

International Workshop *Breastfeeding(s) and Religions: A cross-cultural and Interdisciplinary Perspective from Antiquity to Present*, Max-Weber-Kolleg (University of Erfurt), July 11-12, 2018.

This workshop builds on the expertise gained by editing *Motherhood(s) and Polytheisms* (edited by F.I. Pasche Guignard, G. Pedrucci, M. Scapini. Pàtron: Bologna. 2017), and *Motherhood(s) and Monotheisms*, forthcoming. The main goal of these collective volumes was to reconsider issues at the intersection between religion, gender, and not only womanhood generally, but motherhood specifically. Many scholars, and especially women researchers, successfully implemented the “gender turn” in the study of religions, as early as the 1980s in the English-speaking academia, and later in francophone countries and in Italy. This led to a much needed revisiting of the history of religions using “gender” as a critical category of analysis. Our assumption is that taking the “mother turn” in the study of religions might bring about some radical reconsiderations about not only gender, women, and mothers, but also power, authority, ritual, prescriptions regarding im/purity, conceptions of birth, life and death, cosmologies, myth, kinship, filiation, figures of mother goddesses, and the notion of “care” central to feminist theory.

We further call for revisiting the study of religions through the lenses of maternal theory, without dismissing, but rather, through building upon the rich scholarship on gender and religion. In this regard, the distinction made by S.S. Sered¹ between “womAn as symbol” (e.g., goddesses) and “womEn as agents” (real practice, historical mothers), and the distinction made by A. Rich² between “Motherhood as institution” and “Motherhood as experience” (women’s experience and relation to her own reproductive capacities) is particularly relevant here, especially as evidence strongly suggests a widespread gap between normative representation and actual practice.

Now, we feel that it is time for the “breastfeeding turn.” While breastfeeding is one of the most concrete and “natural” gesture in mothers’ lives, and their maternal work,³ it has a quite problematic position in the maternity package, and its “cultural” perception changes greatly over places and centuries. Today, in the so-called “West”, breastfeeding is vigorously encouraged by a range of state, and voluntary, organizations. When the US pediatrician William Sears, “the man who remade motherhood”, created a theory of *Attachment Parenting* that entails “extreme” breastfeeding, he broke the trend started 50 years ago when the medical and industrial male lobbies strongly cooperated to promote artificial milk. Even in the twenty-first century context, which strongly supports breastfeeding, and in which the media is saturated with images of scantily-clad, bare-breasted, or virtually bare-breasted, women, the act of nursing in public remains highly controversial – and so are explicit images of maternity more generally (just remember the uproar caused by Demi Moore’s naked late pregnancy photographs in the 90s) – as

¹ Sered S.S., *Priestess, Mother, sacred Sister. Religions dominated by Women*, New York-Oxford 1994.

² Rich A., *Of Woman born*, New York 1976.

³ Ruddick S., *Maternal Thinking*, Boston 1989: she distinguishes the three demands of maternal thinking – preservation, growth, and social acceptance – that are met by the three practices (maternal work) of preservative love, nurturance, and training. While the demands are postulated as universals, the ways in which mothers meet them vary across cultures and, as we found in our books, religions.

demonstrated by the frequent news reports about women being banned for breastfeeding in public spaces such as swimming pools, or hotel foyers, for example.

Evidently, the history is mixed, and it is still necessary to distinguish between the promotion of breast-feeding in a general sense, and the limits on its specific performance and display. This issue examines both the biological process of breastfeeding (which connects women's bodies to infants' bodies, involving biological, medical and sociocultural anthropology, body anthropology, linguistics) and broader questions of infants and young child feeding (which require a deep understanding of concepts such as reciprocity, commensality, nurture, and household meal cycles), including its relationships to sexuality, embodiment, and the important policy issues of women's employment (breast-milk as the ultimate slow food, see the exhibition *La grande madre* at EXPO 2015), exclusive breastfeeding, and complementary breastfeeding (involving cultural and evolutionary anthropology, ethnography, and demography). Interdisciplinary research in both semiotics and history may provide new perspectives on embodiment and how breast-milk creates social relationships. Even complex public health policy issues such as HIV and contaminations in breast-milk lead to considerations of embodiment, power, and gender.⁴

More specifically, how do religions deal with breastfeeding? The aim is to analyze how religious discourses have described and influenced such a natural and strictly female practice. Within a religious discourse, breastfeeding(s) can be biological, spiritual, transgressive (for example, babies breastfed by animals, saints breastfed by the Virgin Mary, old men breastfed by young women). Greek and Roman goddesses, for instance, except in some rare and specific exceptions, do not breastfeed (they avoid biological aspects of motherhood in general), but in the Egyptian narratives breast-milk is notoriously central for Horus (and the Pharaoh). Does a divine child need breast-milk and why? What about other polytheistic systems, past and modern? If we come to monotheisms, breastfeeding is also an important issue. Not only Islamic cultures (milk kinship and the related prohibitions), but also Jewish and Christian traditions develop discourses on breastfeeding (see, most recently, Pope Bergoglio's words on breastfeeding during mass). How can we explain the different attitudes towards breastfeeding in religious discourse? To what extent (male) religious authorities and sacred texts dictate/ed maternal practices in a normative way? Do they tell women how, how long, when, and where to breastfeed? Do they blame women who don't have milk, or who decide not to breastfeed? To what extent do women feel free to transgress without blaming themselves for not being a "good" mother? Can we trace any significant differences with the so-called "religions dominated by women?"⁵

We call for papers about case studies on the theoretical framework outlined,⁶ especially but not exclusively for those in which women's responses to religious norms can be traced.

⁴ Van Esterik P., *Contemporary Trends in Infant Feeding Research*, *Annu. Rev. Anthropol.*31, 2002, 257-78.

⁵ See n. 1.

⁶ In this regards, Pasche Guignard F.I., *The Academic Study of Religions and Mothering, Motherhood and Mothers*, in F.I. Pasche Guignard – G. Pedrucci – Marianna Scapini (eds.), *Motherhood/s and Polytheisms / Maternità e Politeismi*, Bologna 2017, 43-69, will be particularly useful.

For Antiquity, papers with epistemological reflections on how we can make “(maternal) silence speak” in addition to case studies, if feasible, will be particularly welcomed.

If you wish to submit a proposal for this International Workshop (proceedings will be published in open access after a double peer review), please send a title and a short (200-300 words) abstract to giulia.pedrucci@gmail.com until December 10, 2017.