

Workshop 5: Motherhood, Religions and Spirituality

Abstracts

The Sacralisation of Motherhood in Contemporary Goddess Spirituality

Anna Fedele

In this paper I will explore from an anthropological perspective the ways in which members of the international Goddess movement conceptualize conscious pregnancy, natural childbirth and prolonged breastfeeding as empowering and sacred experiences for mothers. I will refer to fieldwork in Italy, Spain and Portugal carried out among members of the Goddess movement during the last decade as well as on ongoing research on the sacralisation of motherhood in Portugal. I am particularly interested in analysing the ways in which women are encouraged to stay at home from work during pregnancy or early motherhood in order to fully access the sacredness of motherhood and take advantage of the process of personal transformation and spiritual elevation it is supposed to foster. Central in these discourses is not only the well being of the baby, but also the spiritual development of the mother. Challenging common contemporary assumptions about what it means to be an empowered woman in contemporary Western countries, these mothers embrace this kind of sacred motherhood as the free, empowering choice of women who have the courage to go against mainstream “feminist” assumptions.

Maternal and Religious Disappointment in Contemporary German Women’s Fiction

Sheridan Marshall

British philosopher Simon Critchley offers a possible characterisation of modernity as ‘the attempt to live with(in) the disappointment of religion.’ Research in the social sciences suggests that, in modern industrialised societies, women are more religious than men. The cluster of narratives written during the last decade by women wrestling with the contradictions of modern maternal experiences might aptly be described as attempts ‘to live with(in) the disappointment of motherhood.’ But what, if any, are the connections between women’s experiences of motherhood and their experiences of religion? My paper will explore the associations between religion (and its disappointments) and motherhood (and its disappointments) in contemporary women’s writing in German.

I will examine how this literary writing situates itself in relation to motherhood and religion. What is the relevance of religion to German women’s writing in the twenty-first century, and in particular to their writing about motherhood? Where is God in their writing? How is matriarchal authority infringed/ reinforced by religious authority? To what extent does German women’s writing about motherhood draw upon religious tradition(s)? How is maternal and religious disappointment manifested in German women’s writing?

I will consider these questions with reference to the German-language prose writings of a range of female authors, but will focus here primarily on Sibylle Berg’s *Vielen Dank für das Leben* (‘Thank-you for the Gift of Life’, 2012), Ursula Fricker’s *Außer sich* (‘Beside Himself’, 2012) and Ursula Krechel’s *Landgreicht* (‘State Justice’ 2012). These works have been selected because they all depict female protagonists whose lives are somehow at the limit of religious and/or maternal experience, and therefore focus most perceptively on

societal expectations in relation to each category of experience and the corresponding possibilities for subjective disappointment that these generate. I will show how literary writing uncovers the origin of highly contradictory societal attitudes towards both religion and motherhood within a shared ambivalence about the dialectic of presence and absence which each sort of experience entails.

Motherhood as Constructed by *Us*: Muslim Women's Negotiations *from a Space that is Their Own*

Sariya Cheruvallil-Contractor

Motherhood, according to Islamic foundation texts, is one of the key aspects of women's diverse roles; however some religious commentaries can make motherhood seem to be the only aspect of women's contributions to society. In my research undertaken within a feminist-pragmatist epistemological stance, Muslim women in Britain chose motherhood, firstly, as one of the many fronts on which to challenge such patriarchy that is evident in some Muslim texts and to thus "reclaim their faith" as articulated in foundational Islamic texts and also as articulated by women. Secondly, they also used motherhood as a construct to find commonality within a feminist sisterhood that is simultaneously diverse and universal – motherhood was something these Muslim women believed they shared with their 'sisters' from backgrounds different from their own.

My anthropological paper will examine Muslim women's narratives of motherhood in contemporary British contexts and the balances that they forge between their faith, feminism and plural contexts. Motherhood for these women becomes a space from where to establish and derive the strength and authority which women can then use to challenge patriarchal narratives of motherhood and domesticity. Within their diverse and multifaceted struggles, Muslim women's also use 'the master's tools to dismantle the master's house' (to use Audre Lorde's metaphor) which then leads to the creation of their own space which they share with women from diverse backgrounds.

Rosie and the Virgin Mary: a Modern Model for Motherhood?

Pauline Eaton

When a woman becomes a mother she takes on a new subjective identity and forms new relationships with those around her, and with a new person. Advice comes from family, friends and professionals; her self-representation as a mother is subject to these influences and to others less overt - half forgotten stories and images, and the cultural and religious norms which inform the society in which she lives.

Julia Kristeva, in her essay 'Stabat Mater', focussed on one of these influences, the Virgin Mary, a model of female maternal perfection with its locus firmly in the Roman Catholic tradition of Christianity. Writing in the 1980s, Kristeva saw this model as already out of date, but interrogated its enduring power. This paper looks at another interrogation of the Marian maternal model in Marie NDiaye's *Rosie Carpe*, published in 2001. The novel's eponymous protagonist is presented at the start of the narrative as pregnant but with no recollection of any sexual relations which might have led to a conception. Rosie chooses to view this conception as 'immaculate' and herself as the Virgin Mary.

This paper analyses how the 'mythology' of the Virgin Mary and other biblical intertext is woven into the narrative of Rosie Carpe so as to explore and interrogate Rosie's inner experience of maternity, and also how the sad narrative of Rosie's experience of being a mother refreshes the human stories that are at the root of the Christian narrative. NDiaye's novel might be said to put flesh on the bones of Kristeva's deconstruction of the Virgin. I go on to argue that NDiaye's use of biblical intertext, far from being merely ludic or ironic, is essential to the discourse which develops within the text around the failure of contemporary society to properly valorise the maternal experience, and that the novel provides a particularly bleak representation of maternal experience, not only by showing the failure of the Virgin Mary as a role model for contemporary motherhood, but also by enabling the reader to access, through Rosie, the inner world and the raw experience of the mother, unmediated by intellectualisation, social expectations or religious influence.

Experiences of 'Motherhood' and 'Voluntary Non-Motherhood' in Women's Contemporary Christianity

Dawn Llewellyn

This paper offers some preliminary themes emerging from a current qualitative comparative examination of the interaction 'motherhood' and 'voluntary non-motherhood' (VNM) (Gatrell, 2004, 2008) with women's self-designated Christian identities.

The project draws on narratives from women in their 20s, 30s and 40s and from a range of denominations. There are two theoretical frameworks prompting this study. First, 'Motherhood' and 'VNM' have been compared sociologically (Gatrell, 2008; Gillespie, 2000; Letherby, 1994, 1999, 2002; Oakley, 1980); while studies such as Halbertal (2002), and Page (2010) examine motherhood amongst Jewish and Catholic women and Anglican priests respectively. However, the effects of religious identity on women's 'choices' to have, or not to have children has been qualitatively under-explored. This is despite the importance of motherhood to women's faith lives (Mclemore, 1995), and the prevalence of theological discourses of motherhood in Christianity (Gill, 1994; Hebblethwaite, 1992; Warner, 1985). Second, this cohort has been exposed to secularisation and feminism, processes that are considered to interact in contemporary (Western) religiosity (Aune et al, 2008; Brown 2000). It has been suggested that women who care for children are more likely to continue to affiliate to Christianity (Davie, 2007; Woodhead, 2008), but what women gain from this is unclear (Warner, 2010) in the context of rising instances of women voluntarily choosing not to have children.

This paper engages with these prompts by exploring the influences, challenges and rewards of choosing to have and not have children on women's faith lives.