

International Workshop to be held at the Max-Weber-Kolleg (University of Erfurt), 31 January-1 February 2019

Pregnancies, Childbirths, and Religions: Rituals, Normative Perspectives, and Individual Appropriations. A Cross-Cultural and Interdisciplinary Perspective from Antiquity to the Present

This workshop is the second in a cycle entitled *Religionification of Motherhood and Mothers' Appropriation of Religion*. The first one, *Breastfeeding(s) and Religions: Normative Prescriptions and Individual Appropriation. A Cross-Cultural and Interdisciplinary Perspectives from Antiquity to the Present*, will be held at the Max-Weber-Kolleg (University of Erfurt) on July 11-12, 2018.

The main goal of these workshops is to revisit the study of religions through the lenses of maternal theory without dismissing but rather through building upon the rich existing scholarship on gender and religion. In this regard, the distinction made by S.S. Sered (*Priestess, Mother, Sacred Sister. Religions Dominated by Women*, New York-Oxford 1994) between “womAn as symbol” (e.g., images of goddesses, normative stereotypes created by male religious authorities) and “womEn as agents” (real practice, historical mothers), and the distinction made by A. Rich (*Of Woman born*, New York 1976) between “Motherhood as institution” and “Motherhood as experience” (women’s experience and relation to her own reproductive capacities) are particularly relevant here. In fact, evidence suggests a widespread gap between normative representation and actual practice.

Now, it is time for pregnancy and child-birth. Nowadays, not all babies are necessarily breastfed, not all babies were necessarily breastfed by their biological mother in the past; but every single human being – as A. Rich used to say – is for sure *of woman born*. Always. Also, those men who have created negative stereotypes or biased norms for mothers are *of woman born*. Pregnancy and childbirth seem to be quite univocal terms, but they are not. The title for the workshop, in fact, is intentionally in the plural. Indeed, pregnancies can be “natural” or can be the result of Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ARTS). There are “egg-mothers,” “surrogate mothers”, and “birth mothers”. Childbirth can be natural, cesarean, with or without epidural anesthesia, multiple, a hospital or a home birth. Religious discourses on these issues are frequent and can strongly dictate how women experience their mothering from the very beginning. The religious control on women and their reproductive capacities starts even before by dictating conception, contraception, and abortion. Religious authorities also strongly influence practices of “social birth”, that is adoption.

How do/did religions deal with pregnancy and childbirth? The aim of the workshop is to analyze how religious discourses have described and influenced such natural and strictly female practices. Within a religious discourse, pregnancy can be a divine gift, childbirth can be virginal. As far as childbirth is concerned, impurity is a central issue: How do/did religions cope with the (perceived) impurity caused by the birth event?

Moreover, pregnancy and childbirth are extremely delicate moments, both for the mothers and the babies, which need to be protected (sometimes even hidden) by all means, including religious and magical ones. They are moments of passage, which need rituals to be performed by many religious agents involved to various degrees in the mother and child’s lives, not only by the mothers herself. Which kinds of rituals are/were performed in relation to pregnancy and childbirth and which deities do/did religious agents appropriate, and eventually alter and re-invent for this purpose?

How can we explain the different attitudes towards pregnancy and childbirth in the religious discourses? To what extent dictate (male) religious authorities and sacred texts maternal practices in a normative way? Do they tell women how to get pregnant, what to do during the pregnancy and how to give birth? Do they blame women who cannot or do not want to have children? To what extent do women feel free to transgress without blaming themselves for not being a “good” women and

obedient members of a specific religious tradition? In which way can/could women's decision not to have children or disregard religious rules be perceived as religious individualization and autonomy from social inter-connectedness? Can we trace any significant differences with the so-called "religions dominated by women?" (Sered 1994).

Dr. Giulia Pedrucci, COFUND-Fellow at Max-Weber-Kolleg and the Research Centre "Dynamics of Jewish Ritual Practices in Pluralistic Contexts from Antiquity to the Present" issue this Call-for-Papers about case studies on the theoretical framework outlined above, especially but not exclusively for those in which women's response to religious norms can be traced. Pseudo-religious movements (such as Scientology) can be also taken into account. For antiquity, papers with epistemological reflections on how we can make "(maternal) silence speak" in addition to case studies, if feasible, will be particularly welcome.

The proposals (in English), which should not exceed 300 words, must be received by May 10, 2018. Please, send them to either Dr. Giulia Pedrucci (giulia.pedrucci@gmail.com or giulia.pedrucci@uni-erfurt.de) or Dr. Claudia D. Bergmann (claudia.bergmann@uni-erfurt.de).