

BIRTHING A FUTURE: MOTHERHOOD, MOURNING, METHOD

Topic:	Systematic Theologians Reflect on Motherhood as Both Content and Method
Convener & Moderator:	Karen Trimble Alliaume, Lewis University
Panelists:	Susie Paulik Babka, University of San Diego Janice A. Thompson, King's College Rita George-Tvrtkovic, Benedictine University

As more women—particularly mothers—choose theology as a vocation, is a shift emerging not only in the content of theological reflection on motherhood, but also in terms of method? Is there anything peculiarly prophetic about the ways in which mother-theologians engage in theology? In asking these questions, the three panelists moved away from the idealization of motherhood that appears in past theological work, e.g., in theological reflections on Mary. Instead, they reflected on varied and non-ideal experiences of motherhood and parenthood in their capacity to serve as authoritative and accessible resources not only for issues of sexuality, women and children, but for systematic theology more generally.

In her presentation, “Otherness and Welcoming the Stranger: Seeking Divine Identity through the Maternal Experience,” Susie Paulik Babka began by defining motherhood as “a person who takes on responsibility for children’s lives and for whom providing child care is a significant part of *his or her* working life” (Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*, Beacon Press, 1995, 40). Motherhood can be described as immediate intimacy with a stranger, or “other,” who demands our total dedication and care. She further explored the dynamic between otherness and intimacy using the work of Jewish philosopher Emanuel Levinas, particularly on the face of the Other and on the Kabbalistic understanding of *tzimtzum*, relating these to the Christian idea of *kenosis*. Because maternity is understood not as a fixed biological or social identity but as the response to an ethical imperative from the Other, maternity can be disengaged from a strict biological interpretation such that a maternal event, emptying the self for the benefit of the Other, describes the essential relationship between God and humanity. By understanding maternity ethically as the embodied response to the Other whom one may or may not have conceived and given birth to, maternity can be recognized as a locus of responsibility, without expecting women to bear that responsibility alone. The metaphor and narrative of maternal experience shed light on the movement of divine grace through a defiant creation and show the way into the possibility of justice.

If the creative work of mothers—considered in the work of their bodies, their narratives, and their communities—images the creative work of God, then God can be conceived as mother precisely in this context of making room for the other. But what happens to the analogy between a mother’s creative work and God’s creative work when a child is stillborn or dies soon after birth? Is the analogy broken? Janice Thompson, in a presentation entitled “Birthing a Future: Mothers in Mourning and Eschatological Hope,” suggested that when a mother’s work is

understood not narrowly as “producing new life,” but more broadly as “making room for the other,” one can trace the creative work of mothers into the work of mourning a child. In this way, instead of breaking the analogy between God and mothers after the death of a child, she extended it, first, to understand significant features of the experience of losing a young child, and then ultimately better engage connections between a theology of creation and eschatology. Mining the thought of Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Johann Baptist Metz, Thompson illuminated and suggested ways in which the maternal work of mourning a child in tandem with community points beyond itself to the God who can take human endings and failures and offer instead new hopes and new beginnings, opening up a future even for a past tragically cut short.

In her presentation entitled “Method and the ‘Mother-Theologian’: Two Historical Examples,” Rita George-Tvrtkovic further extended the notion of motherhood/parenthood and maternal work by examining the lives of two historical “mother-theologians,” Angela of Foligno and Dorothy Day. Given the real-life imperfection of motherhood displayed by these two figures (Angela in fact prays in thankfulness that her family had died, while Day is questionable as an ideal mother figure), George-Tvrtkovic outlines the ways in which, nevertheless, motherhood serves as authorization for each woman’s theological commitments and projects in ways not immediately susceptible to “falling short” in the ways that recommended imitation of the virgin mother Mary often suggest to women.

The lively and intimate discussion that followed the presentations contributed to further clarification of the presenters’ positions and suggested further constructive avenues of exploration on these topics.

KAREN TRIMBLE ALLIAUME

*Lewis University
Romeoville, Illinois*