

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

Editorial

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The Entanglement of Mothers and Religions: An Introduction

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The world's stable now. People are happy; they get what they want, and they never want what they can't get. They're well off; they're safe; they're never ill; they're not afraid of death; they're blissfully ignorant of passion and old age; they're plagued with no mothers or fathers; they've got no wives, or children, or lovers to feel strongly about; they're so conditioned that they practically can't help behaving as they ought to behave. And if anything should go wrong, there's soma¹.

In his dystopian novel *Brave New World*, Aldous Huxley imagined a “utopian” world of peace and wellbeing in which biological mothers and the very concept of mother (and father, but in a more nuanced way²) had simply been swept away³. As had religion. Happiness – for those who lived in this *Brave New World* – was not having a mother (or family links). Or a religion. Indeed, many utopias since ancient times imply negotiation (sometimes even the negation) of the very concept of mother, the preference for communitarian mothering, as well as the idea of a eugenic selection of the offspring⁴. This manipulation of mothering frequently goes hand-in-hand with religion (either as rejection or as glorification of it), as the sadly famous case of Jonestown – just to mention a particularly well-known case – amply demonstrate.

This never-ending interaction between religion/religious authorities and mothers invites to investigation into how the maternal paradigm, i.e. “motherhood as an institution”⁵, is constructed for believers (men, including members of the clergy, and women, including those who are not biological mothers) in different religious traditions. I have also tried to examine which are the determining constraints concerning “maternal work”⁶ from antiquity until today, that contribute to make the new status of mother a problematic and contradictory moment for women. In fact, a mother must often struggle between what she is told is the *right* thing to do and what she would feel like doing for her child.

This topical issue of *Open Theology* offers an exhaustive overview of the results I have obtained by working with a few colleagues in recent years. We have explored how – for good and for bad – religion and mothering intertwine. The ground-breaking nature of the six articles I have selected for it is

¹ Huxley, *Brave New World*, 227.

² “The word (for “father” was not so much obscene as—with its connotation of something at one remove from the loathsomeness and moral obliquity of child-bearing—merely gross, a scatological rather than a pornographic impropriety)” (Ibid., 163). On breastfeeding, in particular: “The spectacle of two young women giving breast to their babies made her blush and turn away her face. She had never seen anything so indecent in her life” (Ibid., 126).

³ The exact opposite in comparison with Ruddick’s argument that maternal thinking can provide the basis for a “politics of peace” (Ruddick, “Maternal”).

⁴ E.g., Huys, “The Spartan”; Brisson, “Women”.

⁵ Rich, “Of Woman”.

⁶ Ruddick, “Maternal”.

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that⁷ – it explores how far the fruitful dialogue between Motherhood Studies and Religious Studies⁸ can bring us in reading the material and written evidence related to mothers (in the broadest sense, see *infra*) and infants in religious context in ancient and present times. In doing so, we have also tried to offer, when feasible, a feminist reading of those texts, practices, and laws that uncover women’s agency.

I have decided to group the chapters bases on the distinctions between polytheistic and monotheistic religions, despite evident limits inherent these categories (as the chapter by Pasche Guignard, e.g., clearly shows⁹). I explored the Greek, Etruscan, and Roman religions, Sucharita Sarkar the Hindu context, Pascale Engelmajer the Buddhist context; then, Claudia D. Bergmann the Hebrew Bible, Ladan Rahbari the Islamic law concerning breastfeeding, and Florence Pasche Guignard “natural parenting” in the Francophone contexts (ranging from the Catholic Church to “new-pagan” religions).

Our aim is to survey religions influence on maternal work and maternal thinking through normative paradigms both in biological and social terms, but also on how mothers appropriate these religious normative paradigms. This will help scholars and women in general to understand to what extent women’s lives have been dictated by (male) religious authorities through centuries; but also, it will show women ways to elude religious authorities without blaming themselves.

In order to do so, we have revisited the study of religions through the lenses of maternal theory without dismissing but rather through building upon the rich existing scholarship on gender and religion. In this regard, the distinction made by Susan Starr Sered¹⁰ between “woman as symbol” (e.g., images of goddesses, normative stereotypes created by male religious authorities) and “women as agents” (real practice, historical mothers), and the distinction made by Adrienne Rich¹¹ between “motherhood as institution” and “mothering as experience” (women’s experience and relation to her own reproductive capacities) are particularly relevant. In fact, the evidence suggests a widespread gap between normative representation and actual practice.

More specifically, the chapters will address at least one of the following domains: breastfeeding, pregnancy and childbirth, and mothering in the broadest sense (without any biological implications)¹². I will now explain how these three issues had been dealt with.

I decided to start with breastfeeding, since it is a particularly understudied topic from a religious point of view, although starting with pregnancy and childbirth would have been “chronologically” more coherent¹³. While breastfeeding is one of the most concrete and “natural” gestures in mothers’ lives, it has a quite problematic position in the “maternity package”, and its cultural perception varies greatly across world locations over centuries. From a religious point of view, during the workshop we tried to analyze how religious (male) authorities have dealt with such an instinctive and strictly female practice. Within religious discourses, breastfeeding(s) can be biological, spiritual, transgressive (for example, babies breastfed by animals, saints breastfed by the Virgin Mary, old men breastfed by young women). Greek and Roman goddesses, for instance, except in some rare and specific exceptions, do not breastfeed (they avoid biological aspects of motherhood in general); whilst, on the contrary, in the Egyptian narratives

⁷ Five out of six articles are based on the papers the authors delivered on the occasion of cycle of three workshops *Religionification of Motherhood and Mothers’ Appropriation of Religion*, held at the Max-Weber-Kolleg (University of Erfurt) from July 2018 to July 2019 (more details *infra*). The chapter by Rahbari was not part of these workshops. However, despite a different methodological approach, the direction towards “alternative readings and interpretations of the Quran and hadith are existent that centralize the mother and the maternal body”, makes the contribution suitable for the volume. Moreover, the legal perspective is consistent with the purpose of the volume that aims at showing how the maternal experience is influenced by religious authorities.

⁸ Pedrucci, “Le maternità nei politeismi”; Pedrucci, “Motherhood”; Pedrucci, “Maternità e allattamenti”; Pedrucci, “Le maternità e i monoteismi”; Pedrucci, Scapini, “Il ruolo”; Pasche Guignard, Pedrucci, “Motherhood/s”, Pasche Guignard, “The Academic”.

⁹ See, e.g., Pedrucci, “Le maternità nei politeismi”; Pedrucci, “Le maternità e i monoteismi”.

¹⁰ Sered, “Woman”.

¹¹ Rich, “Of Woman”.

¹² This corresponds to the articulation of the three workshops.

¹³ *Breastfeeding(s) and Religions: Normative Prescriptions and Individual Appropriation. A Cross-Cultural and Interdisciplinary Perspectives from Antiquity to the Present*, held at the Max-Weber-Kolleg (University of Erfurt) on July 11-12, 2018. Proceedings published in Pedrucci, “Breastfeeding(s) and Religions”. The workshop was co-organized with Olivera Koprivica.

breast-milk is notoriously important for Horus (and the Pharaoh). Breastfeeding is also an important issue in monotheistic religions. Not only Islam (see milk kinship and the related prohibitions), but also Jewish and Christian traditions have norms and regulations concerning breastfeeding (see, most recently, Pope Bergoglio's words on breastfeeding during mass).

With pregnancies and childbirths, the focus was still on strictly biological practices.¹⁴ They also must be intended as plural. Indeed, pregnancies can be “natural” or can be the result of Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ARTS). There are “egg-mothers,” “surrogate mothers”, and “birth mothers”. The childbirth can be natural, cesarean, with or without epidural anesthesia, multiple, hospitalized or a home birth. Religious discourses on these issues are frequent and can strongly dictate how women experience their mothering from the very beginning. The religious control on women and their reproductive capacities starts even before by dictating conception, contraception, and abortion. Religious authorities also strongly influence practices of “social birth”, that is adoption. Following the most “natural” way seems to be the best value from a religious point of view. Moreover, even if pregnancy and childbirth are evidently physiological functions, they have been particularly used as powerful metaphors, also in religious contexts by religious authorities, which not rarely imply the negotiation (even the negation) of the female role and agency in this creating a new being.

We finally moved to non-biological functions of mothers¹⁵. We focused on the religious roles of the “mother” in the child's life after the perinatal phase until adulthood, as well as on the less fortunate cases in which the offspring dies before becoming adult. While the first two workshops dealt with physiological functions that only a woman – mother-to-be or newly mother – can perform, this third workshop stresses that the rearing of a child shifts the focus from biology to society. Therefore, it is necessary to define what “mother” is. In order to do so, I used Sara Ruddick's articulation of the three demands of maternal thinking – preservation, growth, and social acceptance – that are met by the three practices of preservative love, nurturance, and training. Of these, preservation is the most fundamental. As Ruddick suggests, “mother” is better understood as a verb (to mother) than as a feminine substantive. A mother is anyone who engages in maternal practice, or motherwork, and makes this a central part of their life.¹⁶ Inspired by Ruddick's words, the epistemological framework and concept of “mother” that I developed reads as follows: in any child's life there may be one or more figures who collaborate (simultaneously or not) to enable that child's preservation, growth, and social acceptance, but most children have one particular figure – a “mother” – in their life, someone who takes care of them on a daily – or almost daily – basis in order to enable their preservation, growth, and social acceptance. Significant others can help this figure, but she/he is the person who does the majority of the work. This figure is often, but not always and not necessarily, the biological mother. As the title – again, in the plural form – aims to underline, there is a multiplicity of ways to mother, some of which can be shaped and influenced by religion or by other social forces similar to religion. These will form the focus of the workshop. Examples include “spiritual mothering”, collective mothering of children by religious institutions, as well as redefinition, negation or negotiation of parenting patterns for instance religious inside sects (e.g., Jonestown, Mount Athos, Il Forteto in Italy...). In the latter regard, I elaborated on the concept of “transgressive mothers”, that is mothers (in the broadest sense

¹⁴ *Pregnancies, Childbirths, and Religions: Rituals, Normative Perspectives, and Individual Appropriations. A Cross-Cultural and Interdisciplinary Perspective from Antiquity to the Present* held at the Max-Weber-Kolleg (University of Erfurt), January 31-February 1, 2019. Proceedings published in Pedrucci, “Pregnancies, Childbirths”. The workshop was co-organized with Claudia D. Bergmann.

¹⁵ *Mothering(s) and Religions: Normative Perspectives and Individual Appropriations. A Cross-Cultural and Interdisciplinary Approach from Antiquity to the Present*, held at the Max-Weber-Kolleg (University of Erfurt), 16-17 July 2019. Proceedings published in Pedrucci, “Mothering(s) and Religions”. The workshop was co-organized with Emiliano R. Urciuoli.

¹⁶ I quote here the reason for not choosing “parent” from Pasche Guignard and Pedrucci 2018, 409f.: “Several reasons lead us to choose ‘mother’ over ‘parent’ [...] etymologically, ‘parent’ derives from *parēre* [...]. Though etymologists suggest other ancient meanings for this verb, ‘*enfanter*, *mettre au monde* [...] est le sens usuel et Classique’ and by far the most widespread. One of our aims is precisely to avoid further reducing ‘the maternal’ to the biological act of giving birth. Beyond childbirth itself, if the term ‘parent,’ in English, may *seem* more ‘inclusive,’ it certainly is not constructed as genderless. Even though care work and nurture are not *essentially* gendered activities, such work was and in many contexts still is predominantly attributed to and performed by women, many of whom are mothers. They are considered (and often too named) primarily in their maternal role rather than as generic ‘parent’”.

described above) who kill, do not properly feed children, or educate them to self-destructive behaviors for religious reasons. Examples include Medea, whose actions seem constantly dictated by the Sun God, *jihadist mothers*, *mothers during the Jonestown massacre*, *mothers who refuse life-saving medical treatments for their offspring, including vaccines, etc.* We asked how these mothers use religion or spirituality as a way to not conform to the expectations of motherhood, by missing the first, most important demand in Ruddick's description: preservation/preservative love¹⁷. For this reason, they act against the very definition of "mother" and become "transgressive".

This special issue aims to show that religious discourses on mothers, motherhood, and mothering can strongly shape the mother's experience from the very beginning onwards. In addition, we also aim to highlight that, in some cases, a feminist reading of these texts that uncover women's agency is possible and desirable.

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¹⁷ However it is worth noting that, according to Ruddick, "Maternal", it is impossible to always meet all the demands, and there is a process of constant negotiation. At some point, every mother fails, and has to face her/his failure. Not all mothers are able to cope with such failure and the consequence can go as far as suicide or homicide.