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RELIGIONS AND MOTHERS

Florence Pasche Guignard

Introduction

Some This chapter provides key categories and notions to study mothers, motherhood, and mothering at the intersection with religions and spiritualities. Religion and maternity[1] rarely are examined together, even as gender has become a widespread critical category of analysis in the study of religions. Rather than offering any detailed accounts or specific case studies, this chapter constitutes a general introduction and invites us to consider a plurality of institutional, organized religions rooted in historical traditions, as well as more recent, contemporary or emerging trends. Building on scholarship on religion and gender more generally, it focuses on issues specific to motherhood rather than to gender or femininity. Although many religious representations, discourses, and practices tend to conflate “women” with “mothers,” it is crucial for any academic perspective on religions and maternity to distinguish these categories and thus to avoid any essentialist assumptions. To this end, a cross-cultural and implicitly comparative approach is helpful in replacing in critical perspective what religious discourses and actors say about mothers, motherhood, and, more rarely, mothering. Uncovering what mothers themselves express, through a variety of media, about their own religious experiences and practices is possible only in contexts where sufficient data is available.

Although definitions of both religion and spirituality are contentious, a broad definition of religion as a distinctive part of culture is relevant for this chapter, with the awareness that “religion” is not always a neatly carved out and separate domain. Spirituality is a term useful to highlight the discrepancy between official or orthodox discourses and the lived reality of people (e.g., practices and beliefs not necessarily rooted in or central to institutions). This chapter highlights many intersections between “the maternal” and “the religious” beyond obvious key figures and themes (outlined in the central themes section), acknowledging the diversity of ways in which religions and spiritualities influence or shape motherhood, as an institution, mothers, and, in some instances, mothering as women’s own experience of being mothers.

After a preliminary historical overview, I outline a list of central themes at the intersection of religion and maternity, with the intention to draw attention to topics that deserve more scrutiny or that remain difficult to identify. After discussing selected issues around these themes, I address a few controversies and challenges. Finally, before the concluding remarks and the bibliographical section, I outline directions for future research.

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Background and context

Historical overview

Neither religious traditions themselves nor those who study them academically have always recognized mothers or the maternal as central issues. Several recent studies with a sharper focus (see the bibliographical section) successfully uncover and analyze new materials or reconsider traditional sources. On the one hand, few scholars of religions have focused their work on motherhood or mothers, and mothering is even more rarely at the center. On the other hand, motherhood studies scholars have only recently paid attention to religion specifically either as a decisive vector in enforcing traditional or conservative gender norms, or as a potential path to empower mothers. Theologians, too, some from within their own tradition and others with some more distance, have written about spirituality as a way for (mostly) women to express in their own terms their experience of being mothers and of mothering, as well as mothers reclaiming their own spiritual paths (Stovell; Thomas). Most of the key themes outlined in the next section relate to motherhood as an institution, though studies on women's own experience of engaging in maternal practice are becoming more frequent, especially in anthropology. Because of epistemological or methodological issues, religious dimensions of mothering rarely are brought to the foreground. Indeed, for historians, access to relevant past sources is a key issue (Cooper and Phelan). Literature of various genres, attributed to men authors, gives us some access to expressions of particular aspects of maternity. Furthermore, an essentialist position that considers maternity as natural, instinctive, and universal, exempts scholars from documenting and studying it, since it is assumed to be the same everywhere and at all times. Yet, religion is one of the factors that contributes to the variety of motherhood. Although the religious lives of women – especially the literate ones who frequently also were close to or part of the religious elite – have never been completely erased or censored, the spiritual lives of mothers and their religious activities in relation with motherhood often remain a blind spot. It is rarely acknowledged explicitly that mothers are necessary to physically give birth to, as well as to practically (through care work) and symbolically transmit religion to and sustain (through religious upbringing and education, among others) the human beings that compose any religious group. Divine images or normative moral discourse tend to occupy the forefront of most discussions on religion and mothers or motherhood. The next section outlines key themes, without claiming any exhaustivity, beyond the frequent, essentialist, and naturalizing focus on "women as mothers" and of notions of "good religious motherhood" within religious traditions themselves as well as in the works of those who study them.

Central themes

The variety of religions and spiritualities past and present around the globe adds to the diversity of motherhood as a social and cultural construction, beyond biologically determined processes of sexual reproduction. Attempts at a general theorizing on maternity and religion, even from feminist perspectives, are bound to fail because it is indeed perilous to claim any systematic thinking about and with categories that cover such a diversity of expressions. The following section, however, provides readers with a list of themes transversal to several religions and spiritualities, and suggest works of reference. Many studies indeed focus on maternal themes or figures within well-defined religious or spiritual traditions (with specific references to a time period, a geographical area, or to particular ethnic or linguistic expressions). Beyond encyclopedia entries that provide a general framework (Harper) or consider motherhood in particular traditions (see [page 158] particular entries in the *Encyclopedia of Motherhood*), it is difficult to find works that consider not just reproduction or childbirth, but women and others in their specific role as mothers (whether biological, social, or spiritual) in religions. Religious traditions themselves indeed produce and reproduce their own discourses about motherhood in which the lived reality of past and contemporary human mothers rarely is central. Some traditions, however, often those outside of the most studied

monotheistic ones, feature maternal figures (both human and suprahuman ones) more prominently, often with an awareness on the multidimensional aspects of motherhood, as we will see later. When addressed specifically to human mothers (more rarely, generically, to parents), religious discourses tend to convey normative views on the very topic of motherhood and family. Issues related to parenting have only recently been considered as valid topics for the study of religions (Lofton). Yet, the contents of such discourses about mothers or addressed to them, might play a crucial role in the everyday religious lives of practitioners, whether or not they mother children.

Recurring themes emerge in social sciences and humanities scholarship on various aspects of motherhood in different religious traditions. Specific points of controversy and challenges, especially relevant to contemporary issues, will be discussed next, but first, based on a previously published and more extensive review (Pasche Guignard, "The Academic Study of Religions and Mothering"), the following section outlines central themes and topics relating to religion and maternity in a variety of past and contemporary traditions.

Maternal cosmological narratives. Notions of generating and sustaining life are at the very center of several cosmogonies and worldviews that can distinctively be labeled as religious. Some mythological narratives conceptualize the "beginning" or the "creation" of the world with metaphors of sexual reproduction involving a maternal (though not necessarily human) body, with fecundation, gestation, and childbirth or parthenogenesis. Others emphasize the role of certain divine entities as sustainers and nurturers of humans and other sentient beings.

Divine motherhood and mother goddesses. Many artistic or literary figures have been interpreted as mother goddesses, mother of the gods, or Mother of God. Systematically reading and reclaiming artifacts shaped like female bodies as "fertile," "maternal," or as "divine," is problematic (Eller). In polytheistic systems that, to some extent, reflect human systems of kinship and family relations, a plurality of suprahuman figures (mostly though not exclusively feminine ones) are concerned with aspects of human life most directly related to maternity. A variety of divinities are prayed to for the good health of the mother and child. Some goddesses have maternal aspects of nurturance and protection while retaining an ambivalent character of potential danger to the child and to the mother as well. Other goddesses are constructed as feminine but without being maternal. "Mother goddesses" are not necessarily associated with children of their own, with many children, nor are represented in the very act of giving birth. Lactating or breastfeeding goddesses are more common.

Other maternal figures. A range of other nonhuman figures, including male and animal ones, that have maternal aspects or take on maternal roles are featured in myths and other sacred narratives. The extent to which othermothers are represented varies in each tradition. Some sources mention other protective or nurturing figures that intervene in the life of the child in addition to the birth-giver (e.g., Halima, the wet-nurse of Prophet Muhammad; the daughter of Pharaoh raising Moses as her son while his own mother serves as wet-nurse; fairies and godmothers in European folktales). Some narratives, and often too their corresponding ritual practices, place a great emphasis on the mother of a man (more rarely, a woman) important to his (or her) religion in his (or her) capacity as a saint, a prophet, a founder, a spiritual leader, or a reformer (e.g., the Virgin Mary in some expressions of Christianity). Inversely, some religious narratives explicitly feature maternal death or comment on the absence of the mother of a [page 159] famous religious figure (e.g., Queen Mahamaya, mother of the Buddha, dies seven days after childbirth). The absence or early death of the mother is accounted for, reflected upon, and often presented as necessary. Some myths feature both human and divine male childbirth and mothering, especially in the absence of a mother (e.g., Zeus giving birth to Dionysus and Athena).

Maternal imagery of the divine or of a God with otherwise frequently masculine attributes and characteristics is also found in religious texts. In the Bible, for instance, God is alluded to or described through metaphors of being involved in midwifery, as a woman in labor, as a woman who has given birth and is carrying her child, as providing nurturance. Maternal physiological and reproductive functions are

also mentioned in the New Testament. Some traditions have ambivalent views on maternal attachment, which is seen as "ties that bind" (Ohnuma) and thus as a potential hindrance on the spiritual path.

Religious othermothering. In some religious institutions, some men and women, who have vowed to live communal lives of celibacy, concretely mother children through raising orphans or running schools or educational programs. This is the case in Buddhism, especially in Southeast Asia, where some monasteries also concretely serve as orphanages, or where parents bring their children in order for them to receive an education. The feelings of mothers willingly bringing their children or constrained to abandon them at the doors of such institutions have rarely been investigated. Catholicism also has teaching congregations known for specializing in running orphanages and schools.

Spiritual and cultural religious mothering. The metaphor of the mother-child relationship is used in several traditions to describe a more advanced practitioner guiding another one as his or her "spiritual child" (also see later considerations on women spiritual leaders as mothers). Outside of such cases of spiritual mothering, very practically, the primary source of exposure of infants to religion often come from those who mother them. Philosopher Plato already acknowledged the primary role of mothers and other caregivers in exposing children to stories about divinities. In many religious contexts, mothers are the primary religious enculturators of children (Reimer, "Who Is in Charge of the Family?" 282). Such spiritual and cultural religious roles in mothering are not restricted to the private or domestic sphere. Roles of educators of children (e.g., Sunday school teacher) often are considered as socially acceptable for women (though not necessarily birth-givers) in contexts where other professional paths and roles within religious institutions remain closed to them or are deemed as inappropriate.

Mother blame and religion. Perceived failure in this role as primary religious enculturator leads to forms of mother blame with specifically religious and moral undertones. More than other caregivers, mothers tend to be blamed, implicitly or explicitly, for decisions or lifestyle choices their children make. This is the case when adolescent or adult children either go against the beliefs and practices of the religious group they were born and raised into and that they sometimes choose to distance themselves from. In more secularized contexts, mother blame occurs when (generally adult) children choose a religious path that is deemed incompatible with or threatening to secular society, or when they display an excessive zeal, especially in case of conversions and further supporting or committing acts of violence.

Spiritual leaders as mothers. Overlapping in some instances with the spiritual mothering mentioned earlier are now well-documented historical and contemporary cases of women as religious leaders, whether their authority is institutional or charismatic. Women in positions of spiritual (and sometimes authoritative institutional) leadership are called "mother" or equivalent terms in the respective languages of their followers, though many of them will never become birth-givers as they commit to a life of sexual abstinence (e.g., in Catholicism, an abbess in a position of authority over a community of nuns, is often called "mother superior"; as early as the late nineteenth century, several movements within Hinduism and its modern reforms and [page 160] reinterpretations emerged with women as leaders or, in some instances, as celibate wife of the guru, see Pechilis).

Gender equality, feminist ideals, and religious feminism with an emphasis on motherhood. Some explicitly religious movements self-identify as feminist and espouse many of the original ideals of feminism, in particular, gender equality. They fight against discriminations both within their own communities and in society in general. These movements tend to build upon maternalist ideals[2] considering that women and, especially, mothers, naturally have more "morality" than men and thus should serve as guardians of good morals as well as trustworthy and efficient social and spiritual reformers or revivalists, not only in their own family or private sphere but in society in general. Other movements fight against discriminations targeting mothers for religious reasons.

Religion as a way to eschew motherhood. Many works on women's religious histories have focused on women who were deemed exceptional in the sense that they did not follow the culturally determined normative course of life for women (traditional adult roles as wife and mother). Nuns, saints, and mostly celibate women engaging in various forms of asceticism, scholarship, or service are examples in many

traditions. In several contexts, a radical engagement with religion, though sometimes controversial, provides a socially accepted framework alternative to marriage and motherhood.

Traditional and emerging rituals. Key moments in a woman's life, especially those related to fertility and childbirth, are celebrated in many traditions. These often are reinterpreted or appropriated by emerging and often highly customized ritualizations in contemporary times. Cultural and religious constructions of the moral and physical im/purity of woman as (future or potential) wife and mother evolve over time. Women are responsible for maintaining many aspects of ritual purity, as well as for teaching them to daughters. Other traditions (and often too, more liberal interpretations within these same traditions) no longer regard the blood of childbirth (and of menstruation) as polluting or impure (e.g., a Sikh mother may visit a Gurdwara for the naming ceremony of a newborn as soon as she feels ready to do so after childbirth). Rituals once linked to ideas of thanksgiving and purification can take on new meanings for mothers (e.g., the churching of women, their first returning to church after childbirth).

Influence of religion on the health and well-being of mothers. In some contexts, religion still influences, among others, access to medical care and the very type of services women as mothers receive. For instance, Catholic hospitals will not provide most forms of contraception, sterilization, and abortion services, even when the life of the mother would depend on it. Similarly, in Ireland, Catholic motivations and beliefs regarding women's fertility, rather than purely medical indications, motivated the procedure of symphysiotomy (rather than C-section). Some discourses also support access to midwifery care and homebirth and resist Western biomedical models on religious grounds (Klassen). Regarding other issues such as in-vitro fertilization and third donor party, acceptance varies greatly across traditions (see Inhorn). How religions impose, offer, or lack ritual and spiritual resources for women to deal with pregnancy loss, abortion, stillbirth, or the early death of a child is also a point to consider.

Key issues and debates

Differences and similarities between mothers in different religious traditions practiced in the same territories, thus sharing some common cultural elements, are striking. Recent volumes, for instance, consider the influence of Hindu, Muslim, or Sikh traditions on motherhood in South Asia and in the South Asian diaspora (Sangha and Gonsalves; Krishnaraj). Another relevant question to consider comparatively is whether monotheistic or polytheistic conceptualizations of the [page 161] divine, with the presence of a plurality of feminine and maternal representations of goddesses in the latter, make any difference for human mothers in their daily life. Similarly, the influence of religious discourse on family structures, as in monogamous or polygynous marriages, or as in other forms of commitments that transcend heteronormative categories, could be further considered.

Controversies and challenges in relation to religions and maternity

Both the academic study of religions and motherhood studies are highly interdisciplinary fields, each relying on various approaches. They share some methodological and epistemological challenges, such as accessing sources and reflecting on the positionality of the researcher. Versatile methodologies, often combining those of literary analysis, history, and anthropology, are privileged.

Another key challenge both to women within religious traditions and to scholars who study them consists in questioning essentialist views that equate "women" with "mothers" and consider motherhood as the "natural" destiny for all (or most) women. Any academic approach to studying religion and maternity ought to identify and then deconstruct this assumption, while acknowledging that, in practice, most reproductive and care work relating to children is still overwhelmingly done by women rather than men. In the case of religious contexts, this "naturalization" of women as mothers is further reinforced when presented as a sacred duty or a divine order. In parallel, the injunction to respect one's parents, and, especially, one's mother is presented not just as an ethical or respectful things to do but as a command from the divinity. In

many contemporary contexts, mothers thus may still derive a relatively high and respected status from this. However, it is often not the maternal status per se nor the capacity of the female body for bringing life that are valued. Even where mothers are highly regarded and respected, most women in general certainly do not enjoy the same freedom, privileges, and rights as men do in contexts where religious laws or customs prevail over or still strongly influence civil ones. While some mothers are praised, others, for the very same physical act of birthing a child (and, later, the social act of raising a child) are vilified: for instance, those who do so outside of a religiously sanctioned wedlock (whether in monogamy or polygyny), or those who give birth only to girls, or to children with disabilities. Similarly, the counterpart of this insistence on valuing motherhood and women's maternal bodies as carriers of (a potential) life, often is the condemnation of infertility. Women who do not wish to or cannot have or raise children may suffer from religious perspectives that view having many children, especially sons, as a sign of morality and blessedness, and associate infertility with suspicion or punishment for a moral or ritual failure. Narratives about motherhood and non-motherhood ought to be contextualized and reconceived (Moss and Baden). Ritual remediation may be suggested to, or enforced on a woman, such as fasting, prayers, pilgrimages, or visits to specific religious sites.

Another challenge for studying motherhood and religion is to go beyond the emphasis placed on the overlap between "motherhood" and "reproduction" by religious discourses, by some mothers themselves, and by scholars. Many studies focus almost exclusively on "biological moments," which are indeed important and constitutive of motherhood (pregnancy, childbirth, the immediate postpartum, and lactation). Studying the religious, ritual, and spiritual aspects of childbirth in any given culture or comparing various religious discourses around a particular birth practice shared by women of several different religious, spiritual, or secular traditions (Selin; Delaporte and Martin), as homebirth for instance (Klassen), does not exhaust the topic of motherhood. It is more difficult to find studies that consider maternal roles not directly tied to biology and that can be taken on by anyone, in less gendered ways. [page 162]

A challenge for scholars is to identify and deconstruct the apparently benevolent rhetoric of religious groups that use motherhood and notions of family to extol a normative, religiously informed "good motherhood" while vilifying other experiences and practices of mothering that do not conform to their own values, for instance, that of same-sex couples raising children. While stigma against single and divorced mothers might have decreased in the last decades, at least in Western and secularized societies, there remains a strong opposition to same-sex parenting, grounded on religious moralistic arguments. Interestingly, groups that hold highly conservative positions on morality but have diverging theologies, meet across the religious spectrum in their opposition to same-sex marriage and families, rights to adoption, or access to gestational surrogacy.

Directions for future research

Previously published reviews of literature or basic key themes on mothers and religion (Cheruvallil-Contractor and Rye; Sered; Kawash; Pasche Guignard, "The Academic Study of Religions and Mothering") have already pointed out significant gaps and outlined directions for future research. Building upon these and considering new directions in most recent scholarship, I identify current or new themes or topics likely to receive more attention in the future.

One such trend is to focus more on mothering and religious practice as experienced by mothers, rather than as prescribed by institutions. In line with this, aspects and experiences not directly linked to giving birth and other aspects of motherhood closely tied to biology deserve more scrutiny. Many myths, sacred narratives, ritual practices, and ethical prescriptions indeed relate to such important issues and are consequently the most studied. However, what happens in the mother-child relationship, for instance, in terms of ritualization, past the years of infancy and childhood and how religious institutions consider mothers also matter.

Likewise, how different religious traditions consider as normal or as problematic that several persons other than the birth-giver intervene in the life of the child could become a fruitful topic for comparison. Furthermore, maternal participation in shaping or transmitting religious narratives and norms to their children and the general role of mothers as primary religious enculturators for their children deserves more research, especially in non-monotheistic contexts. Maternal participation in religious rituals and the issue of mother blame in perceived failures of "training" children to meet religious expectations also are likely to be further investigated.

Future research ought to take emic discourses and religious sources themselves seriously, even when no direct, authentic maternal voices are available in them. Yet, tendencies of religious discourses themselves to equate women with mothers and to overemphasize the biological aspects of motherhood should be considered with distance in any critical analysis.

Notes

1 I use the word "maternity" as a cluster encompassing the various meanings of motherhood as an institution and mothering as women's own experience, drawing the distinction, initially suggested by Adrienne Rich (13) and now a common referential in motherhood studies. Also see the general introduction to this volume.

2 Maternalism is different from matricentric feminism (see O'Reilly and in the introduction to this volume).

Further reading

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Conclusion

Any considerations on religions and mothers, motherhood and mothering should be carefully situated in their broader contexts and in regard to other factors that determine sociocultural norms and how these get enforced, resisted, challenged, or changed by mothers and others. More research on the intersection of religion and maternity certainly is needed to advance our understanding of experiences of motherhood and mothering, both in contemporary and past contexts, with attention paid to spiritual expressions, normative and marginalized discourses, as well as ritual practices. Other more specific topics of study, whether particular to one tradition or comparatively across several religions, are still to be uncovered in addition to the key themes outlined in this chapter.

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