Afterword: Giving Voice: The Contested Sites of Motherhood, Religion and Spirituality

RACHEL JONES*

Abstract

This afterword offers a reflective response to the methods and thematic content of the papers collected in this special issue on motherhood, religions and spirituality. It suggests that by using qualitative interviews to give voice to (other) women as well as to mothers themselves, the issue counters the traditional silencing of female and maternal experience. This feminist gesture echoes the corporeal generosity of birth as well as the dependency and relationality of the maternal scene. The response foregrounds the issue's attentiveness to both the diverse intersections of mothering, religion and spiritual practice and the diversity of those who mother. It seeks to situate the resulting complexity in relation to a range of theoretical reference points (philosophical and theological; feminist, womanist, and queer) and concludes that, collectively, these papers present mothering as a site both of contestation and of precarious promise.

Keywords

mothering; religion; the maternal; ethics; feminist theory; diversity; resistance.

Author affiliation

Dr Rachel Jones is Associate Professor of Philosophy and Affiliated Faculty with the Women and Gender Studies Program at George Mason University, Virginia. She is the author of *Irigaray: Towards a Sexuate Philosophy* (Polity, 2011) and has published on birth and infancy in Lyotard and Irigaray, as well as on feminist approaches to aesthetics and pedagogy. In her ongoing work she is interested in re-interrogating human beings' relations to materiality, natality and birth, bodily difference, and the non-human.

In her 2013 book, *Motherhood as Metaphor*, Jeannine Hill Fletcher asks: 'What difference *does* it make when women's voices and experiences are taken as the point of departure for theological investigation?' (xii). Hill Fletcher goes

*Correspondence: Department of Philosophy, George Mason University, Robinson Hall B Room 465, 4400 University Drive, 3F1, Fairfax, VA 22030, USA.

E-mail: rjones23@gmu.edu.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution License (3.0)

Religion and Gender | ISSN: 1878-5417 | www.religionandgender.org | [UopenJournals](http://UopenJournals.org)

on to propose motherhood as a metaphor that is simultaneously 'rooted in the lives of actual women' yet speaks to the constitutive relationality of all human beings in ways that '[do] not see the biological role of mother as requisite for all women or "motherhood" as inherently female' (45). On the contrary, motherhood directs us to the ways in which all selves – 'regardless of biology or gender' (45) – are formed in relationship with others. At the same time, the historical and cultural diversity of experiences of mothering (amongst which Hill Fletcher includes both voluntary and coerced surrogacy) testifies not only 'to the multiplicity inherent in the subject-position "mother"' but 'indicates that "we" are not all reducible to the "same"' (74).

Hill Fletcher is particularly interested in motherhood as a metaphor for inter-faith dialogue. Nonetheless her concerns intersect with this special issue on motherhood, spirituality and religions, which explores how women's lived and imaginary relations to mothering both inform, and are informed by, their diverse religious and spiritual contexts. Like Hill Fletcher, the authors represented here embrace an approach that avoids seeing human beings as either 'fundamentally "the same" or as radically different' and instead affirm that 'each of us encounters our others with a dynamic mix of "sameness" and "difference"' (xi). Their contributions attest that it does indeed make a difference when women's experiences – of mothering, being mothered, and not mothering – are taken as a point of departure for reflections on spirituality and religion; equally, they show that the context of spiritual and religious belief and practice opens up instructive perspectives on motherhood. Insofar as many of these papers are based on material gathered from qualitative interviews, they also underscore Hill Fletcher's emphasis on the importance of attending to the diverse voices of women themselves. The extensive use of direct excerpts from the interviews is not only a valuable method, but a deliberately ethical and political gesture that counters the traditional silencing of female experience by allowing the women whose responses formed the body of this research to speak for themselves. Nonetheless, it can only operate as such a gesture because the researchers remain attentive to the epistemological and ethical risks of the interview process. Thus, while Page addresses the complex power relations involved, Cheruvallil-Contractor proposes collaborative models of *researching with* rather than *doing research on*.

In keeping with the multiplicity, relationality and particularity that Hill Fletcher foregrounds, in these papers, '[i]t is not Woman, which is just as fictitious as Man, which is ... expressed and represented' (Cavarero 2005: 206). Rather, we encounter a plurality of women's voices which allow both the shared and the irreducibly different to make themselves heard. Through the interview excerpts, a trace of the situated, embodied encounters on which this research depends remains present within the text. Although mediated by the written word, the citations serve as a reminder of the vocalic and material relationality of the original exchange and the singularity of each woman's voice (see Cavarero 2005: 208). They allow the authors to displace the model of the disembodied researcher and expose their dependency on the material given to them by the women who have chosen to collaborate in their research. In return, the interviews give voice to those women twice over: once in the original encounter, and again on the printed page, giving voice in the public realm to questions around motherhood and faith that are too often silenced.

Dependency, relationality, embodied singularity: this collaborative research practice could be seen as echoing the maternal scene which is its subject. Such

an approach reflects the orientation towards others that, as Lisa Guenther has explored, is constitutive of our very existence insofar as it is always another who gives birth to me. My existence is thus marked by the 'unchosen contingency' of birth and 'a profound sense of not controlling one's existence from the ground up' (Guenther 2006: 163). Similarly, these authors affirm a research practice that has to allow for the contingencies and 'affective exposure' (*ibid*) of the interview process, as well as a lack of complete control over what the researcher is given to work with. If 'the very condition of my existence' is 'a woman who gave birth to me' (1), this corporeal generosity finds its ethical counterpart in the feminist gesture of giving voice to other women.

Yet as these papers show, the place and meaning of the maternal not only lends itself to feminist reclamation. It is also a site of repeatedly renewed contestation, not least amongst women themselves as well as within and between differing feminist discourses. As Ruddick notes, feminists have had good reason to reject an enforced and repressive motherhood that is 'enmeshed in patriarchal and heterosexist institutions' (1992: 149), even as this makes the feminist reclamation of mothering as a knowingly resistant practice all the more urgent. Thus, while there has been a distinctive turn towards re-evaluating mothering and birth in recent feminist theorising (along with Cavarero, Guenther, and Hill Fletcher, see for example Baraitser 2009; Battersby 1998; LaChance Adams and Lundquist 2012; Lintott and Sander-Staudt 2012; Stone 2012), this has been accompanied by thorough-going critiques of both heteronormativity and the reproductive imperative (such critiques run through much of the work just cited, but see also Gibson 2014; Park 2013, as well as most of the work of Judith Butler).

As such work shows, and the papers in this special issue reinforce, feminist reclamations of motherhood can be profoundly generative, producing new lines of solidarity as well as new ways of conceptualising subjectivity and difference; yet, like birth itself, they remain inevitably risky, open to co-option and re-appropriation by the very discourses they seek to resist. Pregnancy, birth and mothering are the conjoined scene of intensely personal experiences and over-determined social and political struggles, unique bodily relations and regulated biomedical practices, an always surprising newness and the re-inscription of oppressive social norms and expectations. Motherhood is situated at the intersections of gender, sexuality, race, class, age, and ethnicity in ways that make for an irreducible diversity of experiences while opening it up to the many violences of racism, sexism and ableism, as well as appropriation by colonial, nationalist and biopolitical projects (for a consideration of such issues in relation to specifically religious texts and contexts, see Jacob 2015 and Williams 1993).

As Davis' contribution to this issue shows, mothering can work to (re)produce religious, cultural and nationalist identities in ways that simultaneously express, overwrite and/or complicate individual women's beliefs and commitments. Meanwhile, Fedele's account of a father trying to register the birth of a child reminds us that birth itself sits ambivalently at the threshold between what have traditionally been constructed as public and private domains. When the authorities demand official documentation of his son's home birth, the father is suddenly confronted by the thought that 'this child does not exist for the world!' We might read this as attesting to the peculiar conditions of biopolitical modernity, where to exist, it is not enough to appear to others. Instead, to exist requires documentation, and to be undocumented is to be consigned to social (and sometimes physical) death or to find one's very existence criminalised. In

this image of the undocumented child, we might find a reminder of all those whose undocumented, migrant, or refugee status calls on us to take up our natal responsibility toward others.

The complexities of contemporary motherhood are thrown into starker relief when considered through the lens of religion and spirituality. If such beliefs and practices speak to the need to give meaning to the contingencies of existence, what happens when those meanings work against the possibility of making mothering meaningful? To what extent can religious beliefs and spiritual practices offer meanings to maternity that contest oppressive patriarchal or biomedical norms? Previous feminist work has addressed such questions by evacuating the excessive and resistant aspects of maternity from within existing religious traditions (Kristeva 1986) as well as re-evaluating the religious role of women, the maternal and the feminine from historical, anthropological and hermeneutic perspectives (Bynum 1982; Sered 1994; Williams 1993). These analytical frames differ both from one another and from many of the other approaches discussed here or deployed in this issue (earlier, more womanist and matrifocal analyses standing in tension with later critiques of heteronormativity and the reproductive imperative, for example). Nonetheless, a shared strategy can be found in the refusal to position either maternity or religious belief as entirely dominated by patriarchal traditions and the insistence on both as internally plural and contested domains. This allows for conjunctions of mothering *with* religious or spiritual practice that work to resist dominant patriarchal norms in both religious *and* maternal contexts.

The diversity amongst mothers and women which recent feminist theorising has sought to emphasise is inevitably lost when patriarchal models remain unchallenged. Women are reductively identified with a reproductive function and the maternal body is construed in biologically essentialist ways. Yet just as women differ irreducibly from one another, so maternal bodies may take many forms, as Llewellyn discusses. These include grandmothers, sisters and stepmothers; surrogates, both voluntary and coerced; those who adopt, foster or otherwise care for those they did not physically birth; the voluntarily or involuntarily childless; and, we might add, those who identify as men. We might think here of Thomas Beattie, a female-to-male transsexual who gave birth after transitioning; Sara Ruddick's account of mothering as an attentive practice that allows for male mothers (Ruddick 1992); or Guenther's natal ethics that calls on us to become *like* a maternal body by responding to the Other so as 'to give to her a past of forgiveness and a future of promise' (2006: 7).

The papers included in this issue might also be read as acting *like* a maternal body. They too seek forgiveness for the inevitable moments when mothering falters and fails, and a 'future of promise' in which damaging fantasies of the 'good mother' are replaced with more diverse (and forgiving) images of mothering. In contrast, Page explores a traditionally male role – that of the priest – whose vocational and pastoral elements have been explicitly constructed in terms of being 'like' a mother in ways that simultaneously appropriate and exclude the maternal body. As Page shows, when this role is taken up not just by a woman, but by women who are also mothers, the damaging effects of an intensive model of mothering (both for priests, and for mothers) are acutely exposed.

Opening a more promising future for mothering involves challenging this intensive model. It can also involve the active reclamation of a religious past, as when Muslim women locate affirmative and non-essentialising images

of women and mothers in foundational Islamic texts (Cheruvallil-Contractor; see also Williams 1993, on the reclamation of Hagar from the perspective of African-American women, and Jacob 2015, who re-reads the Virgin Mary in relation to contemporary Indian women's experiences of surrogacy and reproductive tourism). As Cheruvallil-Contractor shows, such acts of interpretative re-appropriation can conjoin religious texts and images with mothering in ways that challenge cultural and religious prejudice and build solidarity across differences. They also remind us of the importance of according agency to mothers, as emphasised by the editors of this special issue in their introduction. By attending to maternal agency in multiple ways, these papers work against the reduction of mothers to the objects of others' discourses, as the editors suggest, while simultaneously expanding the discourses of feminism itself: for as Alison Stone has argued, while feminism has developed powerful arguments for *women* to be granted the status of subjects, it has paid rather less attention to the importance and specificities of recognising *mothers* as subjects (Stone 2012). Nonetheless, as Llewelyn suggests, to move towards a non-oppressive future for maternity, we also need to overcome the stigma attached to non-motherhood and childlessness; where this alienates women from religious contexts to which they otherwise wish to belong, it produces a double harm. Here, we might invoke Cavarero's insistence that maternal generative power should be considered the power to birth or *not give birth*, rather than turned into a reproductive imperative (Cavarero 1995).

Cavarero's approach involves 'stealing back' female figures from the philosophical tradition and knowingly re-situating them in a conceptual fabric that attests to both sexual difference and birth. A similar practice is discerned by Eaton in Marie NDiaye's 2001 novel, *Rosie Carpe*. As Eaton suggests, the novel shows how an idealised Marian figure still informs contemporary understandings of motherhood, while revealing its painful inadequacy when confronted with the ambivalent, failing and sometimes abusive mothering that arises under conditions of exploitation and social isolation. Yet our image of the Virgin Mary is itself re-calibrated as it is overwritten with the distinctly non-ideal, faltering figure of Rosie, whose profane invocation of the 'miracle' of virgin birth provides her with a language in which to make sense of the disconcerting temporality of maternity.

Luce Irigaray has argued that the importance of a 'female divine' lies in the need for an existential horizon within which women's specificity can be valorised and affirmed (Irigaray 1993). NDiaye's novel – as read by Eaton – suggests that one way to address the absence of such a horizon is to de-mythologise and re-humanise existing religious figures, deliberately contaminating them with the banality of contemporary mothering to produce more forgiving images of maternity: images that refuse the alignment of maternity with sexual purity and accept mothering as an often ambivalent and always imperfect practice (see also Baraitser 2009; Jacob 2015). As all of these papers attest, such images are urgently required, if we are to give maternity 'a past of forgiveness and a future of promise'.

References

- Baraitser, Lisa. 2009. *Maternal Encounters: The Ethics of Interruption*, Cambridge: Polity.
Battersby, Christine. 1998. *The Phenomenal Woman: Feminist Metaphysics and the Patterns of Identity*. London, New York: Routledge.

- Bynum, Caroline Walker. 1982. *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Cavarero, Adriana. 1995. *In Spite of Plato* (trans. S. Anderlini-D'Onofrio and Á. O'Healy). Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Cavarero, Adriana. 2005. *For More Than One Voice*, trans. P. Kottman, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Gibson, Margaret F. 2014. *Queering Motherhood: Narrative and Theoretical Perspectives*, Bradford, Ontario: Demeter Press.
- Guenther, Lisa. 2006. *The Gift of the Other*, Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Hill Fletcher, Jeannine. 2013. *Motherhood as Metaphor: Engendering Interreligious Dialogue*, New York: Fordham University Press.
- Irigaray, Luce. 1993. 'Divine Women' in *Sexes and Genealogies* (trans. G.C. Gill), New York: Columbia University Press, 57-72.
- Jacob, Sharon. 2015. *Reading Mary Alongside Indian Surrogate Mothers: Violent Love, Oppressive Liberation and Infancy Narratives*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Kristeva, Julia. 1986. 'Stabat Mater' in T. Moi (ed.), *The Kristeva Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell, 160-186.
- LaChance Adams, Sarah, and Lundquist, Caroline R. 2012. *Coming to Life: Philosophies of Pregnancy, Childbirth and Mothering*, New York: Fordham University Press.
- Lintott, Sheila, and Sander-Staudt, Maureen. 2012. *Philosophical Inquiries into Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Mothering*, New York, London: Routledge.
- Park, Shelley M. 2013. *Mothering Queerly, Queering Motherhood*, New York: State University of New York Press.
- Ruddick, Sara. 1992. 'From Maternal Thinking to Peace Politics' in E. Browning Cole and S. Coultrap-McQuin (eds.), *Explorations in Ethics*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 141-155.
- Sered, Susan Starr. 1994. *Priestess, Mother, Sacred Sister: Religions Dominated by Women*, New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Stone, Alison. 2012. *Feminism, Psychoanalysis and Maternal Subjectivity*, New York, London: Routledge.
- Williams, Delores S. 1993. *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, New York: Orbis Books.