

Maternal Silences: Motherhood and Voluntary Childlessness in Contemporary Christianity

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Abstract

In Christianity, there is an ideology of motherhood that pervades scripture, ritual, and doctrine, yet there is an academic silence that means relatively little space has been given to motherhood and mothering, and even less to voluntary childlessness, from a faith perspective. By drawing on qualitative in-depth interviews with Christian women living in Britain, narrating their experiences of motherhood and voluntary childlessness, I suggest there are also lived maternal silences encountered by women in contemporary Christianity. There is a maternal expectation produced through church teaching, liturgy and culture that constructs women as 'maternal bodies' (Gatrell 2008); this silences and marginalises women from articulating their complex relationship with religion, motherhood, and childlessness in ways that challenge their spiritual development. However, this article also introduces the everyday and intentional tactics women employ to disrupt the maternal expectation, and hereby interrupt the maternal silence.

Keywords

Motherhood; voluntary childlessness; Christianity; maternal silences; maternal bodies; Caroline Gatrell.

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Religion and Gender | ISSN: 1878-5417 | www.religionandgender.org | Uopen Journals

Introduction

It is difficult to argue with the visibility and value given to mothering and motherhood in Christianity, and yet very little is known about Christian women's 'maternal bodies' (Gatrell 2008: 6) – the social and cultural positions women are given in regard to maternity. This is curious as motherhood has been named as a key factor in faith development and an opportunity for spiritual insight (Buller and Fast 2013; Halbertal 2002; Molina 2013; Slee 2004). In feminist studies of religion and theology, the general concern has been to critique the unfeasible ways motherhood is represented, such as the association of Eve's sinfulness and punishment with painful childbirth, and its veneration through the Virgin Mary's perfect, pure, passiveness (Bennett Moore 2002; Chenu 1989; Daly 1986, 1991), or religious feminists have deconstructed and reconstructed mothering stereotypes to off-set patriarchal language, metaphor, and theology (Carr and Fiorenza 1989; Christ 1992; Grenholm 2011; Hogan 1995; Kennedy 1993; McFague 1987; Percy 2014; Walker 1984). These are important challenges to received theological certainties, but overall 'studies on mothers and faith involvement are lacking and more research is needed on how such identities are pursued' (Page 2010: 387). This absence is perhaps predictable. According to Clarissa Atkinson, motherhood has had 'no history' because it is 'too thoroughly identified with the private sphere and with the "changeless" biological aspects of the human condition' (1991: 6). In the late twentieth century there has been an intensification of maternal studies and parenting,¹ but the role of religion is an under-researched aspect of these otherwise much welcomed conversations.

Even less is known about the particular considerations and concerns Christian women have toward motherhood, or the processes prior to and preceding becoming or not becoming mothers, and the accompanying feelings of uncertainty, ambivalence, disappointment, or regret (de Beauvoir 1997; Donath 2014, 2015; Rich 1986). There is, as Diana Meyers argues, a 'highly voluntaristic rhetoric' dominating 'women's motherhood decisions' (2001: 736) in westernised culture, and feminist studies have explored what childlessness (elective and involuntary) means (Baum 1983; Letherby 1994, 2002; Letherby and Williams 1999; O'Mahony 2015) at a time when birth rates suggest approximately 1 in 5 women will remain childless (Office for National Statistics 2012, 2014; Shapiro 2014).² But women's reproductive choices are part of wider cultural shifts in traditional gender norms (work, equitable sexual relationships, the entitlement to make choices about their lives) that have been understood to challenge Christian religiosity and to contribute to women leaving or redefining Christianity (Aune et al. 2008; Brown 2009). Therefore it is likely the processes through which Christian women become, or do not become mothers and carers of children are deeply significant and an important site through which to understand how women navigate their gendered, religious identities.

¹ See Arendell 2000; O'Reilly 2010; <http://www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk/>.

² The statistical information suggests the decreasing birth rate, but does not distinguish between gendered experiences, or between voluntary childlessness, involuntary childlessness, and infertility (McAllister and Clarke 1998; Shapiro 2014).

This absence of faith perspectives in motherhood studies and feminist religious and theological studies signals a 'maternal silence' in academic discourses (Miller-McLemore 1994; Olsen 2003; Suleiman 2001). However, there are also lived maternal silences encountered by women in contemporary Christianity. By drawing on in-depth qualitative interviews with Christian women in Britain, I suggest there is a maternal expectation produced in Christian discourses that creates a maternal silence, which painfully marginalises women's experiences of motherhood and voluntary childlessness, and furthermore hinders faith identities. This article first outlines the methodology and methods I adopted and my use of Caroline Gatrell's term 'maternal bodies' that informs this study. Following this, I draw on the women's narratives to identify the maternal expectation which limits women to mothering roles and cultivates a maternal silence that diminishes opportunity for discussing reproductive choices and faith development. I then examine the disruptive and interruptive tactics participants develop in response to the maternal silences.

Researching Motherhood and Voluntary Childlessness in Christianity

To examine the relationship between motherhood, voluntary childlessness and Christian identity – to try and interrupt the maternal academic silence – I undertook two phases of qualitative research from 2011 to 2013. First, through personal contacts I invited four women to a group interview, all married, heterosexual mothers, but one had decided at the age of 16 to be childless until she accidentally became pregnant in her mid-30s. Group interviews, like focus groups, can provide an orientation into a new research topic (Fontana and Frey 1994), and this meeting gave me the opportunity to explore meanings of motherhood, childfree and childlessness with participants and the issues these raise in their lives. Second, I used in-depth interviews with 18 participants (including three of the women from the group interview), and I took a narrative approach (Bold 2012; Ellis 2004) to explore women's experiences, thoughts, and emotions connected to a potential life-change (the choices around maternity). The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and lasted between one and two hours, and I used thematic analysis (Joffe and Yardley 2004) to examine them. When using the material in this article, I follow the women's description of their religious, gendered, sexual identities, and maternal identities – participants used 'non-motherhood', 'child-free', 'without children', 'voluntary childless' – and some used their first name or a pseudonym, while others preferred me to select a first name on their behalf.

Recruiting participants was sensitive because motherhood, childlessness, and faith lives are very personal topics, and it is intrusive and inappropriate to assume how women might identify in regard to maternity based on the presence or a perceived absence of children. While women with children may be visible in church, as there are often spaces dedicated to parents and families, the personal experiences of choice are much less evident and openly voluntary childless women are even less detectable. Despite increasing in numbers, couples choosing not to have children tend to be non-religious for instance, affiliation to Catholicism decreases the likelihood of elective childlessness by

37% in men and 35% in women (if other variables are held constant) (Veevers 1973; Waren and Pals 2013: 163; see also Basten 2009). When this is considered alongside the complex picture of religious decline generally in the West, there is likely to be a small population of electively childless women in Christianity.

Owing to the complex nature of approaching women in Christianity directly to discuss their reproductive choices, I relied on women to self-select and volunteer through two methods: snowball (Arber 1993) and purposive (Mason 2002) sampling. I asked friends, family, colleagues, and participants to pass on news about the study, and I advertised through emails, social media, leaflets, and posters through a range of Christian organisations, groups, and parish churches. My call for participants tried to encourage a range of experiences and identities, inviting women from across denominations with varying degrees of affiliation and participation, and I highlighted that participants from diverse identities were welcomed.

The women recruited came from different denominations: high and low forms of Anglicanism and Roman Catholicism, Baptist, Methodist, United Reformed, emerging church, and Evangelical communities.³ Participants are in their 20s to 50s to capture the different stages of reflecting on reproductive choices, and the research group comprised straight, married, partnered women (same-sex and heterosexual), and women who were single, divorced, or separated. One of the limits of relying on participants to self-select through snowball sampling and advertising is that it can be difficult to secure diversity. Despite attempts to broaden the research group by advertising in LGBT Christian groups and Black Minority Ethnic urban churches, participants had similar backgrounds. For instance, one participant identified as mixed race, but the study is overwhelmingly white. Moreover, the women were generally formally educated and economically privileged and in work – priesthood, lay church work, teaching, research, Higher Education, administration, medicine, the media, publishing, project management, and non-profit and voluntary organisations. Other women were studying, caring for children full time, or on maternity leave.

Such characteristics are not uncommon in research into British women's faith lives (Slee 2004), but they create another kind of maternal silence by leaving those who fall outside these relative 'parameters of privilege' (Llewellyn 2015: 53) unheard. Furthermore, these are women with the social capital to consider maternity a 'choice' and have the resources and inclination to volunteer for this project. The demographic comparisons amongst the women are perhaps foreseeable as snowball sampling relies on established connections of communities and networks, and purposive sampling works to gather those who have insight into the phenomenon to be examined, and therefore volunteers are likely to share commonalities. While the lack of racial diversity requires challenge and further study, the research group is a particular group of women whose narratives I can draw on to illustrate the relationship between motherhood, voluntary childlessness, and Christian identity.

³ The denominational differences between participants have no doubt shaped their experiences, but for the purpose of this article I focus on the commonalities narrated by the women in this study.

I was also conscious to trouble the binary which features in maternal studies created by the language of 'motherhood' and 'non-motherhood', in which the latter positions childlessness negatively, defining women as what they are 'not' in relation to the normative 'mother'. This divides women too easily into two camps – 'mums' and 'not-mums' – assuming differences rather than commonalities. Instead, intentions towards motherhood and elective childlessness are often transient (Gillespie 1999; McAllister and Clarke 1998); choice can be an accidental, definite, or a hesitant process (Campbell 1999); and there might be ambivalence or regret (Donath 2015). There are circumstances in which elective childlessness merges with looking after children, or coincides with infertility or involuntary childlessness, choosing motherhood might rely on medical intervention, fostering, adoption, and caring for step-children – in all of these situations women could potentially self-identify as a 'mother', or not. Motherhood and childlessness (voluntary, involuntary, infertility) are not singular categories with a cohesive meaning and neither are they identities in opposition. Caroline Gatrell's term 'the maternal body' points to this fluidity, as she suggests it does not just designate motherhood 'but also includes the ways in which women are allocated social roles in relation to their actual, potential or non-maternity. Thus the notion of the maternal body is extended to include menstruation, non-motherhood and menopause' (2008: 6; Gatrell and Tyler 2005). In this research, 'maternal bodies' infers the essentialism that positions women in relation to their potential, actual, or expired capacity to physically birth and the expected characteristics associated with these life stages in individual women. However, I also use it to acknowledge the overlapping, plural ways Christian women conceive of motherhood and childlessness and the potential for these roles to coalesce within individual women and between women. Subsequently, the information sent out to potential participants stressed that the maternal is dynamic, which also informed the fieldwork and analysis: the women have diverse relationships to motherhood and elective childlessness, but they share commonalities in their responses to the shared ways their maternal bodies are constructed in Christian discourses.

The Maternal Expectation, the Maternal Silence

Too many people worship at the altar of 'must have children'.
(Sam, Anglican, voluntary childless)

Throughout my interview with Sam, who is 48, an ordained priest in the Church of England, and in a long term relationship with a female partner, she described hearing the constant message that a Christian woman's role is to have and nurture children. Her analogy of the 'altar of "must have children"' is witty, critical, and suggestive of an excessive sacred meaning given to the maternal expectation, which usually goes unchallenged. Sam's observation that motherhood pervades Christianity is emblematic of Adrienne Rich's evocative and oft cited phrase, the 'institution of motherhood'. For Rich, motherhood has two connected, overlapping meanings: 'the *potential relationship* of woman to her power of reproduction and to children; and the *institution*, which aims at ensuring that that potential – and all women – shall remain under male control' (Rich 1986: 13). While 'mothering' refers to women's actual relationships to children,

'motherhood' is a constructed, patriarchal system that defines, restricts, and controls their reproductive agency.⁴ This is evident in the way essentialist ideas of fertility and childbearing have become attached to women's identities to the extent that 'the nurturance of children has historically been seen to be what women *do*, and mothers have been seen to be what women *are*, constituting the central core of normal, healthy feminine identity, women's social role and ultimately the meanings of the term *woman* (Gillespie 2000: 225).'

The western world, in part, has inherited this ideology from Christianity, which continues to institutionalise motherhood in particularly acute ways. While historically there have been idealised notions of Christian identity that depend upon the rejection of family (Middleton 2014; Ruether 2001), the dominant doctrinal, scriptural, and theological discourses enshrine pronatalism. From the biblical call to 'Be fruitful and multiply' (Gen. 1: 28), the declaration that 'women will be saved through childbirth' (1 Tim. 2.15), to the understanding in Roman Catholic teaching that motherhood is the 'fundamental contribution that the Church and humanity expect from women' (*Evangelium Vitae*, para. 19), the normative message for lay women is that they are 'supposed' to be mothers and their Christian identities are fulfilled by becoming mothers. As Sam notes sarcastically, according to the church, if 'you're a nice woman under 40, you're bound to have a baby any minute now aren't you?' Sam's personal vision of church and God is inclusive, but she finds it 'distressing' that the institution in which she works, ministers, and worships considers her queer identity and her voluntary childlessness to run counter to its 'sets of rules'. Crucially it also prohibits her from living out her faith life according to God's call: 'it's difficult to work under the authority of an institution that says, "Tut, tut, tut" when you believe that God says, "You are who you are and I want you to blossom and be all that I've made you to become." And that's a tense balance.'

For some women, this maternal expectation accords with their understanding of a Christian identity; having children was described as 'a joy', as signalling God's grace and blessing, as a gift, as having 'unbelievable value', and as central to living a faithful life with God. However, even for participants who framed their choice to have children positively, they sense there can be little divergence from understanding motherhood as faith enhancing. Religious feminisms have long noted and challenged the lack of space Christianity gives to women and their engagements with the sacred, and motherhood is no exception. This points to what Bonnie Miller-McLemore briefly identifies in *Also a Mother: Work and Family as Theological Dilemma* as a cultural 'maternal silence' (1994), which is not specific to Christianity (Olsen 2003; Suleiman 2001) but prevents women discussing the struggles and the unwanted sacrifices made when becoming mothers. While Miller-McLemore focuses theologically on women's lived experiences of raising children, I suggest the silence moves through Christianity to affect all maternal bodies, purported by a pronatalism that renders the unwelcome aspects of mothering and childlessness as a departure from faith. The Christian women in this study describe the 'taboos' and 'hiddenness' of speaking about the challenges motherhood raises for faith identity, the hurt and confusion this causes, the uncertainty about having children, the decision to remain childless,

⁴ Andrea O'Reilly (2004) reclaims 'mothering' to mean women's self-defining and socially empowering experiences of motherhood.

and name the Church as 'lacking' the space to reflect and share their experiences.

A Challenge to Faith

When Nicola Slee explored women's faith development, some of her participants spoke of times when a 'cultural and social silence' had proscribed them 'explicitly or implicitly, to name their experiences and struggles' (2004: 87). For mothers, the Christian maternal expectation can create a maternal silence preventing them from naming children as impacting the outworking of their Christian identity. Rebecca is 35 and is a practising Catholic with two children under three, who bring 'grace' to her life, and she speaks movingly of the 'utter uniqueness' of motherhood. However, she experiences the maternal silence as a restriction to naming the negative effect motherhood has on her spiritual development and how it has changed her faith identity and practices. Before having her children she remembers feeling 'grounded...as a woman before God' through activities she considers spiritual: her yoga practice and walking. Once, spirituality was her 'very core' but since having her babies there is an absence: 'I don't really feel as though that's [spirituality] kind of come back'. This is in part because motherhood 'involves a tremendous sacrifice of my own creativity and intellectual potential at this point and potentially for quite a long time.' Later in the interview, Rebecca expressed some anger, or at least resentment:

I don't enjoy being constantly surrounded by children's chaos and the constant demand. If you're an intellectual type of person who could spend all day quite happily, for days on end, reading in a library, and you have to be surrounded by small people who are making demands on you all the time. That's not an easy or cosy choice...Do I write a word at the moment? I haven't written even a word in my journal for fucking months.

These feelings clash with Catholicism's unhelpful romantic valorisation of motherhood, particularly through Mary. In practice, the parish community and worship are places where Rebecca is supposed to encounter God, but it 'doesn't allow a space for conscious reflection' on her struggles. As Roman Catholic author Margaret Hebblethwaite reflects in her memoir *Motherhood and God*, 'when a mother has most need of spiritual...support, she can feel most starved of it (1984: 116), Rebecca feels there is little provision to help balance religious development with motherhood and these feelings can become a barrier to once again 'becoming grounded before God' because they remain unspoken.

Catriona took part in the group interview. She is an ordained chaplain at a large University, is married and has two children aged 4 and 2; she has always wanted children and likens it to her vocation to become a priest. Catriona notices the maternal silence that prohibits women from admitting their spiritual life is neglected, if they are seen to inhabit a mothering maternal body. In church, the maternal expectation means most of the attention is paid towards the child, with conversations revolving around Sunday school or the child's progress. The mother, on the other hand, is sidelined: 'not a lot of attention is given to you: "What's your personal faith story about? What's your journey?"' When asked why she thinks this is, she remarks: 'there's this role that you fit in...a space you occupy within the Church. In [that] space a faith journey feels really important,

but [for mothers] it's almost like it gets completely ignored...who are you apart from this child?' For women with children, it is rare they can disclose that mothering practices can interfere with rather than fulfil their spiritual journey.

'Mothering Sunday...or as I like to call it, Hetero-Patriarchal Day'

(Elizabeth, 42, Anglo-Catholic, voluntarily childless)

The maternal expectation is inscribed through ritual, liturgical, and social practices which makes some church spaces unwelcoming.⁵ In the interviews, participants often named Mothering Sunday as a highly charged time: celebrating mothering in idealised ways can become painful moments of exclusion. For Elizabeth, who attends an Anglican cathedral, Mother's Day is 'one of the worst times of the year'. Elizabeth exemplifies that maternal bodies are fluid; she identifies as a 'non-mother' but explains 'I was a step-mother' to her ex-husband's daughter, before their divorce. Elizabeth wryly has renamed Mothering Sunday 'Hetero-Patriarchal Sunday'. She is responding to the Anglican service (Archbishop's Council 2002) that includes *A Song of St Anselm* which compares God to a mother-hen 'gathering her brood', the distribution of flowers to all mothers in the congregation – 'Everyone sits, except mothers, who are asked to remain standing'⁶ – and a prayer for thanks (which children may lead). These practices mean 'Mothering Sunday is not only painful for women who haven't had children, but it makes...a lot of people think about their relationship with their own mother...which may have been very painful and difficult.'⁷ The service presents the mother as near perfect: she is one who loves 'tenderly' and offers 'comfort' and 'warmth'. Echoing Nancy Chodorow and Susan Contratto's 'fantasy of maternal perfectability' (1982: 55), Elizabeth says this is 'basically the veneration of "super-mum"'. The faultless version of a maternal body Elizabeth encounters on Mother's Day, which she identifies as constructed through Christianity's patriarchal and androcentric traditions, is far removed

⁵ In an article in *The Church Times* entitled 'Blessed, but not with child', journalist Rachel Giles (2015) asks whether the Church offers a 'welcoming space' for infertile and involuntary childless couples. For her informants, Mother's Day is 'especially hard'. While there are some Church initiatives attempting to create 'welcoming spaces' to discuss biological childlessness, Giles suggests provision is limited and help is often found outside denominations. Giles focuses on the painful and complex consequences of trying to have children, but her report reflects a broader pattern in which issues of maternity are rarely spoken of, or examined in Christian contexts. Although I am neither collapsing nor drawing easy parallels with the deeply personal difficulties of infertility, the challenges Giles's participants face are indicative of the ways in which experiences of the maternal are generally silenced in Christian discourses.

⁶ Although the liturgy states that mothers should stand, practices do vary in churches to avoid mothers being singled out in this very visible and problematic way. For instance, some churches do not give out flowers, or they distribute them to all members of the congregation.

⁷ See Griffiths (2015).

from her self-understanding as a Christian voluntary childless women. As it idolises motherhood, it excludes Elisabeth's choices and experiences of elective childlessness.

Janice is 40, and has recently married for the first time. She is a minister in the United Reformed Church, and her feelings towards motherhood have shifted through her childhood, teenage, and adult life, illustrating the fluidity of maternal identities and troubling the idea there are neat, one-off moments of reproductive 'choice'. There have been times when she wanted children, but as a single woman during her 30s this seemed unlikely, especially because she did not want to pursue motherhood outside of Christian marriage: 'children have a right to be loved and they actually have a right to two parents...I suppose that's part of my Christian ethic that children should have a mother and a father, in marriage.' The realisation that, as she matured, the opportunity to have children has diminished was painful and has taken about three, difficult years to 'come to terms with'. Since then there has been a change in her thinking: she no longer wants children but captures her relationship to motherhood and her process toward understanding her maternity as 'ambivalent'. Janice encounters the maternal expectation in church social settings; for instance, she hears 'it's a family church' but then asks herself, 'What does that mean when you're single?' During the interview, Janice shared her experiences when she identified as a single, childless woman attending Mothering Sunday:

People who aren't mothers for whatever reason find themselves excluded and I've always hated Mothering Sunday as well. I always just take [that] Sunday off where I possibly could, and those daffodils I used to get given year after year, little poxy bunches of flowers, I used to say,

'What's all that about?'

'It's a church tradition.'

'Why?'

'Well we used to give [the flowers] to all the mothers but we thought it was excluding, so now we give it to all the ladies.'

I was like, 'Well I don't want one, I'm not a mother, I'm probably not going to be a mother.' What's that all about?

Exposure to this maternal expectation through church liturgies can result in feelings of rejection. For Janice, 'Mothering Sunday, every year...a nightmare' to the extent she avoids it, and Elizabeth wrestles with some upsetting reflections: 'I have sometimes wondered whether the fact that I ended up single... was a kind of punishment for not wanting children or for choosing not to have children. That God was saying, "Well, if you're not open to life then you don't deserve a partner"'. For women sitting in the pews and participating in their faith communities the valorisation and celebration of some maternal bodies simultaneously renders others silent.

Interrupting the Maternal Silence

Participants' narratives reveal the extent to which the maternal expectation circulates their faith lives as they discuss how the pronatalist discourses and their expression in church life collapse babies, mothering, and caring for children

with their maternal bodies. While the silencing is excluding and prohibitive, some women in this study adopt different tactics to disrupt the maternal expectation and thereby interrupt the maternal silence.

The tactics women employ include 'everyday' moments of refusal as well as calculated intentional tactics that distance them from the maternal expectation and interjects into the silence. In *The Practice of Everyday Life* Michel de Certeau (1984) distinguishes between 'strategies' which are actions that are accessible to and fulfilled by those who have authority within institutions, and 'tactics' which are the practices utilised by those without institutional influence and control to oppose the way power moves and operates. While the women in this study experience silence as a result of the Christian institution of motherhood inscribing essentialised maternal identities upon them, they have at their disposal devices that can displace this power, even momentarily. For instance, Louise is 34 and has a 15-month-old baby. She was brought up as an Anglican and since the early 2000s has been part of a 'Fresh Expression' city-based community emerging Church,⁸ but is currently not attending regularly. Louise is aware of the gendered social roles placed upon maternal bodies, particularly the expectation that women should lead children's groups and activities for young people: 'I can understand that in the broader sense of church, that if you turned up to some churches on Sunday morning with three children under five in tow, then you'd be given the Sunday School to do'. However, her response to this is indignant: 'I'm not doing [Sunday School] just because I've got children.' While Louise might not be able to change the teachings and scriptures that give rise to and endorse the social practices that expect women to take responsibility for children, she is in a position to articulate her resistance to the maternal expectation, and by speaking interrupts the silence.

For voluntary childless Christian women, disrupting and interrupting maternal expectations and silences can be a risky tactic. Laura is 46, a married Methodist minister, and has 'felt no draw to have children'. While some of the mothers in this study express difficulties in maintaining a spiritual life with children, voluntary childless women anticipate that motherhood might hinder the fulfilment of their particular 'calling'. Laura's calling is to minister, teach and study: 'it is a self-offering and sense of vocation which I imagine is filled for some others by having children.' Usually Laura, a feminist, is vocal on issues of gender injustice in her faith community and does not tolerate women's exclusion. However, her experiences as a voluntary childless women in the church illustrate the maternal expectation and the silences it creates, as she rarely discusses being childless by choice because of the 'shame, a level of guilt' provoked by Christian sources: 'anything Christian I might have looked at and certainly if I looked at anything Catholic...[tells me] it is not an appropriate choice to make'. Laura puts this

⁸ 'Fresh Expression' was coined by the Church of England in *Mission-Shaped Church: Church Planting and Fresh Expression of Church in a Changing Context* (2004). It refers to (largely) Church of England and Methodist evangelising initiatives to engage with people who do not go to church. It tries to develop Christian communities outside of traditional parish buildings and networks; instead it uses existing spaces such as bars and cafés, skate parks, surf clubs and other cultural and social locations. Fresh Expressions are sometimes understood to be part of the Emerging Church, a self-consciously postmodern movement that emphasises the deconstruction of received Christian worship, and modern forms of mission, evangelising and community (Marti and Ganiel 2014; Moody 2010).

down to the 'hiddenness about not having children or the choice not to have children' and the negative reception that is likely to await women like her:

I've had to struggle with...believing other people would see it as the wrong choice but not quite opening up the conversation enough, that's the hiddenness...I don't think it's just the not wanting to be challenged because I can be challenged on plenty of other issues...although maybe it does say something about how personal it is and how potentially undermining it is...to be challenged at the point where you are struggling to work out God's desire and invitation for you and if somebody else simply comes and smashes it and says 'Of course that can't be God's choice, 'cos that's wrong'.

Laura has experienced moments when the silence is interrupted. For instance, at a meeting with two other women work colleagues, also in their 40s, there was an acknowledgement that they were childless 'and that there was something actually quite significant about that...I guess that none of us would have had that sort of conversation before'. The conversation stopped abruptly, something Laura seems to regret. However, the meaningful exchange was recognition of her choice in the company of other women and briefly intruded on the 'hiddenness', breaking the maternal silence that usually dominates.

Although there is risk, Laura does resist the ways her maternal body is read as a mothering body. When asked by friends, family, or her congregation loaded, pronatalist questions about 'having a family', she responds: 'Yes, I have a husband', which re-imagines the Christian model of family that features children to include a model of family that does not. Laura continues: 'and then they make it clear that's not the question they meant...I... say, "No, we don't have children"'. This is often accompanied by 'don't go there' attitude – a look, a gesture, a pause – which seems to work because she imagines it is a 'scary' enough tactic to prevent further probing about her childlessness.

While Louise's and Laura's efficient tactics highlight and challenge the status of women's maternal bodies, participants are also resisting tradition and practice. Kay is 34, married, a minister with 17-month-old child. She had made a very firm choice not to have children until she accidentally became pregnant. This was not happy news and she describes having to do 'a lot of work' to come to terms with her pregnancy, which involved the serious consideration of an abortion. One of the reasons Kay did not want children was because it would mean: 'packing my life in, not having any particular things that I wanted to do in the world'. Even as a church leader, Kay could see no way of overcoming the maternal silences and articulating her concern that motherhood might be a barrier to the outworking of her faith identity. She expresses the weight of the maternal expectation caused by 'being a Christian, being in the Church, being right in the middle of being in the Church, being a church leader and a woman, and, married and all of that'. Kay was aware that she needed to find ways to help her 'be OK' with her pregnancy, to reconcile the collision between her ministry and having a child, and that in a church context she would not be able to be 'honest' about her feelings. Therefore she self-excluded during her maternity leave, leaving her church community. While in one sense removing herself from her congregation keeps the maternal silence intact, she is not disrupting it by speaking about how her faith and her maternal body were in contest. However, as a tactic it marked a refusal to accept the expectations written on her maternal body and instead she found other places outside of the church to speak out.

Emily is a trainee RE teacher in her 20s; she and her husband are Roman Catholic, and came to a joint decision to remain childless mainly because of other caring responsibilities and an understanding her vocation was to teach and not to have children. She recognises the maternal silence around childlessness in Christianity, pointing out that maternal bodies are over-represented as mothers: 'I think it's difficult not having sort of role models that have made similar decisions [to me], that's quite isolating...because even when I find role models then they're either mothers or celibate.' When they were preparing for marriage in their parish, Emily and her partner discussed openly their choice not to have children and asked if reference to children might be removed from the wedding vows. This departs from the *Rites of Marriage* (1969) in which the priest asks couples to consent to 'accept children lovingly from God', reflecting the inextricable link Roman Catholic teaching makes between women and motherhood.⁹ For instance, in *Mulieris Dignitatem: On the Dignity and Vocation of Women* motherhood is described as 'the fruit of the marriage union of a man and woman' (cf. Gen 2: 24)' (para. 18), and in *Evangelium Vitae* it is considered to 'profoundly mark the women's personality' (para. 19). After a difficult conversation, the priest refused to marry them unless they changed their minds, or left the vows complete. However, rather than hiding their choices, it took the couple two more attempts to find a priest – at some distance from their home – to marry them. Although initially Emily's choice was disregarded by an authority in the institution, she tactically voiced her choice and found a way to bring her Christian identity, faith commitment, and elective childlessness together, thus interrupting the maternal silence.

Conclusion

Women's religiosity has been historically silenced in the faith communities and institutions to which they belong. Even when academic debates venture toward investigating and examining women and religion, there are inevitable gaps and remaining questions, especially when the powers that marginalise them continue to adapt and find expression in contemporary contexts. The research on which this article is based was prompted by wanting to pay more attention to the particular ways motherhood and voluntary childlessness impacts women's Christian identities. This is a response to the dominant pronatalist Christian teachings and practices that have received theological and religious critique, but which is missing an engagement with women's embodied voices contributing to this discourse. This seems particularly timely at a juncture when women's connections to maternity are diversifying in increasing numbers and childlessness is gaining visibility in wider culture, suggesting that women may be troubling normative presentations of the maternal – and women of faith are part of these shifts.

The participants gathered for this research are usually left out of mother-talk, and yet their experiences offer insight into the processes by which Christianity's construction of maternal bodies, culturally and socially, are resisted and

⁹ Excerpts from the English translation of the *Rites of Marriage* ©1969, International Commission on English in the Liturgy Corporation. All rights reserved.

affect faith. Despite simplistic assumptions of reproductive choice that Christian women will and should become mothers, and some clear distinctions sometimes made between mothers and childless women, participants' identities overlap. Individual women have cared for children but do not identify as mothers, have wanted to have children and then this desire has abated, have chosen childlessness only to unintentionally conceive, but there are moments when their discreet experiences connect. The women in this study share confusion and hurt when their faith identities are silenced because of the maternal expectation; they have moments of ambivalence, uncertainty, and doubt that rub up against Christian ritual, teaching, scripture and practice. Moreover, they use similar tactics for naming the ways they are positioned in relation to motherhood and mothering, for unsettling the ways they are defined, and for interrupting the silences inhibiting the expression of their faith lives.

By drawing attention to these experiences, this article begins to interrupt one aspect of the academic maternal silence regarding religion and maternal bodies, but as discussed there are voices missing. Terry Arrendell in her critical survey of maternal studies calls for 'more attention to the lives of particular mothers – to mothers' own voices – and to the lives and voices of diverse groups of mothers' (2000: 1207). I would add this is crucial but needs extending in the study of Christianity. I suggest further investigation is needed into women's acceptance, negotiation, and resistance of the pronatalist discourses in their religious lives, in the intersections of their different denominations, race, class, age, disability, sexuality and other markers of identity, and in the multiple, fluid and transient ways women position their bodies in relation to the maternal.

Acknowledgements

I am indebted to Rob Warner for his collaboration on this project during its initial stages. Versions of this paper were delivered at the *Motherhood and Cultures* conference (Maynooth, June 2015) and the British Sociology Association's Sociology of Religion Study Group annual meeting (Kingston, July 2015), and I am grateful to those audiences for engaging with this work. I would like to thank Sariya Cheruvallil-Contractor and Gill Rye for their patience, the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments, and Susannah Cornwall, Rachel Giles, Wayne Morris, Sarah-Jane Page, Sonya Sharma, and Anna Strhan for their invaluable feedback. Finally, I sincerely thank the women in this research for participating in this project.

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