticism of the capitalist model of consumption are also at work in natural parenting, beyond the focus on birth. These perspectives add to or are in many aspects compatible with what can be identified as the religious roots of natural parenting.

The blended methodology used in this study, with cyber-fieldwork as one of its tools, has also served to uncover one of the new paradoxes of natural parenting. The first and key paradox of natural parenting, already evidenced by Bobel, is the contrast between insisting on the "naturalness" of certain practices while also highlighting that mothers "choose" to do them. One of the new paradoxes stems from the digitalization of natural parenting. In the past fifteen to twenty years, the digitalization of our daily lives

54 For a deeper analysis of this same case, see Pasche Guignard, "Nurturing the Sustainable Family," 61-63.

55 Such examples also speak to the flexibility of natural parenting in practice, in contrast with its ideals, set as preferences and not as absolute goals.

56 Craven, *Pushing for Midwives*, 6.

57 Katz Rothman, *A Bun in the Oven*, 6.

58 Davis-Floyd, "The Technocratic, Humanistic, and Holistic Paradigms of Childbirth."

59 Odent, *Le fermier et l'accoucheur*.

60 Katz Rothman, *A Bun in the Oven*.

has been growing in a context where discourses about a "return of the natural" or a "return to Nature" have also progressed. In spite of a strong and even growing resistance against them, environmentalist discourses have become more mainstream because of the urgency of topics such as climate change or pollution. Within natural parenting, this resurgence of "the natural" is often a response to or resistance against industrial, technological, or even technocratic perspectives of fertility management, pregnancy, and, more importantly, childbirth. Thus, it is important to underline the following paradox: discourses that tie "the maternal" (and sometimes also "the parental") with "the natural" as an ideal and guiding principle tend to contest and challenge technocracy, and yet, they rely more than ever on high-tech digital devices and social media to inform about, disseminate, and implement lifestyles that insist on "going back to the natural."

3 The Religious Roots of Natural Parenting and Attitudes of Natural Parents towards Religion and Spirituality

Several of the key practices of natural parenting first developed or were promoted within religious settings, mostly Christian ones, or by groups and movements in alternative spiritualities in the 1960s onwards. This section discusses a few examples, with references to relevant literature, in support of this claim that certain of these practices have historically "religious roots," including the early development of natural family planning,[61] the "natural childbirth" movements (in the USA especially), and the founding of the breastfeeding advocacy group La Leche League. All had evident religious roots at their beginning, even if most of their contemporary expressions tend to put less emphasis on references to spirituality or religion. To state this differently, religious beliefs or motivations contributed to the early development of these specific clusters of discourses, practices, and advocacy, though their later developments did not necessarily maintain such references. Some of these religious origins are known to francophone advocates and detractors of natural parenting, while others are not because many of these movements first developed in anglophone contexts.

3.1 Natural Family Planning and Fertility Awareness-based Methods of Contraception

Natural family planning developed in the 1960s, in mostly Roman Catholic environments, for and by people for whom the use of hormonal or barrier methods of contraception were out of the question after the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* by Pope Paul VI.[62] The doctors John (1918-2007) and Evelyn (1918-2013) Billings, key developers one of the now multiple fertility awareness-based methods, based on observing cervical mucus, were Roman Catholics. In an article retracing the "life and times of John J. Billings," with only a few references to his wife Evelyn's contributions, Charles Norris writes: "A life-long Catholic with a strong faith, John could not believe that God had left humanity without a harmless natural method of controlling fertility."[63] One of John Billings' last publications was entitled "A Story of God's Providence."[64] In 1969, and then again in 2003, John Billings received recognition for his work by Popes Paul VI and John Paul II.

For several decades, what was known as "natural family planning" remained taught mostly in religious circles to heterosexual couples, married or engaged, as the rest of society embraced hormonal (and other forms of) contraception after its legalization. During the second half of the 20th century, attitudes towards contraception and its availability changed drastically, for instance in Quebec after the Quiet Revolution

61 Most of the many existing methods are now practiced and taught as fertility-awareness based methods of contraception, beyond religious circles and including through online platforms and services without specific religious affiliations.

62 For a discussion of the moral objections to or in favor of (hormonal) contraception, see Klassen, "Contraception and the Coming of Secularism," 24-25. Also see Pasche Guignard, "Digital Tools for Fertility Awareness."

63 Norris, "The Life and Times of John J. Billings," 324.

64 Ibid., 328.

(*la révolution tranquille*). Though hormonal and mechanical contraception remains the norm, more women and couples have become interested in fertility awareness in recent years. Beyond its originally Christian and mostly Catholic circles, many natural parents consider fertility awareness-based methods as a valid contraceptive option, even when their regular health practitioners do not. In my research, none of the couples who did use such methods stated that they did so out of the desire to comply with the official teachings of their Church or religion. Instead, many emphasized the idea of self-knowledge (cognitive purposes of fertility awareness), respect of the body (avoiding the side effects of hormones) and of nature (considerations about the environmental impact of hormonal contraception, for instance, as residues in water).[65]

Fertility awareness-based methods remain linked to Catholicism in many francophone countries. In a broadcast by the francophone Swiss television[66] about women who decide to stop taking the Pill, a 27-year-old explains how she monitors her fertility with the connected thermometer Daysy. Sharing about the reactions of others during her first few months of use of this high-tech device, she states: "The temperature method sounds like very old-fashioned, a little bit catho[lic]! I do not self-identify with such adjectives." Recently, physicians and feminists alike have expressed their skepticism against fertility awareness-based methods of contraception, all lumped together without any analysis of their efficiency according to the Pearl index. For instance, the French national federation of colleges for medical gynecology released a press statement alerting on "natural contraceptive methods" and stating: "From the temperature curve to assessing mucus and withdrawal for man, these so-called natural methods make us come far back in time."[67] Without mentioning the specific name of the application "Natural Cycles," the press statement mentions the fact that 37 women sought an abortion at a hospital in Stockholm after allegedly relying on a smartphone application for monitoring fertility.

In spite of its digitalization, fertility awareness is still regarded as a thing from a past in which women had no other valid option, or as tied to a conservatism that affords women no room for personal agency and decisions. In many media and popular discourses, "the Pill" represents modernity and the "liberation of women" for a certain generation of feminists (mostly second wave, white, middle-class women). This going "back" to methods presented as "natural," a highly contentious term, is framed as reminiscent of a time when religions still had a strong impact on peoples' sexual lives. The voices of a minority within francophone feminism[68] that challenge prevailing contraceptive models do not speak from an explicitly religious position and still strongly support rights to access contraception and abortion.

3.2 Natural Childbirth Movements

The early movements for "natural childbirth" are another example of the religious roots of natural parenting. Few studies uncover aspects and retrace the history of the influence of religion on these pregnancy and childbirth practices presented in their own time as alternatives to or as in resistance against a "technocratic model"[69] or that of "the body as a machine."[70] Some of the early key figures in the movements for childbirth without the systematic use of analgesia were tied to specific religious movements, but these links are rarely central in the analysis. In anglophone contexts, Grantley Dick-Read (1890-1959) has been described as "fired

65 Pasche Guignard, "Digital Tools for Fertility Awareness."

66 *Contraception: cette pilule qui ne passe plus* (2017).

67 My translation of the first lines of the February 23, 2018 press release of the French national federation of colleges for medical gynecology, alerting on natural contraceptive methods. Available through the website of the Fédération Nationale des Collèges de Gynécologie Médicale. http://www.fncgm.com/images/revue_presse/2018/CP_la_FNCGM_alerte_sur_les_methodes_naturelles_1_1.pdf

68 For instance, Debusquat, "*J'arrête la pilule*" and "*Marre de souffrir pour ma contraception!*"

69 Katz Rothman, *In Labor*, 29-49; Davis-Floyd, *Birth as an American Rite of Passage*, 44-72; also see Davis-Floyd, "The Technocratic, Humanistic, and Holistic Paradigms of Childbirth."

70 Martin, *The Woman in the Body.*

by an evangelical faith in the spiritual significance of motherhood,"[71] in line with "his eccentric emphasis on spiritual motherhood and anti-technological rhetoric."[72] More influential in francophone contexts is Frédérick Leboyer (1918-2017), who lived in India for some time and he became the disciple of the Hindu Swami Prajnandpad (1891-1974). The influence of this contact with India, its traditions and spiritualities is visible in Leboyer's work, for instance in his promotion of "Shantala Massage."[73] A few of my informants said that they regularly give their babies massages, a practice gaining growing popularity in natural parenting circles, and some took courses in order to learn the proper techniques. Similarly, Leboyer's emphasis on "birth without violence" probably owes to the concept of *ahimsa* (non-violence) from a Hindu perspective. Another example is that of Ina May Gaskin (b. 1940), one of the most influential figures of the "natural childbirth" movement. Marianne Delaporte has recently documented the cultural context of the philosophies, systems of beliefs, and practices around childbirth attended by midwives on the commune known as The Farm.[74] In the work of Ina May Gaskin, rationality, biomedicine, and science all have room alongside spirituality. Her book, entitled *Spiritual Midwifery* (1975), "integrated (...) the spiritual beliefs of the religious commune in which she lived and where she still works"[75] and obstetrical medical knowledge. Her midwifery manual, produced in the larger framework of the "hippie movement," has a clearly theological framework based on a "belief system developed within the 1960s counterculture"[76] and she saw birth not only as a biological experience, but as a spiritual one as well.

3.3 Breastfeeding Advocacy: La Leche League

Finally, La Leche League is another example that speaks to the religious roots of a key practice in both attachment parenting and natural parenting. This breastfeeding advocacy group was originally founded in 1956 by a group of seven Catholic mothers in an American context where breastfeeding mothers could not expect medical or social support for their decision not to feed their babies with formula. The institutional developments, discourses, and now worldwide influence of La Leche League constitute another example of how religion in practice extends to domains of everyday life, including very private and intimate ones, such as infant feeding. Jule DeJager Ward (2000) explored "at the crossroads of medicine, feminism, and religion" the early history and development of this breastfeeding advocacy league, as well as its theological underpinnings. From an originally grassroots association, founded with the purpose to educate and support mothers who chose to breastfeed, La Leche League has grown over the years into an organization with several million members all around the world, including many who are not Catholics. In her study, Jule DeJager Ward shows how in spite of gradually distancing itself from explicit references to its religious roots and expressions of a faith-based notion of maternal identity and practices, La Leche League has kept a strong articulation of Catholic social thought while incorporating specific currents within feminism and scientific discourses and ideologies as well.

3.4 References to Religion: Personal, Political, Spiritual and Ritual Choices

One of the key questions in the broader research on which this contribution is based was what happens to these references to religion or spirituality, originally in predominantly anglophone contexts when, several decades later, practices typical of natural parenting, like home birth or specific modes of breastfeeding, are practiced in francophone and mostly secularized environments. In her study of "holistic mothering"

71 Al-Gailani, "Drawing aside the Curtain," 476.
72 Ibid., 477.
73 Leboyer, *Shantala*.
74 Delaporte, "Stories of Birth."
75 Ibid., 57.
76 Ibid., 58.

and, particularly, of homebirth in Portugal, Anna Fedele advises that scholars should pay more attention to the "religious dimensions of alternative mothering choices."[77] Fedele argues that the medicalization of childbirth in Portugal is so important that holistic mothering and options alternative to hospital birth have become a personal and political choice. There, and in other contexts, such choice often grows out of a spiritual worldview. While it is nowadays often associated with "Goddess spirituality" or spiritualities of the "sacred feminine" in Portugal, as documented by Fedele, and in many anglophone contexts as well, this was rarely the case in the francophone contexts I studied. Though rarely mentioned explicitly, these early developments in specific religious environments still contribute to the association of natural parenting with religion, spirituality (especially "New Age" or cult milieu), or both, often in a negative light.

In spite of the mostly North American or anglophone religious roots and spiritual components still at work in some movements centered around specific practices of natural parenting, the attitude of the parents I interviewed towards religion, spirituality, and secularism was quite different. Most tended not to associate natural parenting with religion, in contrast with the discourses and images found in French media (see the next section for an analysis). Are these parents' stance towards religion similar to that of the American participants to "sacred pregnancy" retreats studied by Duncan and defined as living "in the Age of the Nones"?[78] Do they also regard pregnancy and childbirth as occasions for ritualizations that call for community support and for the making of spiritual meaning? During the interviews, the majority of my informants self-identified as "atheists," "agnostics," or "non-believers." Only a few of the mothers and fathers self-identified as religious or spiritual. Some were "believers" without being active members of any institution. For most of them, religion had not much to do in their parenting practices, yet many acknowledged environmentalist ideals, such as the notion of moral responsibility towards the earth and other humans. Some also mentioned that the notion of respect, central to many of their choices, was found in "all religions."

Less than one in four of my interviewees self-identified with a specific religion,[79] but several said they were "non-practicing Christians." Others mentioned their Catholic upbringing that they had taken distance from, though remaining attached to certain values and customs that they wanted to transmit to their children. Most of them did not actively reject the existence of God or the divine, but believed in some form of a higher power and regarded having a spiritual life and some degree of ritualization around birth as acceptable or even desirable. Very few of them, however, had actively organized their own pregnancy or birth rituals, but those who had did regard such occasions as very important and as aligned with other practices in their lives that they mentioned when I asked them if they had religious or spiritual practices. These included well-being practices that engage the body and the mind, such as meditation or westernized forms of yoga, as well as participation in red tents and women's circles. Examples of ritualization after birth included "placenta prints" and "placenterre."[80] Moreover, celebrations within the extended family were not uncommon (for instance, marking the passing of seasons, celebrating religious and cultural holidays such as Christmas, Carnival, or Easter, even for non-believers).

Their discourses emphasized a new consciousness of the maternal body and of the self. Alternatively, as was the case for many of my atheist and agnostic French informants, they also sometimes ascribed moral value to the practices that they framed as eco-friendly or sustainable (such as abstaining from eating meat, or buying second-hand clothing). Most of their daily practices fit into the description of lifestyles of health and sustainability, with their key ethical and, by extension, spiritual dimensions, as highlighted by Monica Emerich in her study of such trends towards a "gospel of sustainability."[81] Combining a culture, a variety of movements and discourses and a marketplace for products and

77 Fedele, "'Holistic Mothers' or 'Bad Mothers,'" 109.

78 Duncan, "Sacred Pregnancy."

79 Among those who identified religion, not just spirituality, as something important to them, two were Catholics, two were Protestants, one converted as an adult to Orthodox Christianity, and one was Muslim.

80 The practice of printing the placenta, retrieved and saved after birth (in most cases, at home), or of planting the placenta in the ground, giving it a "*place en terre*" (a place in the ground). For studies of such placenterre ritualizations, see the contributions in Jordan, *Placenta Wit*.

81 Emerich, *The Gospel of Sustainability*.

services, lifestyles of health and sustainability (LOHAS), often are compatible with lifestyles of voluntary simplicity: they emphasize personal (rather than only public) responsibility as a conscious consumer and implementing values through personal or familial choices and everyday practices (e.g. choices in diet, healthcare, but also sexuality, etc.). Also key in these lifestyles are mindful and wise uses of natural resources, and striving to avoid further polluting the planet and damaging the environment. Just like in the case of LOHAS, if natural parenting and its practices are not essentially religious or spiritual *per se*, our usual methodologies and concepts in religious studies remain useful to make sense of this cluster of practices and values.

While distancing themselves from religions as institutions and traditions, the parents whom I interviewed and whose conversations I followed still sought to give meaning in ethical and moral terms to their daily life choices, including those concerning their children. Environmentalism and the notion of proximity (see above, 2.2.3) leading to a belief in the interconnectedness between humans and the Earth provided a spiritual framework for some of them. Yet, none of my francophone informants considered "Nature" as divine or even as sacred. The notion of "Mother Nature" or references to figures such as the Pachamama or Gaia were not prominent in their discourses. The few parents who did have a more institutional practice, or one more rooted in a specific tradition, stressed how their parenting practices were compatible or aligned with their religious beliefs. For instance, this was the case of a mother in my study who self-identified as Muslim: she mentioned breastfeeding as valued and prescribed as a religious duty in Islam.

The self-perception and mention of religious or spiritual elements by natural parents themselves stands in contrast with how they are represented in francophone and mostly French media that echo and amplify a widespread criticism against natural parenting and trends that associate women with a "going back to nature" alongside with a suspicious return of religion. Such criticism is examined in the following section.

4 Natural Parenting as Religious or Spiritual: Negative Portraying in French Media

Building up on the contextualization in sections 2 and 3, this section analyzes how mainstream[82] French media tends to portray natural birth, homebirth, and, generally, alternatives to hospital birth, as well as the mothers – and, more rarely, the fathers– who engage in it, and the midwives who assist them. These minority practices participate in constructing the broader image of natural parenting. They are associated with ideology, dogmatism, and a form of "return to the past" for women. This move "backwards" includes "religion," perceived in a negative light as one of the tools for the oppression of women, alongside with many of the embodied or "biological" aspects of motherhood and the fear of essentialism that these bring along. This section focuses on these case studies while section 5 will offer concluding remarks on the more general framework of natural parenting in which these alternatives to medicalized childbirth are situated.

Over the course of the completion of this study and up until this year (2012-2020), a regular follow-up on francophone publications on the topic of natural parenting reveals that attitudes towards some of its typical practices have started to change. This indicates a shift towards a greater acceptance of certain practices, for instance breastfeeding (especially past the first few months of life of the baby), as well as babywearing, and, more generally, lifestyles that are regarded as more ecofriendly. The use of washable diapers is another example: many online platforms now offer parents opportunities to purchase and resell these articles whereas these were not available to the same extent just a few years ago. Though still marginal, the use of washable diapers is now significant enough for a second-hand market for such items to thrive online. Similarly, another example is the increased interest in recent years for fertility awareness, sometimes used

82 The expression "mainstream media" is used here in contrast with "specialized media" that target a readership of either parents in general, or people interested in environmentalism, or in religious issues. While parenting magazines published in France and addressing a broader francophone readership also tend to be critical of practices such as homebirth or babywearing, however, the voices of natural parenting practitioners or advocates are featured slightly more prominently in these than in mainstream media that feature more prominently the perspectives of healthcare professionals.

as a form of contraception, due to the availability of digital devices and software that facilitate its daily implementation.[83]

In contrast with these objects and practices typical of natural parenting that are gaining broader social acceptance, others remain highly controversial choices, frowned upon by society in general and also, for some, even within the mamasphere and milieux of natural parenting. Among these more rarely implemented and marginalized options are homeschooling and non-compliance with the official calendar for children's immunizations (with stances ranging from vaccine hesitancy to strongly "antivaxxers" positions). Similarly, home birth is likely to be criticized from a "moral" perspective: homebirthers often "are accused of selfishly taking undue risks not only for themselves, but also for their baby. Echoing the opinion of mainstream healthcare providers in these contexts, the public generally considers homebirth an unethical and backward choice."[84] To many physicians, feminists, and the general public, not only homebirth, but also the idea of a "natural" birth, often defined by my informants as a birth with as little medical interventions and surveillance as safely possible, remains suspicious.

Several key issues emerge in the cases of representations of homebirth and natural birth analyzed below. The main point of focus is the association with religion as superstition, doctrine, and extremism, and with spirituality[85] as "New Age," with overtones of brainwashing, the dangers of cults, and propaganda. Spirituality is regarded no less suspiciously than religion, though a strong institutional dimension may be absent from it. Additionally, in contrast with the notion of progress brought by Western, modern, rational, and scientific biomedicine, that of regression is associated to key practices of natural parenting: to its detractors, natural parenting takes the form of a going back and backwards, of a "return" to an idealistically constructed notion of "the natural," but also to a "past" located in an undetermined but certainly pre-feminist era. Tied to the previous notions of "the natural" and of a "past" and premodern time, the notion of a constructed "Exotic Other" will also be addressed in my analysis.

4.1 Interview with Odile Buisson and Cartoons in Charlie Hebdo

An interview published by the satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo and its cartoon illustrations constitute the core of the first case study.[86] Related materials also include another interview with French gynecologist Dr Odile Buisson, as well as her book published shortly before these interviews. Obviously, as part of this literary genre, a satirical magazine is expected to produce cartoons mocking specific categories of people. Furthermore, the tradition of misrepresenting midwives is not new. However, beyond the irony and exaggeration of satire, the interview and images analyzed here in detail reflect rather common opinions towards alternative choices for childbirth in France and attitudes towards mothers and parents who make such choices.

The interview published online on April 11, 2013, featured Dr Odile Buisson, a French gynecologist most famous for her pioneering work on women's sexual pleasure. She is the author of the book *Sale temps pour les femmes, Futures mères, si vous saviez* (a title with a pun that can be translated as: "Bad weather/bad time for women. Future mothers, if you knew…"). Published by a non-academic press, her book and ideas were relayed in mainstream media and in magazines targeting readerships beyond women or medical professionals. In her book, and in the Charlie Hebdo interview, Buisson criticizes both the industrialization of women's healthcare and the midwifery model of care. She represents here a typical voice of authoritative, medical, scientifically grounded knowledge. In this interview (and in her book), she

83 Debusquat, *J'arrête la Pilule*; Pasche Guignard, "Digital Tools for Fertility Awareness."

84 Fedele and Pasche Guignard, "Pushing from the Margins," 133.

85 For distinctions in my use of the terms "spirituality" and "religions," see notes 1 and 28.

86 This interview was published and accessed online about two years before the January 7, 2015 terrorist attack that left five of its journalists dead. Charlie Hebdo then completely restructured its website and these materials are no longer accessible in the digital format that I retrieved them in. The cartoons are signed by Luz, who escaped the slaughter at Charlie Hebdo. My request for permission to include these images in this special issue of *Open Theology* was left unanswered.

argues that the government is trying to save money on women's health by pushing for giving midwives more responsibilities, some of which she regards as beyond their level of competence.[87]

The interview features cartoons mocking several actors of alternative or "natural" childbirth movements that participate in the natural parenting trends discussed in this article. In one of the images, both the parents who choose midwifery care and the midwife are the targets of criticism. The image depicts a woman apparently awaiting a medical act to take place, lying on her back in supine position, with her feet tied up with cords (and not in stirrups) which, typically, would be avoided as much as possible in natural birth (or more generally midwifery) practice. The midwife is portrayed as a filthy woman who spits in her hands in order to clean them. She wears a headscarf and clogs. Her appearance resembles that of a peasant, rural woman, thus suggesting backwardness. The image also conveys the idea of unsanitary conditions, with what appears as an open market stall, and the presence of animals. Nevertheless, the pig and the chicken (farm animals) in the image wear surgical masks to signal that a medical intervention is expected to take place. In a sense, these animals appear as more hygienic than the midwife. The sterile surgical instruments typical of hospital childbirth are replaced by rudimentary tools, in a bucket.

Religious practice is suggested through the presence in the background of a voodoo doll pierced by three pins. This object associates further midwifery to witchcraft. Incidentally, several francophone activists in the field of "respected childbirth," such as Marie-Hélène Lahaye, use the expression "*la chasse aux sorcières*" (witch hunt) to refer to the administrative complexities and antagonist discourses targeting liberal, independent midwives in France, in particular those still serving women in homebirths.[88] As explained above, in France, more so than in other francophone countries, choosing a homebirth is heavily frowned upon both by the medical establishment and by popular opinion.[89]

The cartoon also casts doubts about the competence of the midwife: "Are you sure she is competent?" asks the pregnant woman tied up to the examination table. Referral is not sanctioned by a diploma or by medical authorities, but through hearsay: the midwife was "recommended at the organic market," her partner replies. This image and the general tone of the interview ridicule midwives and the parents who choose alternative options for childbirth. Such choices are portrayed as irrational, anti-technological, unhygienic, dangerous and, generally, backwards. Furthermore, if the option for a vast majority of women in France is that of a hospital birth, with the availability and, in most cases, the use of an epidural,[90] alternative choices, such as homebirth but also several forms of "natural birth" –whichever meanings are ascribed to them— are negatively associated with religion. So are other practices of pregnancy and postpartum popular among natural parents in France and other francophone countries.

In the same interview, Buisson evokes her visit to a *maison de naissance* (a midwife-led birth center), which are very few in France:

> What do I see on the walls? Advertisements for holistic massage, lucky charms (*gris-gris*), essential oils. So, of course, this does not hurt, but well... Every time medicine retreats, rescinds, quacks arrive. And this goes very well with liberalism. Because false sciences are not reimbursed. [...] I have seen that there were babywearing workshops. Am I dreaming? When you are in a public maternity ward, there are no such things.[91]

Even an increasingly common practice, such as babywearing, typical not only to natural parenting but recommended as a bonding practice in attachment parenting, is regarded as suspicious and as not belonging to a maternity ward in a public hospital. In the typically French understanding of secularism, the space of a public hospital should be free from any religious symbols, including those of "New Age" practices that often include a preference for alternative systems of healing (massage, other forms of bodywork, essential oils, etc.).

87 Examples of such competence include allowing midwives to prescribe contraceptives, to perform early stage abortions, and to do cancer prevention, in addition to their caring for low-risk pregnant women.

88 Lahaye, *Accouchement*, 249.

89 Also see Ingar, "Birth in France."

90 Data from 2010 gives 77% as the rate of all vaginal deliveries with an epidural; see INSERM, "En France, la péridurale est fréquente."

91 My translation. Buisson and Biard, "Santé des femmes."

In another cross-interview, published in *Le Figaro Madame* a few days before the one in *Charlie Hebdo*, Buisson confronts a liberal midwife. On the topic of independent *maisons de naissance* (midwife-led birth centers) that are *not* attached to or within a hospital ward, Buisson says the following:

> I hate closed locations that prevent links between the different professionals. I clearly prefer physiological poles.[92] These allow real exchanges between gynecologists and midwives. They constitute a safeguard against proselytism, religiosity and other fake sciences.[93]

Home birth is not even mentioned in the interview, but the confrontational dialogue ends with very opposing views on the availability and actual use, or coercion to use, the epidural.

Another one of the cartoons illustrating Dr Buisson's interview in *Charlie Hebdo*, is worth analyzing here in detail from a perspective in religious studies. The image features a crucified woman about to give birth, bare breasts, and with her large belly highly visible. She is wearing a loincloth that hides her genitals. In contrast, is it not uncommon to find representations of male and female genitals in other cartoons in Charlie Hebdo that are explicit (if not anatomically accurate). The woman is also wearing a crown of thorns. The religious reference is that of the suffering Christ on the cross. Before becoming the symbol of Christianity, the cross had long been used as an instrument of torture in Antiquity. Consistently with the Biblical narrative of *Genesis* (3:16), childbirth is associated with pain. In childbirth, pain is frequently linked to suffering and, in this case with the woman on the cross, to torture, a form of unnecessary and undesirable suffering. The woman says: "It seems that, to give birth, one must suffer a little bit." At the foot of the cross on what appears to be a hilltop, medical staff wearing their typical outfits and positioning their hands as in prayer, reply: "Push, M'am." The traditional "INRI" sign (*Iesus Nazarethus Rex Iudeorum*, meaning Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews) is replaced by a mock-Latin language sign that reads: "*Peridurala satanica*" or satanic epidural. Many of my interviewees and mothers whose online conversations I analyzed as part of my broader study, much more often than a homebirth, wished for themselves an epidural-free childbirth. In this case, the criticism against "doing without" medicalization extends to those who reject the use of this type of analgesia.

4.2 Reviews of Movies on Homebirth

The second case study illustrating how media reports on choices typical of natural parenting comprises several reviews of recent documentaries on "natural childbirth" (rarely including any critical discussion of such terminology) or homebirth. Several of the mothers I interviewed told me about such movies, had watched them, and found them inspiring. Though the following discussion focuses only on the reviews, my analysis also considered the anonymous online comments, positive or negative, posted as responses to the negative reviews of such movies.

The movie *Loba* (2015, directed by Catherine Béchard, an osteopath) follows women, parents, families, midwives and other medical practitioners in Spain, France, Cuba, and Mexico. It interrogates the notion of a "normal childbirth," the norm of hospital birth and its medicalization, as well as women's education about, and agency in, the process of birth. It also includes a discussion of traditional spiritual and ritual practices around pregnancy and childbirth. Adding to a strand of criticism against the over-medicalization of birth, the movie advocates for choice and depicts homebirth in a positive light. Such a position was likely to be misunderstood in France: shortly after the release of the movie, a review in *Le Monde* was entitled "*Loba*: yet another propaganda film for home birth." Journalist Isabelle Régnier writes:

> The homebirth propaganda documentary is about to become a genre in itself. Every year, there is a new one in French movie theaters to glorify this practice, [that is] extremely minority in France. Covered, like others, by a "new age" varnish of a fantasized return to nature, this one is not better at dissimulating its reactionary ideology, where the

92 "*Pôles physiologiques*" refers to facilities embedded in maternity wards and welcoming women who desire to give birth with less medicalization.

93 My translation. Buisson, interviewed in Franrenet, "*La sage-femme, la gynéco et… les Françaises*."

> essentialization of maternity, of femininity goes along with a massive denial of the progress made over the past century by obstetrical medicine.[94]

Régnier is correct in stating that homebirth is "extremely minority" in France.[95] She associates "New Age" to the movie, homebirth, and, by extension, to those involved in both the documentary and the practice of homebirth. She highlights a form of essentialism at work in some discourses: essentialism, the danger of reducing woman to nature and to her biology through advocating for or just using the concept of "natural" in connection with "the maternal" (whether in birth, breastfeeding, or other) is indeed a dangerous trap that many in the natural childbirth movements are well aware of. Later in the article, Régnier also writes of the dangers of representing a "mystical relationship to motherhood." She associates remote areas, like Cuba and rural places in Mexico, where parts of the documentary were filmed, to "living in the Middle Ages." This association with the Middle Ages and, implicitly, with obscurantism and backwardness, is negative. She calls onto the figure of an "Exotic Other," distant from the (imagined mostly white) women who birth in hospitals with the help of medical technology and, especially, the epidural.

In her review, Régnier identifies a trend in documentaries challenging medical models of birth, questioning the systematic use of epidurals and comparing the rates of C-sections between countries. Without naming them, she probably refers to two previous movies on similar topics, released in this same francophone context. The first is *Entre leurs mains* ("Between their hands," 2013, by Céline Darmayan) which focuses on the professional difficulties of midwives in France, and the other is *L'arbre et le Nid* ("The tree and the nest," 2013, by Valérie Pouyanne). The latter features interviews with key childbirth educators, midwives, and obstetricians, such as Michel Odent. The subtitle reads: "*les vertus de l'accouchement naturel et les secrets des hormones de l'amour*" ("the virtues of natural childbirth and the secrets of love hormones").

A brief and skeptical review of *L'arbre et le nid*, published online, also uses the vocabulary of religious evangelism and propaganda:

> Whom does this documentary by Valérie Pouyanne address, that ardently defends natural childbirth, with giving too many details that cause nausea? Without any great cinematographic qualities, *L'arbre et le nid* reveals itself as standing at the crossroads between an infomercial for a birth center and pamphlet against the epidural. For sure, we do not doubt the sincerity and good faith of the birthers, the midwives, and the gynecologists who sing the praises of homebirth, but the whole [movie] so much gives the impression of demonizing birth in hospital settings that it provokes unease and anger. With such a perfect tool of propaganda, it is likely that *L'arbre et le nid* preaches only to the choir (*ne prêche qu'aux convertis*) and sustains all of the clichés of those who prefer physicians to midwives.[96]

These recent movies do not directly *promote* homebirth, but are perceived as tools for preaching a form of "gospel of natural childbirth" that will reach only those who already believe in it. The reviews do not read them as spreading information and choice for women, educating about respected birth, and denouncing obstetrical violence, just like other movies centering on anglophone contexts (especially the USA).[97]

The notion of an "Exotic Other," distant from us either in space or in time is present in the discourses of detractors and advocates of natural parenting. It is particularly visible in discourses about or against "natural" childbirth. In the documentary *Loba*, the viewer travels as far as Cuba and Mexico to witness birth "undisturbed" by medical interventions. The movie conveys the idea that positive attitudes and outcomes for birth could still be achieved not *because* of, but *in spite* of the medical settings of the hospital, not *thanks to* technology itself, but *in spite* of its misuses and abuses. A figure of the "Exotic Other" as a feminine birthing, breastfeeding, and parenting form of Jean-Jacque Rousseau's "noble savage" emerges in these and other movies, as well as in many non-professionally produced videos of women sharing stories about their birthing experience on video-sharing websites, and in the criticism against these movies on natural birth and homebirth.

For advocates of homebirth, this figure is positive: she is a model and an inspiration of how to find meaning in "natural" processes such as childbirth, that also retain a sacred or spiritual dimension made

94 My translation. Régnier, "'Loba'."

95 Generous estimates are that 1 to 2 % of women in France give birth at home. See Ingar, "Birth in France," 20.

96 My translation. Dumais, "L'arbre et le nid."

97 See for instance *The Business of Being Born* (2008) and *Orgasmic Birth, The Best-Kept Secret* (2009).

visible through ritualization of specific gestures. Contrastingly, for those who criticize birth outside of institutional, medical settings, as in the Charlie Hebdo's cartoons and in the film reviews, allusions to this "Exotic Other" are quite negative, which is common in French media. Again, the link to belief, superstition, and magic contributes to the negative criticism. The cartoon with the midwife features a voodoo doll which ties the practice of midwifery to witchcraft, though not necessarily a European one. The voodoo doll pierced with needles is generally associated with the religious culture and ritual practices of Haiti, with African roots. In one of her interviews, Buisson speaks against the alleged presence in the midwife-led birthing center of "*gris-gris*," generally small objects used as "lucky charms," often for protection, and often associated with Caribbean cultures and religions. When not remote from us in space, then this "Exotic Other" can also be found in the past: for instance in the notion of "going back to the fifties" in the title of Charlie Hebdo's interview. Régnier's mention, in her review of *Loba*, of the "Middle Ages" and of an alleged negation of a hundred years of medical progress hints to a relapse to a pre-technological, pre-modern and pre-rational world.

While notions of "going back to the past" or "returning to nature" are negative for those who criticize natural parenting and practices, the discourse of many natural parents turn this into a positive reference to a time when some forms of technology were not yet available and did not obscure aspects of birth and parenting that they regard as sacred. What Robbie Davis-Floyd described as the "holistic paradigm" is still relevant to make sense of the frameworks in which such discourses operate, in spite of most parents not identifying strongly with religion or spirituality:

> The holistic paradigm also insists on the participation of the *spirit* in the human whole. In incorporating soul into the healing process, holistic healers bring medicine back into the world of the spiritual and the metaphysical from which it was separated during the Industrial Revolution. The spirituality of holistic healers tends to be fluid, and to take the form of a loose identification with eastern or New Age philosophies more often than with Judaism, Christianity, or Islam. Where the technomedical model is rigid and separatist, the holistic model recognizes no sharp divisions or distinct boundaries."[98]

Whether this "Other" is located in a distant past or in a distant space, or both, a construction is at work and it involves religion or even magic as systems of beliefs and practices in opposition to, on the one hand, the valuation of science and technology, and, on the other hand, to the most common strands of feminism in highly secularized francophone contexts.

5 Concluding Remarks

With such a broad and yet coherent range of practices and choices, criticism against natural parenting is bound to come from many directions. Addressing each one of these, this concluding section goes back to how aspects of natural parenting are indirectly or directly tied to religion or spirituality in media discourses about parenting and the environment. In the francophone and mostly European contexts referred to in this article, the entanglements between religion, spirituality, feminism, parenting, medicine, and environmentalism are articulated in ways that differ from those of anglophone, mostly North American countries. The national and cultural contexts in which natural parenting practices are implemented give them different resonances. These range from finding such practices and the representations they carry as appropriate and legal, though not necessarily widespread, to considering them as morally bad, backwards, and as a serious threat to gender equality and the status of women. For instance, though only a minority of parents choose a homebirth in Quebec or in Switzerland, this option is accessible to them, whereas in France, planned homebirths are increasingly difficult to implement.[99] Similarly, breastfeeding rates and discourses about them varied in the different national contexts surveyed in this research.[100] Yet, it is possible to identify the same general strands of criticism against natural parenting, with various degrees of vehemence.

98 Davis-Floyd, "The Technocratic, Humanistic, and Holistic Paradigms of Childbirth," 16.
99 Ingar, "Birth in France"; Lahaye, *Accouchement*.
100 See above, notes 18 and 19.

In francophone contexts, a first strand of criticism comes from a specific, generationally situated, feminist perspective that regards as worrisome the emphasis on "home" and on "nature" found in natural parenting. According to this perspective still deeply rooted in the works of Simone de Beauvoir,[101] the alleged risk is that of sending women "back into the home" (and perhaps, more specifically, to the kitchen) under the guise of implementing a strict environmentalist agenda. In this French context, the reception of contemporary ecofeminist works[102] (mostly written in English) is scarce. The mere mention of "nature" is seen as a path leading straight to the essentialist trap as the distinction between "environmentalist" and "naturalist" perspectives is rarely perceived. Homebirth, natural childbirth, and breastfeeding are key targets of such criticism. Practices deemed ecofriendly that demand a sustained effort in the domestic sphere, such as using washable diapers or seeking a zero-waste lifestyle, are also perceived as a going against the hard-won progress gained by women, through feminism, over the last decades. As several key practices of natural parenting originally developed within religious groups that insist on traditional gender norms and roles, these are bound to be associated with regression. "Back home" and "back to Nature" are seen as a relapse into conservatism. Not only must parents raise happy, healthy and well-adjusted children, but they must also do so without harming their own health, that of their children, and the environment. This responsibility still falls mostly on mothers.

In France, more strikingly than in Quebec and in francophone areas of Switzerland and Belgium, "nature," "motherhood," and "religion" have in common that they are regarded as obstacles in women's path to liberation, in a cultural and social sense, rather than in a spiritual one. Additionally, motherhood and childbirth have been central to feminist movements in Quebec, whereas this was not the case in France.[103] In contrast, many –though not all– currents within ecofeminism as expressed by anglophone authors and activists,[104] leave a large room to spirituality and the sacred, often outside of —or even against— established religious institutions, deservedly criticized as patriarchal and oppressive. A return to Nature through its re-sacralization, through learning the physiological rhythms of women's bodies and of the seasons, or through reappropriating old and creating new rituals centered on women's bodies or on seasonal calendars: all these are presented as ways to (re)connect with this ideally constructed concept of "Nature." In natural parenting, nature is manifest in two key sites: the environment, local or global (as planet Earth) and women's bodies. In contrast to this, feminism in France has developed from the prevailing legacy of the Enlightenment: from this perspective, a hard-line understanding of secularism as a fight against religions, beliefs, and superstitions is key to women's emancipation and equal status. Thus, it is not surprising that many feminists, women, and the public in general perceive as a dangerous regression any emphasis on "Nature" in relation to embodiment. Moreover, questioning the notion of (technological or medical) progress is suspicious.

Often in line with this first strand of criticism, another line of opposition is visible in medical discourses, especially those of obstetricians who advocate hospital birth as the *only* safe option.[105] They bring forth the notion of risk in pregnancy and childbirth. This discourse is pitted against the notion cultivated by many francophone homebirthing mothers and natural parents that one must "trust" or "have faith" in one's own body and "natural" or "physiological processes," (expressions that they used online or in the interviews). In addition to providing selective medical information, the doctors interviewed in French media also engage in a moral critique of mothers who make such choices (see section 4.1). These women often are suspected of engaging in such practices because they are uneducated, gullible, or vulnerable, under the influence

101 de Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe*. Simone de Beauvoir prioritized the refusal of motherhood and emphasized abortion and contraception in her analysis: access to contraception and abortion remain crucial and still highly relevant topics in most feminist currents in France. Media and most activist discourses rarely feature centrally topics such as the status of mothers, the lack of contraceptive options beyond hormonal paradigms, childbirth, or midwifery. Lahaye and Debusquat are examples of exceptions to this. Also see Cascales and Négrié, "L'accouchement, une question clivante."

102 See section 2.2.1, and references to Larrère in note 31, and to Burgart Goutal in notes 32 and, just below, 104.

103 For France, see Cascales and Négrié, "L'accouchement, une question clivante," 179 ; For Quebec, see Descarries and Corbeil, "Entre discours et pratiques."

104 For examples, refer to Burgart Goutal, "L'écoféminisme et la France," 68-69.

105 Highly mediatized examples in this French context include contributions to various media by Buisson and Nisand.

of ideologies or religions. Their attitude is seen not only as a disavowal of the medical establishment, but as a rejection of science, rationality, technology, and modernity. Mainstream media largely relay such discourses that insist on the notion of risk for women and babies during pregnancy and childbirth and on the necessity of some degree of medicalization. In turn, these influence attitudes in the general public towards homebirth and natural childbirth, two practices commonly found in natural parenting.

While some practices of attachment parenting have become more prominent with the rise of the ideology of intensive mothering[106] as defined by Sharon Hays in (mostly) North American contexts, in France and francophone contexts, they go against the key tenets of a mostly distal style in parenting. Embodied practices that demand the availability of the parent such as co-sleeping, breastfeeding on demand, or babywearing, are key to a *maternage proximal* that is made to blend in or fit with lifestyles of health and sustainability.[107] In part because they are frowned upon and go against the norms of distal French parenting, these practices indeed remain those of a minority. They are rarely practiced or discussed openly and in public. In spite of a critical stance against the misuses of technology, whether in the domain of medicine or in communication, natural parents now commonly use high-tech devices to implement their parenting and lifestyles, and they have created their own "safe space" of benevolent, online mamasphere that offers information and advice and provides a place for virtual community bonding around shared values and practices. Whereas Bobel noticed a lack of collectivity and connectivity between natural mothers in the context of the USA in the late 1990s,[108] my francophone informants, over twenty years later, have embraced information and communication technologies, particularly social media.

Finally, while considering the new entanglements between parenting, feminism, environmentalism and their religious aspects, the growing impact of environmentalist discourses has to be considered, as well as the resistance or backlash against them (with a strongly gendered dimension). Media relay and amplify the pervasive criticism against practices suspected to bring women back to home and to their inescapable biology, through the very notion of nature. Many traditional religious discourses, especially, in the francophone contexts considered in this research, those of conservative Christianity, have and continue to hold very similar ideas about the "nature" of women and their roles in the family, sometimes with detailed theologies about suffering and pain in childbirth. Yet, these religious roots of natural parenting are rarely mentioned or even known to its francophone detractors. Moreover, often outside of established institutions or sometimes at their margins, spiritual movements and ideas, often implemented as personal quests, are also regarded suspiciously when it comes to childbirth: the concern is not only lobbying or proselytization, but propaganda and brainwashing associated with sectarian (cult) movements and radicalization. In this highly secular context, where most francophone natural parents in fact do not self-identify with religion and rarely with spirituality, the association of natural parenting with religion remains pervasive. Far from helping natural parenting gain further acceptance in francophone contexts, it participates in the criticism against it.[109]

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106 See section 2.2.3 and see Hays, *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*

107 See above the discussion on lifestyles of health and sustainability. See also Emerich, *The Gospel of Sustainability*.

108 Bobel, *The Paradox of Natural Mothering*, 168.

109 Some elements of this artcile were presented at the three workshops on religions and motherhood organized by Dr Giulia Pedrucci at the University of Erfurt in July 2018, January and July 2019. I thank Dr Pedrucci, the participants to these workshops, as well as the peer-reviewers for *Open Theology* for their insightful comments.

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