

Review of Vanessa Reimer, *Angels on Earth: Mothering, Religion, and Spirituality*, Bradford: Demeter Press 2016, 278 pp, ISBN 978-1-77258-022-8

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The book 'Angels on Earth' has been edited by Vanessa Reimer, scholar in gender, feminist and women's studies. Other contributors to the book have backgrounds in counselling, sociology, anthropology, history, religious studies, theology and English literature. In addition to scholars working within the academic industry, the book also holds contributions by a rabbi and a certified shamanic healer and doula. As reflected in this list, the book proposes an interdisciplinary perspective on the subject matter, one in which the experiences of mothers take center stage.

The title of the book 'Angels on Earth' presents readers with a paradox that might not be obvious at first, but which is well presented throughout the book. The paradox lies in the double standard created by the idea that mothers are to the least the equivalent of angels, and in some instances even regarded as the personification of God's angels on earth. Mothers are regarded as celestial beings, providing care and love through self-sacrifice. At the same time, the expectation of mothers being angels subordinates them into pious, selfless, humble and subservient individuals. In other words, by elevating mothers as angels, they are at the same time reduced as such, thereby being denied their full potential as women in general. Within patriarchal religious institutions such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the paradox extends even further. While mothers are heralded for their reproductive potentials or successes, these reproductive characteristics make them at the same time impure and deficient, not able to take part in male dominated, 'pure' positions. Angels are pure and untainted; mothers are, through their ability and need to reproduce, not or no longer. The book provides a narratively based insight into this paradox from 'within', that is, from mothers who are part of religious institutions that both emphasize the angelic virtues of mothers as well as their sinful, 'impure' potential. The book narrates how such mothers negotiate and resist religious and spiritual ideologies, and find empowerment in those actions. It does so by approaching religion and spirituality as lived practices: as ways for mothers to

make use of in their everyday lives, and as part of the broader cultural contexts and identities of these mothers. Contributors to the book outline how they or their research participants place the demands of mothering (preservation, growth and acceptability) within their religious contexts, as well as the broader secular contexts in which they live.

The book consists of a short but insightful introduction and 16 additional chapters, each varying significantly in length, scope and theoretical depth. The chapters are divided over three sections, which respectively give contemporary theological backgrounds on religious mothering, historical perspectives on mothering and motherhood, and individual maternal narratives. The contributions to the parts differ in disciplinary focus, with the first section generally containing ethnographic chapters, the second section primarily entailing literary and historical studies, and the third section presenting narratives without much theoretical or methodological grounding.

The diversity of the contributions to the book is both a strength and a limitation. The main focus in the book is on the experiences of mothers within their religious and spiritual frameworks. Their stories are not only interesting and motivating to read for religious women, but for all young women struggling with questions of motherhood, even for women who do not identify as being religious. In addition, the book deals with both historical and very timely topics, and clearly highlights the diversity of the broad field of the study of religion and gender.

Another strength of the book is that it takes a first step into the direction of a cross-cultural approach to the subject, even though, as also realized by Reimer, the focus in the book is primarily on mothers adhering to the Abrahamic faiths in Western context, or off-springs of those faiths (for example, Anglicanism, Baptism, Protestantism, Roman Catholicism, Judaism, and Islam). The Abrahamic faiths are often seen as patriarchal, in which the female (and perhaps especially the mother) has a dual role as submissive and divine. The choice, therefore, of chapters mostly dealing with these religions seems justifiable. However, an attempt to include other religions has been made: three chapters deal with Hindu and Buddhist mothers in a cultural context (Asia) in which the role of religion is notably different. By presenting these chapters, the book can be read as a call for more cross-cultural comparison of mothering narratives and religion. This is needed, as a more inclusive religious perspective on the subject matter will contribute the exploration of the topic 'mothering and religion', with a lesser focus on 'mothering within traditionally patriarchal religions'.

The main limitation to the book is the absence of a clear theoretical framework that binds the contributions together. This makes the book fascinating and insightful to read, but not necessarily beneficial to scholars interested in the subject. Some of the chapters offer interesting theoretical concepts (for example, 'intensive mothering', 'spiritual capital', 'womanist consciousness', 'inter-sectional mothering', 'spiritual agents of change', and 'monomaternalism'), but these are not well theorized or used in a more encompassing framework for the book.

The book would have strongly benefited from an overarching theoretical debate. One possibility might have been an exploration between 'mothering' and 'motherhood', as presented in the chapter by Guignard on Hindu devotional poetry. The concept of 'mothering' here seems to allude to the practices performed by mothers, whereas 'motherhood' could have been used as

a concept to signify religious and spiritual discourses related to the image of mothers. Another possible theoretical framework could have been the disputed binary between the 'spiritual' and the 'religious'. Both concepts are synonymously employed throughout the book. As such, the book fails to engage with contemporary debates on the dichotomy between the concepts. The 'religious' is often seen as related to the institutionalized and the transcendent, whereas the 'spiritual' is often considered, both by insiders and outsiders, as the personal or the immanent, consisting of individual beliefs and practices. Almost all chapters to the book seem to deal with mothers in 'religious' frameworks. However, in the ways these mothers live their religions (either adhering to the official doctrines and creating a space within those, or trying publicly to push against the boundaries) a more spiritual approach to religion sometimes comes to light.

In conclusion, the book 'Angels on earth' is a good read, brightly and narratively putting to the fore the complexities of mothering, motherhood, lived religious practices, and the combination of these topics. As such, it can be interesting for individual mothers seeking empowerment within religious and secular contexts. In addition, the book could very well function as illustration for scholars on the topic of religion and mothering/motherhood who are in search of lived experiences to enhance theoretical frameworks on the subject matter. For the latter, I am convinced the book offers many fascinating ideas and insights into the complexities of the lives of these 'angels on earth'.