

## Introduction Motherhood, Religions and Spirituality

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### Abstract

This Editors' Introduction to the special issue on 'Motherhood, Religions and Spirituality' serves to explain the rationale, research questions and context for this interdisciplinary collection. As such, it engages with Kawash's call for more scholarly work on the intersections between mothering and religious beliefs, practices and experiences. It goes on to situate the contributions into feminist work and methodologies and to show how they focus on the voices and agency of mothers (and non-mothers), before introducing and contextualising the individual contributions. The Introduction concludes by discussing further studies that could build on the work of this collection.

### Keywords

Motherhood; mothering; faith; religion; feminism.

The relationship between motherhood and religion has a long history, with religious beliefs of different persuasions impacting on the way mothers and motherhood are perceived, constructed and lived across centuries and cultures. In Judaism, mothers transmit Jewishness to the next generation; in Islam, mothers are both recognised and valorised as the first educators of children; in Christianity, the cult of the Virgin Mary has sacralised motherhood and created an idealised figure (Warner 1976). As Samira Kawash (2011: 994) states: 'Religion as an institution has done much to uphold the most damaging forms of patriarchy', and disaffection with institutional religion remains a significant aspect of women's lives. Yet women's lived experience of religion is much more nuanced than unquestioning conformance to or outright rejection of patriarchal structures. In discussing the experiences of women in Europe, Aune et al. consider that whereas women are leaving established forms of religion and in particular the Church, they are 'numerically more dominant in various forms of religion, especially the newer forms of alternative spiritualities' (Aune et al. 2008: 15). Furthermore, while patriarchy continues to be a feature in much institutional religion, as women negotiate balances between their religious beliefs and the social roles and the public visibility that modernity has brought to their lives,

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they are transforming religion, often reclaiming it for themselves. They are using their intellectual and social agency to challenge patriarchal narratives and are instead moving towards ways of believing that are more spiritual, less formal and which give women a central role in religious life and transmission. As Aune et al. (2008: 15) conclude, with regard to secularisation theories, 'women's modes of belief are neither secular nor sacral, but both'. By challenging institutional religion, women are finding new ways to believe and – significantly for this special edition on motherhood, religions and spirituality – new ways for their children to believe. They are thus slowly transforming religious landscapes.

Such complexities in relation to women's religion are all the more evident in contemporary Europe, which partly due to post-war migration is religiously diverse and which as elsewhere is seeing a 'return' to religion, in particular in relation to identity. Yet research around motherhood with regard to religious, non-religious and spiritual beliefs remains inadequate. This special issue unprecedentedly brings together scholars who work with mothers of different religious and spiritual persuasions to discuss how beliefs influence mothering. It focuses on the kinds of impact women's new modes and experiences of believing are having on mothers as individuals and on motherhood as a socially, culturally and religiously constructed institution. It throws light on how new or transformed religion is being experienced by women as mothers in broadly European contexts. And it initiates an intellectual and reflective process that responds to the following questions, and others: How are their religious beliefs influencing modern European women's experience of mothering? How is their lived experience challenging or conforming to more traditional religious constructs of motherhood? Are mothers using the freedom and opportunities presented by secular criticisms of religion to reformulate their religious practice as mothers? And how do they negotiate secular and sacred aspects of their lives? In this sense, this special issue responds to Kawash's feminist call for 'more scholarly attention [...] to elucidate the connections and crossings between secular and religiously framed mothering practises and experiences' (Kawash 2011: 994).<sup>1</sup>

'Motherhood, Religions and Spirituality' started life as a workshop organised by the Motherhood in Post-1968 European Literature Network, funded by the British Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), which brought together researchers from across Europe and across disciplines with the aim of inserting literature into an interdisciplinary and cross-cultural debate on the topic. The workshop was held on 28 June 2013 at the University of London; it was co-organised by one of the editors of this special issue, Gill Rye, and the other editor, Sariya Cheruvallil-Contractor, presented a paper. Indeed, five of the other contributors to the issue also participated in the workshop, although not all the current articles originated there.<sup>2</sup> The special issue is designed to prolong and

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<sup>1</sup> The terms 'motherhood' and 'mothering' are both commonly and variously used to describe what mothers do and the relations they have with their children. Over recent years, 'mothering' has become widely used in feminist work (O'Reilly 2004a and 2004b) to distinguish individual practices and experiences from the ideological 'institution' or state of motherhood, as defined by Adrienne Rich (1976).

<sup>2</sup> The podcasts of the Network's events are available at <http://modernlanguages.sas.ac.uk/research-fellowships/ahrc-motherhood-post-1968-european-literature-network/podcasts>.

develop the stimulating dialogue and debate which took place at the workshop, exploring further the entanglements between motherhood, religions and spirituality across a range of contexts, concepts and experiences. It covers a broad range of faiths – Christianity, Islam, Judaism and Goddess Spirituality –, disciplinary perspectives – anthropology, literary studies, oral history, philosophy, religious studies and sociology –, and includes contributions relating to France, Portugal and Israel as well as Britain.

## **Motherhood, Belief and Feminism**

Philosophically all the articles in this special edition align with the broad feminist aim of dismantling hierarchies in the processes of knowledge production and transmission. This special edition makes a feminist contribution in two ways: first, it interrogates the patriarchal subjection and silencing of mothers' voices and agency that is prevalent in institutional religion. By recognising the largely unacknowledged roles of mothers and in highlighting their voices, articles in this special issue challenge patriarchal interpretations of religious texts and the expectations that both secular and religious cultures have of mothers. Secondly, this volume recognises voices that are less-heard within feminist thought and which are arguably caught in a 'feminist' blind-spot: the voices of believing women, who may hold either religious, non-religious or spiritual beliefs. Feminist thinkers, not unreasonably, have sought to challenge patriarchal structures within religion, which is an intellectual and reflective process that this special edition contributes to as well. However, in their criticisms of religion, feminist thinkers have alienated many religious and spiritual women who feel empowered by their beliefs and who draw authority and agency from them. By allowing belief and feminism to enter into dialogue with each other, this special issue creates a powerful intellectual and indeed feminist space, where it is possible to deconstruct the stereotypes that both feminists and religionists have of each other.

The research within this special edition also contributes to what is a simpler but as significant *methodological* dismantling of epistemic hierarchies – that between the 'researcher' and the 'researched'. These are hierarchies of authority that can occur within individual research projects, but which in the articles presented here have been replaced by thinking around positionality. Research becomes a collaborative exercise where the 'researcher' and 'researched' together create new meaning and new knowledge. It is significant here, then, that all the contributions in this special issue focus on women as speaking subjects, who have voice and agency, albeit different forms of agency. They speak about their experiences of mothering and more significantly about their challenge of motherhood – the institution that in the case of religious women is propped up both by socio-cultural norms of the ideal mother and religious impositions of what this should mean. Key to such giving of voice to mothers is the possibility to capture the complexities and nuances of the cultural milieu unique to each mother. The articles in this special edition, and the authors themselves, become conveyors of voice that capture both the similarities and differences in mothering and motherhood for diverse women, identifying spaces for solidarity. Like Brown et al., the articles in this special edition focus 'deliberately on

women's own views' (1994: 1). All the authors, in ways that are shaped by their disciplinary perspectives, ask women about their mothering experiences and proceed on the assumption 'that women can be believed when they report on their lives' (Brown et al. 1994: 2).

## Mothers as Agents

The articles included here invite us to think about mothers as subjects and agents, not as objects of others' discourses. As Dubravka Žarkov (2015: 5) notes: 'Historically, in Europe, religion has been one of the major ideologies of Oth-ering'. And although modern plural Europe includes ways of believing that give women more agency, religious institutions continue to hold a great deal of sway over how their lives are lived. They have established rules and regulations, limits and boundaries, which impact on women's everyday life, on how they experience motherhood, on the ways they mother their children – and indeed even on the decision of whether or not to become a mother. They have defined and normalised good and bad practices and who should and should not be a mother. Many of these institutions reify the institution of motherhood in different ways: ranging from exemplifying motherhood as the main domain for women's spiritual success and as 'woman's highest and holiest mission (Rich 1985: 42); to social constructs of the 'good mother' (Brown et al. 1994: 139); and resultant pressures which stigmatise women who cannot or do not want to become mothers, labelling them as barren or 'unwomanly' (Marsh 1997: 216). But very few of these institutions recognise women's agency and authority in determining motherhood. Women's experiences of *mothering* tend to be paid very little if any attention to in religious constructs of *motherhood*. And where women do have authority, it is often outside of 'traditional' religious institutions, in feminist theological thinking or in groups that may be understood as women's religions (Sered 1996).

Sariya Cheruvallil-Contractor's article, 'Motherhood as Constructed by Us: Muslim Women's Negotiations from a Space that is their Own', which opens the collection, draws on interviews with young Muslim women in Britain, focusing on the differences between motherhood as institution and mothering as experience. Cheruvallil-Contractor shows how, while valorising motherhood, some Muslim religious discourses limit women's lives in other areas. Yet the foundational texts of Islam themselves allow for motherhood to be lived out in more liberal ways and enable these young mothers to forge a feminist sisterhood with women from different backgrounds and faiths.

In 'Rosie Carpe and the Virgin Mary – Modelling Modern Motherhood', Pauline Eaton analyses a novel by contemporary French author, Marie NDiaye, in which the 'mythology' of the Virgin Mary is seen to be woven into the narrative of motherhood. While the study confirms Bulgarian-French philosopher, psychoanalyst and literary critic Julia Kristeva's diagnosis that the Virgin Mary is no longer an adequate model for modern motherhood, it nonetheless refreshes the human stories at the root of the Christian narrative.

The following two articles also focus on Christianity. In 'Altruism and Sacrifice: Anglican Priests Managing "Intensive" Priesthood and Motherhood', Sarah-Jane Page examines the cases of clergy mothers when the demands of

motherhood and priesthood clash. Both callings are based on altruism and sacrifice, and the article highlights the negotiations that are necessary for women to manage the co-existence of motherhood with a career in the Church. Dawn Llewellyn's 'Maternal Silences: Motherhood and Voluntary Childlessness in Contemporary Christianity', meanwhile, explores how Christian pronatalist discourses work against women's choices of whether to become mothers at all from within a faith context. Drawing on interviews with women who identify as Christian, it reveals the strategies they have for subverting and resisting the discourses – and the silences – that surround motherhood and which impact on their lives.

Angela Davis's article, "'I Want Them to Learn about Israel and the Holidays": Jewish Israeli Mothers in Early-Twenty-First-Century Britain', draws on interviews with Jewish mothers who have migrated from Israel to Britain. It focuses on the strategies used by women for passing on a Jewish Israeli identity to their children, whether or not they are practising themselves. Davis also shows how parenting abroad led the interviewees to embrace cultural and religious traditions in new ways.

Anna Fedele's article "'Holistic Mothers" or "Bad Mothers"? Challenging Bio-medical Models of the Body in Portugal' considers mothering choices based on the assumption that pregnancy, childbirth and early childhood are important spiritual occasions for mother and child. Through interviews with women she defines as 'holistic' mothers, Fedele looks at the interconnections between their interest in alternative forms of birth care and early mothering and Goddess spirituality.

Rachel Jones's 'Afterword' concludes the collection by reflecting on the contributions from a feminist philosophical perspective.

## Closing Thoughts

At the start of this Introduction, we said that this special edition is an unprecedented *bringing together* of scholars who work with women from a range of religious and spiritual beliefs to discuss the influences of religion and spirituality on their mothering experiences. In researching for it, as stated previously, we realise that, although there has been some research on motherhood and religion that is feminist, anthropological or philosophical, this is still an area that needs further work. In traditional theological circles this is an area that continues to be caught in an epistemic blind-spot that leads to the de-valuing of the contributions of women. This blind-spot is also relevant to feminist thought, which, in its criticisms of religion, may still sometimes fail to see that for some women belief is an important aspect of their identity and their lives. Feminist and womanist scholars like Bynum (1984), Sered (1996), Williams (1993), Tananbaum (1994) and more recently Sullivan (2012), Ryan and Vacchelli (2013) and Reynolds and May (2014) have begun the process of re-assigning value, authenticity and authority to religious women's voices and experiences in feminist, theological, anthropological and sociological studies of mothering, but further work is required to redress the gap in scholarship on and *with* mothers. Through this special issue we contribute to the process of addressing this gap by bringing together the voices of women from diverse theological backgrounds, to

explore lived experiences of mothering. Significantly the articles also explore how mothers are changing religion.

While research into Christian mothering experiences is growing (see contributions here from Eaton, Llewellyn and Page), more research is needed into the lives of mothers from other religious groups – Islam, Judaism (that feature here in articles by Cheruvallil-Contractor and Davies, respectively) and also Hinduism, Sikhism and other faiths which are increasing in significance in Europe. More studies are also required on other modes of believing; we need to examine how pagan and druid mothers mother their children, for example – Fedele’s article on alternative spiritualities represents a beginning, but more work is needed. Non-religiosity as a belief and as an identity is increasing in significance in Europe and it remains to be seen – and studied – how this will influence mothering practices.

Most of our contributors acknowledge the heterosexual focus of their studies, even if they have interviewed women who do not identify as heterosexual in their wider studies. With an increasing acceptance (legal, social and otherwise) of same-sex sexualities, marriage and parenthood in Europe and elsewhere (if not widely yet within religious institutions themselves), future studies of mothering, religions and spirituality will need to be more inclusive in terms of genders and sexualities as well as class, race, ethnicity and, as above, different religious groupings.

The articles in this special issue together demonstrate the ways in which women are changing traditional notions of belief in different ways. This may be through re-interpreting religious texts in ways that are ‘women-friendly’ – looking again at those texts – or simply through paying attention to women’s lived realities and the balances that they forge in everyday life between their beliefs, social contexts and their feminisms. Patriarchy is an enduring aspect of most religions, yet women’s religion can represent a challenge to patriarchy from the inside, by using language and tools that, within the context of institutional religion, cannot easily be dismissed. Future research needs to interrogate *women’s religion* in more detail, to consider what the changes are and how they may affect social relations in future, more diverse communities. It is important to note that, as expressed in all the articles but perhaps as most clearly demonstrated in Davis’s article, women are amalgamating their religious identities with their secular contexts. Belief becomes ‘fuzzy’ (Voas 2009); identity becomes complex and mothering even more so.

In her contribution, Eaton describes motherhood ‘as a key human experience and, for some, the key experience of being a woman’. She continues to describe religious belief as one of the ‘pressures on women’ to become an ideal mother – whatever and however this is constructed. The articles here demonstrate that, in changing belief, women are changing and debating these traditional constructs of motherhood and mothering. In concluding her own article Page asserts that ‘although religion has contributed to this idealisation of motherhood, it can also be used as a resource to challenge it’. More research, activism and inclusive feminisms are needed to realise the emancipatory potential of women’s religion and belief to challenge the valorisation of motherhood and reifications of womanhood in general.

Finally we wish to come back to feminism. The legacy and praxis of feminist scholarship and activism is to give agency to all voices that may be marginalised for a variety of reasons, including by institutional religion. Yet in some ways feminism can also be perceived as marginalising religious women. With regard

to motherhood, as mentioned by Llewellyn (in her contribution here), this has led in part to religious experiences of motherhood being under-researched, which according to her constitutes a 'maternal silence'. Unfortunately, religious women have also been suspicious of feminism and have often eschewed it. For example some respondents in Fedele's study (as quoted in the contribution here) said that they did not consider themselves feminists because for them feminists 'put too much emphasis on attaining equality in the workplace, dismissing the spiritual dimension of the mothering experience as well as the centrality of close contact between mother and child during the first years'. Future research and activism agendas need to consider ways in which this mutual avoidance can be bridged, and for greater more impactful collaborations between women's beliefs and their feminism.

All of these debates, on mothering, women's belief and feminism are ongoing. In bringing together disciplines and ideas that otherwise would not necessarily come together, this special issue breaks new ground. Yet this constitutes only the beginning of a discussion that needs to continue. We hope, though, that the articles in this special issue and the ideas they present generate further dialogue and research into how contemporary mothers are finding new strategies of managing the ongoing inter-relations between mothering, religions and spirituality, and that they stimulate further opportunities to give voice and visibility to women's own experiences of mothering.

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