

## A Response to Postnatal Depression: Should we Bring Back Churching?

Allison Fenton

Department of Theology and Religion, Durham University

Priest in Charge, St Margaret, Scotswood, Newcastle Upon Tyne



La Pieta

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## Abstract

In this paper my experience of Postnatal depression sets the agenda, thus offering both a response to a critical incident and attention to the detail of experience which characterises Practical Theology. I explore something of what women experience in their transition to motherhood, especially when this transition leads to depression (although I argue that this happens more often than is usually acknowledged). I aim to describe, and thus deconstruct, the discourse on Postnatal depression, exploring the ideal of the 'perfect mother' which pervades the literature although rarely corresponds with the real experience of mothers. While churching might be perceived as belonging to patriarchy, this paper explores whether it might be reclaimed, or whether its association with notions of purification means that liturgies that recognise and celebrate the transition to motherhood should replace it. Towards the end of the paper I offer some suggestions for how such a liturgy might begin to take shape.

**Key Words:** Motherhood; Postnatal Depression; Churching; Liturgy; Birth.

## Introduction

I gave birth to my first child, a boy, in 1993. Almost immediately after his birth I became depressed. I felt immensely protective towards him yet at the same time confused, incapable and vulnerable. Nevertheless, I struggled on. I was articulate and fooled the midwives and doctors into thinking that I was fine for two years before receiving the medical care I needed. Throughout this experience I was expecting to receive some kind of help at church but I was new in a 'pit-village' community, and only six elderly women worshipped at the local church. In fact I spent the only services I attended trying not to cry. I struggled to comprehend my child as a 'gift'. I asked myself if my being so far removed from the image of the perfect mother was the reason my child cried so much. However, while flicking through the *Book of Common Prayer*, I did find the 'Churching of Women' service: it seemed to be what I needed. When I enquired, it was dismissed as being old fashioned and about purification after birth, so of no relevance to me.

Although my son is now an adult, in the intervening years I have sought to make sense of my experience. This article explores how the Church relates to the experience of the new mother and to what extent its liturgies are apt.

## Understanding Postnatal Depression

Postnatal depression (PND) is difficult to define, different researchers giving differing definitions. Katharina Dalton cites the medical definition very starkly:

Postnatal depression is the first occurrence of psychiatric symptoms severe enough to require medical help occurring after childbirth and before the return of menstruation.<sup>1</sup>

PND is on a scale of severity.<sup>2</sup> This starts with the Baby Blues, which are seen as normal; in fact some studies have shown that up to 80 per cent of women experience the Baby Blues.<sup>3</sup> This is described as bouts of unexplained crying which last for five minutes or more in the first ten days after childbirth; sometimes these 'bouts' may last for two hours or more. Reports of the number of women who suffer from Postnatal depression vary and range from 13–50 per cent.<sup>4</sup>

The reasons for PND are complicated: that it is so widespread suggests that they are not just sociological. Katharina Dalton's research suggests that it is hormone related, but other models have dominated the discussion on PND.<sup>5</sup> Cox has said that although there are many factors that are common to those suffering from PND, women who do suffer are universally 'troubled by their inability to live up to their own high expectations of motherhood'.<sup>6</sup>

Cox developed the Edinburgh Postnatal Depression Scale, which is used world-wide in the diagnosis of PND. It has been translated into many languages and has been used to show that the illness occurs at the same rate throughout the world and across boundaries of class or wealth.<sup>7</sup> A woman is asked to score for herself – although ideally in the presence of a midwife or health visitor – and the process assumes that she answers honestly. There has, however, been little research that questions its validity or the reliability of the answers of a mother who might be feeling threatened and guilty: some respondents might 'acquiesce' in the completion of the questionnaire – and this is more likely in depressed patients.<sup>8</sup>

## The Perfect Mother

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<sup>1</sup> Katharina Dalton, *Depression After Childbirth* (London: Oxford University Press, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. 1996), 3.

<sup>2</sup> It is important to distinguish PND from puerperal psychosis which is much more severe.

<sup>3</sup> Cindy-Lee Dennis, 'Can we Identify Mothers at Risk for Postpartum Depression in the Immediate Postpartum Period Using the Edinburgh Postnatal Depression Scale?', *Journal of Affective Disorders* 78 (2004), 163–169.

<sup>4</sup> M.W. O'Hara and A.M. Swain, 'Rates and Risks of Postpartum Depression – a Meta-analysis', *International Review of Psychiatry* 8 (1996), 37–54; R. Kumar and K.L. Robson, 'A Prospective Study of Emotional Disorders in Childbearing Women', *British Journal of Psychiatry* 144 (1984), 35–47.

<sup>5</sup> Dalton, *Depression After Childbirth*.

<sup>6</sup> J.L. Cox *et al.*, 'Prospective Study of the Psychiatric Disorders of Childbirth', *British Journal of Psychiatry* 140 (1982), 114.

<sup>7</sup> J.L. Cox *et al.*, 'Detection of Postnatal Depression: Development of the 10 Item Postnatal Depression Scale', *British Journal of Psychiatry* 150 (1987), 782–786. Collette Clifford, *et al.*, 'A Cross-Cultural Analysis of the Use of the Edinburgh Post-Natal Depression Scale in Health Visiting Practice', *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 30, no.3 (1999), 655–664.

<sup>8</sup> A. Hinz, *et al.*, 'The Acquiescence Effect in Responding to a Questionnaire', *GMS Psychosocial Medicine* 4, Doc 07 (2007), [www.egms.de/en/journals/psm/index.shtml](http://www.egms.de/en/journals/psm/index.shtml) (6 July 2009).

It is, then, important to examine the reasons why women have such high expectations of motherhood, and to explore the sources of such a guilt-inducing, unrealistic standard. Looking at the images of motherhood that are encountered daily reveals the subtlety and pervasiveness of the image of the perfect (yet unrealistic) mother.<sup>9</sup> In modern film, while the mother might be allowed to work or to be single, she still needs to be happy, have a clean scrubbed kitchen and be willing to sacrifice her desires for her children.<sup>10</sup> Women who are not prepared to do this are vilified: they are portrayed as mad or bad. These ideal mothers are predominantly white and middle-class, as if anyone from outside this category could never even contemplate coming close to being the perfect mother.<sup>11</sup>

Hadfield *et al.* suggest that attitudes to mothering and the 'right' kind of parenting are pervasive in the British media. Much media discourse is based around the 'good' mother, 'she is heterosexual, selfless, fertile (Gillespie, 2000), middle class and aged 25- to 35-years-old.'<sup>12</sup>

When we think of motherhood we are supposed to think of Renoir's blooming women with rosy children at their knees, Raphael's ecstatic madonnas, some Jewish mother lighting the candles in a scrubbed kitchen on Shabbos.<sup>13</sup>

Although Adrienne Rich wrote these words in 1976, these images continue to prevail, promoting a romantic image of motherhood.

Rich was one of the first women to critique motherhood from a feminist perspective. In the foreword to her 1986 edition, Rich admits that she wrote from a white perspective and disparagingly of those women who are 'barren' (*sic*). However, her work is important for all those sociologists who followed her and who have attempted to break the myth of motherhood. Rich suggests that motherhood as an institution is very different from the actual experience of mothering that women encounter. It is this gap, she believes, which helps to engender guilt.

Institutionalised motherhood demands of women maternal 'instinct' rather than intelligence, selflessness rather than self-realisation, relation to others rather than creation of self.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> This portrayal of the perfect mother, particularly in the media, is discussed by Fiona Joy Green, 'Feminist Mothers', in Andrea O'Reilly (ed.), *From Motherhood to Mothering: The Legacy of Adrienne Rich's Of Woman Born* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2004), 127.

<sup>10</sup> Lucy Fischer discusses this in *Cinematernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), especially page 30.

<sup>11</sup> O'Reilly, *From Motherhood to Mothering*, Introduction, 5.

<sup>12</sup> L. Hadfield *et al.*, 'Motherhood, Choice and the British Media: A Time to Reflect', *Gender and Education* 19, no. 2 (2007), 256.

<sup>13</sup> Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: Norton, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1986), 275.

<sup>14</sup> Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 42.

John Bowlby's research, published in the 1950's, helped to form the institution of motherhood about which Rich writes. His research revealed that babies do better when their caretaker is constant, when they make an attachment to their carer. Bowlby interpreted this to mean the mother should remain the main caretaker, and that this is most natural for the mother: 'Most mothers experience a strong pull to be close to their babies and young children.'<sup>15</sup> Bowlby's work began to be influential at a time when women who had come out of the domestic sphere during the war were being encouraged to become homemakers once again and allow men to return to their previous employment. Bowlby's work seems to support this: he showed that children need their mothers. Diane Eyer offers a critique of Bowlby's work: 'Bowlby's claims regarding the importance of mother love in infancy and early childhood led some people to place an almost mystical importance on the role of mother.'<sup>16</sup>

Michael Rutter has also challenged Bowlby's research into attachment, arguing that 'the good science has also been accompanied by excessive polarising claims, and by unwarranted extrapolations'.<sup>17</sup> He argues that scientists, since Bowlby, have a much more developed understanding of nature, nurture and developmental processes, which should be used when developing an understanding of mother-child relationships. Although he agrees that the mother infant relationship is central, the relationship of a child to its mother is not the only factor that can influence development. Rutter cites research showing that siblings, raised in the same family, can show quite different psychological development.

Melanie Klein saw the mother-child relationship as central in the child's personality development, placing an onus on the mother to get it right.<sup>18</sup> She is one of many psychologists whose work warns mothers that their failure to 'mother' properly will lead to the destructive behaviour of their children. 'To the long tradition of blaming the mother for juvenile delinquency (Bowlby), a nation of "gladiators" (Dick Read) and "terrorists" (Brazelton) we may now add "violent criminal" (Spock).'<sup>19</sup>

Donald Winnicott, in attempting to redress the unrealistic demands of previous generations of psychologists, coined the term 'good-enough mother'.<sup>20</sup> A 'good-enough mother' is one who meets a child's needs enough of the time so that it is not overwhelmed with anxiety, yet at the same time allows the child to separate from her. Although Winnicott suggests that most women have an innate ability to care for

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<sup>15</sup> John Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss*, vol. 1, *Attachment* (London: Pimlico, 1997), 241.

<sup>16</sup> Diane Eyer, *Mother-Infant Bonding: A Scientific Fiction* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), 50.

<sup>17</sup> Michael Rutter, 'Nature, Nurture and Development: From Evangelism through Science toward Policy and Practice', *Child Development* 73, no. 1 (Jan/Feb 2002), abstract, 1.

<sup>18</sup> H. Segal, *Melanie Klein* (New York: The Viking Press, 1980).

<sup>19</sup> Eyer, *Mother-Infant Bonding*, 457.

<sup>20</sup> Peter Pearce, *Psychoanalytic/Psychodynamic Developmental Theories*, <http://mcgraw-hill.co.uk/openup/chapters/0335206352.pdf>, (7 May 2009).

their children, he still wrote books designed to tell mothers how to best look after their babies.<sup>21</sup>

The notion of the 'good-enough mother', while promoted by health visitors, has not broken into the general consciousness of women. Despite the professional and academic achievements of women in our society, a mother is still judged on her mothering abilities, so strives to be 'The perfect mother'. Even the term 'good-enough mother' is laden with expectation, measurability and the possibility of failing (of being not-good-enough) as a mother.

In black communities, while the biological mother is expected to care for her children, mothering tends to be a shared responsibility within the community.

African and African-American communities have recognised that vesting one person with full responsibility for mothering a child may not be wise or possible. As a result 'othermothers', women who assist blood mothers by sharing mothering responsibilities, traditionally have been central to the institution of black motherhood.<sup>22</sup>

In addition to the image of the ideal mother to which women aspire, an important factor in influencing a mother's reaction to her child is her attitude to her own mother.<sup>23</sup> Nancy Chodorow believes that girls form the basis of their identity through identification with the mother.<sup>24</sup> However, they also find separation from the mother difficult and often have a fear of becoming their mother (matrophobia), attaching their negative emotions of motherhood onto themselves. This is confounded when they themselves become mothers, acting as one of the triggers in Postnatal depression. This is less likely in societies where female-kin relationships are prevalent, where women develop mature dependency on one another.<sup>25</sup>

### **Mary: The Perfect Mother**

In considering the importance of images of mothers in formulating society's view of the mother, we need also to consider the view of the mother-goddess which existed even in primal religions.<sup>26</sup> The most archetypal of these is the Egyptian goddess-mother, Isis. In Christianity it seems that Mary has been moulded by the Church over generations to comply with this goddess figure.<sup>27</sup> The image of Mary, even in a society that is overtly secular, is inherent in our culture, art and literature. In Pasolini's film, *The Gospel According to St Matthew*, Mary is posed according to the

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<sup>21</sup> D.W. Winnicott *The Child, The Family and the Outside World* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1964).

<sup>22</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, quoted in O'Reilly, *From Motherhood to Mothering*, 11.

<sup>23</sup> Rosalind Coward, *Our Treacherous Hearts* (London: Faber & Faber, 1992), 90.

<sup>24</sup> Nancy Chodorow, 'Family Structure and Feminine Personality', in Darlene M. Juschka (ed.), *Feminism in the Study of Religion* (London: Continuum, 2001), 81-105.

<sup>25</sup> Chodorow, 'Family Structure', 97.

<sup>26</sup> Verena Kast, *Father-Daughter, Mother-Son* (Shaftesbury, Dorset: Element, 1997), 65.

<sup>27</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Mary – The Feminine Face of the Church* (London: SCM, 1979), 63.

images of Classical Art: she is doe-eyed, silent, and impassive. It is this image that we find on Christmas cards, in churches and on book covers, and which perpetuates the myth of the perfect mother.<sup>28</sup>

Mary is often contrasted with Eve, especially in terms of giving birth. Eve was punished for her disobedience by suffering the pangs of childbirth. Mary, according to tradition, suffered no such pain.<sup>29</sup> Also, in contrast with Eve who had succumbed to the temptations of the serpent and sexuality, the virginal Mary is beyond sexuality.

To place her [Mary] on a pedestal as the holy virgin and mother and contrast her with sinful Eve, the symbol of all ordinary women, makes it difficult to bridge the gap between ordinary women and Mary.<sup>30</sup>

Here lies the paradox. Because the image of Mary has been deliberately removed from that of ordinary women, the perfection which she is seen to embody is not, therefore, achievable.

It is interesting that Mary is the only mother in the New Testament referred to in any depth. In the Old Testament there are many references to motherhood and to mothers. It is noteworthy that these portrayals of motherhood are very different from that of Mary, none of them seem easy and many fall short of 'perfect'. The story of Sarai and her relationship with Hagar shows the pain of infertility, jealousy and resentment: it is the story of two women whose joy in the blessing of motherhood was tainted. Other stories of mothers in the Old Testament reveal motherhood to be sacrificial, painful, and involving loss: the story of Rachel who died in childbirth; Naomi, whose sons both died, lonely, impoverished and in a foreign land; the widow in Zarephath whose son died despite her hospitality to Elijah<sup>31</sup> – the pain of her loss is obvious in her begging Elijah to bring him back to life; Hannah in her infertility, desperate to bear a child, and having done so giving him back to the Temple to serve God. These women are neither docile nor subservient, yet their faith in God remains strong. They provide a positive image of the strength of mothers, carrying on in pain and loss. These are stories the Church needs to make more of: icons of motherhood which need to be celebrated.<sup>32</sup>

Feminist theologians believe that God rather than Mary encapsulates the essence of motherliness: God is the giver of life; God gives birth to the world from within the

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<sup>28</sup>Marie-Therese van Lunnen Chenu, 'Between Sexes and Generations', in Anne Carr and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (eds.), *Motherhood: Experience, Institution, Theology*, Concilium 206 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989), 38.

<sup>29</sup>Sarah Jane Boss, *Mary* (Sheffield: Continuum, 2004), 102.

<sup>30</sup>Kathleen Coyle, *Mary in the Christian Tradition* (Leominster: Gracewing, 1996), 86.

<sup>31</sup>1 Kgs 17.8–24.

<sup>32</sup>Pauline Warner, *Women's Icons of Ministry*, Grove Pastoral 60 (Cambridge: Grove Books, 1994).

world; God will feed and nurture us all, including the weak and the vulnerable.<sup>33</sup> God as Mother is impartial and inclusive, wanting all to flourish. God as Mother allows mothers to feel more connected in the process of creation and in developing a positive image of mothers. However, Ellen Clark-King has shown that some women in the matriarchal society she studied have real difficulties with this concept.<sup>34</sup> So, while it is important to begin to explore God as Mother, there are many reasons why women may have difficulty with the metaphor (not least their relationship with their own mother). Thelma Aldcroft reports that 'Referring to God as "She" actually makes some women feel physically sick.'<sup>35</sup>

### **The Church's Rituals Surrounding Birth**

As well as examining the theology of the images of mothers and their importance in Christianity, it is also important to look at the rituals that are associated with birth in Christianity. Ritual is an important way of marking rites of passage, or changes in status in the community. Arnold van Gennep writes that the rites of childbirth are intended to re-integrate the woman into groups to which she previously belonged or to establish her new position in society as a mother.<sup>36</sup> The ritual stages involved in this are: separation, transition and reincorporation. It marks an entrance into a new kind of life.<sup>37</sup>

It is, then, important that we recognise rites of passage markers in society and develop them in church. Relevant liturgy transcends the limitations of counselling and clergy inadequacy. It avoids the clumsiness or incompetence of individuals, adding richly to pastoral care and uniting the personal condition with the universal condition of humanity.

'The Churching of Women' (*Thanksgiving of Women after Childbirth*) seems to fulfil the requirements of a ritual that marks motherhood: being woman-centred it is the only place in which the mother is acknowledged as an individual rather than as a bearer of children.<sup>38</sup> It fulfils Arnold van Gennep's requirements for a rite of passage: acknowledging loss in birth while at the same time rejoicing in it and seeking God's help in the (difficult) task ahead.

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<sup>33</sup> Natalie Knödel, 'Reconsidering an Obsolete Rite: The Churching of Women and Feminist Liturgical Theology', *Feminist Theology* 5, (1997), 108.

<sup>34</sup> Ellen Clark-King, *Theology by Heart: Women, the Church, and God* (Peterborough: Epworth Press, 2004), 77.

<sup>35</sup> Thelma Aldcroft, 'Childbirth, Liturgy and Ritual – A Neglected Dimension of Pastoral Theology', in Elaine Graham and Margaret Halsey (eds.), *Lifecycles: Women and Pastoral Care* (London: SPCK, 1993), 189.

<sup>36</sup> Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1977)

<sup>37</sup>R. Grainger, *The Message of the Rite: The Significance of Christian Rites of Passage* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 1988).

<sup>38</sup> *The Book of Common Prayer: The Thanksgiving for a Woman after Childbirth*.



The biblical background for churching is Lev. 12.1–5, where a woman who has given birth to a son is unclean for 40 days, or, if she has given birth to a daughter, for 80 days. At the end of this time she is expected to perform the *mikveh* – the purifying bath – and go to the Temple with offerings to make atonement for her impurity.

Although the roots of churching go back into Jewish law, the practice of women not being allowed into church for a certain period after giving birth did not begin until the eleventh century.<sup>39</sup> The blessing given to women before that time was more about protection from evil rather than purification. The first liturgies for this rite rarely contain the word ‘purification’, it was a

rite of thanksgiving in a situation which was perceived as potentially dangerous, a ceremony of special prayers of protection for mother and child, and as a social event for the reintroduction of the mother to the life of the church and society.<sup>40</sup>

Only in the 1549 Prayer Book was the rite called ‘The Purification of Women.’ It had huge importance and a woman who was ‘unchurched’ could not be admitted into any part of society. By 1552 references to purification had been removed, yet that purpose continued to linger in the popular consciousness. The clergy often emphasised the need for purification, especially in reference to sexual intercourse: ‘Some stain or other doth creep into this action which had need to be repented.’<sup>41</sup> Churching became, however, a time of great celebration for the ‘gossips’ – those women who were present at the birth and were part of the community. It became a female occasion for sharing and celebrating together.<sup>42</sup>

However, ‘The Churching of Women’ remains associated with purification in the common mind. In deciding not to include churching in the *Alternative Service Book*, the authors of the commentary explained:

The extravagant language of 1662 about ‘the great pain and peril of childbirth’ was becoming less appropriate. It was also claimed during debates in convocation in 1966 that a woman using the service could still go away with the uneasy feeling that she ‘had done something wrong.’<sup>43</sup>

Maurice Staton researched the uptake of churching in the matriarchal society of the North East of England.<sup>44</sup> In the 1970’s, churching was still fairly common. In fact, women were commonly not allowed into others’ houses until they had been churched. In some areas of Newcastle, women still ask for churching, and it is only

<sup>39</sup> Knödel, ‘Reconsidering an Obsolete Rite’, 108.

<sup>40</sup> Knödel, ‘Reconsidering an Obsolete Rite’, 111.

<sup>41</sup> The Works of Henry Smith, quoted by Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* [1971] (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1997), 60.

<sup>42</sup> Knödel, ‘Reconsidering an Obsolete Rite’, 115.

<sup>43</sup> ASB commentary quoted in Charles Read, ‘Women Still Invisible?’ (unpublished thesis, 2008).

<sup>44</sup> M.W Staton, ‘The Rite of Churching: A Sociological Analysis with Special Reference to an Urban Area in Newcastle Upon Tyne’ (unpublished M Theol thesis, University of Newcastle).

through the imposition of the clergy that it has become truly obsolete. This is less because these clergy do not recognise a need for such a liturgy, than because of its powerful associations with purification and the lingering belief that something about childbirth is sinful.

When a mother, or family, bring their baby to church they are expecting some kind of ritual to mark not only the birth of their baby, but also one which marks the passage into parenthood; a rite which, as well as acknowledging the baby, acknowledges the new role of mothers and fathers.

The first liturgical contact most people have with the Church after childbirth is when they bring their child for baptism. As a sacrament it marks the entering into a new way of living in Christ.<sup>45</sup> The child is, in baptism, being born again, without its mother.

New birth is the most feminine of images, and some fonts have been designed to suggest a pregnant woman. Baptism is spoken of as both tomb and womb.<sup>46</sup>

In this ritual the mother becomes redundant: her child is born again without need of her, it then becomes part of a new community – the Church – and official responsibility for its upbringing in Christ is shared with god-parents. This is good, if the reality is that from the community of the church emerge ‘other-mothers’ who will help to bear the responsibility of bringing up a child. It is important, however, to ask why so many families who do not usually attend church continue to bring children to baptism. The reasons are complex, but it is possible that women (and men) are seeking acknowledgement of their new role and of the spirituality of their experience of childbirth.

The Church of England, in *Common Worship*, developed an alternative to baptism: *Thanksgiving for the Gift of a Child*. It was intended that this would replace the antiquated churching service, and offer an alternative to baptism. But the emphasis had changed: this is a service that is child-centred. At no point in the service, or in the additional prayers, is there any reference to the mother (although there are prayers for the father, grandparents, and siblings). The service begins with a reference to Mary. It refers to children as a gift – to unpack the semantics of the word gift might suggest that this is a term which needs to be challenged.<sup>47</sup> So, while this service is a useful, joyful recognition of a new child, it neither recognises the new mother nor offers a response to the experience of birth and may even exacerbate the negative emotions that contribute to Postnatal depression.

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<sup>45</sup> Gordon Kuhrt, *Believing in Baptism* (Oxford: Mowbray, 1987).

<sup>46</sup> James F. White, *Introduction to Christian Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. 2000), 219.

<sup>47</sup> Natalie Watson suggests that in patriarchal societies it is actually men who experience childbirth as gift: for women it is work. See ‘Expecting or Being Open to Children’, in Angela Shier Jones (ed.), *Children of God* (Peterborough: Epworth, 2007), 10.

## Developing a New Liturgy

Liturgy needs to recover its function as the accompaniment of the major stages in the lives of the people in the community, both women and men. Childbirth and the transition to parenthood are among the most central of these. So, we need a suitable liturgy to replace churching. Thelma Aldcroft writes:

There are two specific considerations to be borne in mind:  
First, that there should be scope for expressing negative emotions,  
possibly anger, and second that the emphasis should be on the  
mother and her needs.<sup>48</sup>

Such a liturgy is pastorally important, it confirms the woman as a mother, and affirms who she is. It acknowledges childbirth as an important spiritual event and continues to value the mother as a person, while all other eyes are fixed on the baby.<sup>49</sup>

It needs to be a liturgy which can be used in the home, in a chapel, in a hospital, or more publicly before a service of baptism or thanksgiving. It should offer the woman, in a safe environment, a place to explore her experience of birth. It needs to make the woman feel supported and valued, as if she is surrounded by 'gossips'.<sup>50</sup> This liturgy should be pastorally important for all new mothers: of course it might offer support to those who have PND but, because it is often unrecognised, such a liturgy needs to be offered universally. With this in mind it should not contain images of motherhood that are outside the PND sufferer's experience and therefore excluding. It could even include fathers who are necessarily sidelined throughout the whole process of birth; there are images of the Holy Family which can be used, and if the liturgy recognised or left space to give thanks for the mothers of all those present it would be less excluding. It is, however, intrinsic that giving birth and the rituals that follow are woman-centred.

A pastorally aware liturgy will change attitudes to mothers: it will mean that women are not overlooked in the delight of meeting a new baby. The Church in its pastoral ministry could develop a system of other-mothers who help in the care of other children and support the mother so she feels less isolated.<sup>51</sup> The Church needs to have the confidence to acknowledge that while to give birth is to participate in God's creative love, it involves loss and anger.

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<sup>48</sup> Thelma Aldcroft, 'Childbirth, Liturgy and Ritual', 186.

<sup>49</sup> Childbirth is rarely acknowledged as a spiritual event, although addressed by Susan Sered in, 'Childbirth as a Religious Experience? Voices from an Israeli Hospital', in Darlene M. Juschka (ed.), *Feminism in the Study of Religion: A Reader* (London: Continuum, 2001), 239–40.

<sup>50</sup> 'The original word "gossip" did not mean malevolent talkers but God-siblings.' Warner, *Icons*, 6.

<sup>51</sup> A system that operates in my home parish of bringing good home cooked food to the family three or four times a week for a few weeks after the birth, can be operated on a rota and is simple, yet supportive.

In developing such a liturgy it is important to bear in mind the images and the myths which have been discussed in this essay. Such a rite needs to avoid images of motherhood that are sentimental or guilt inducing; to be careful about how it portrays Mary; to acknowledge the mother's new role in her community:

On the one hand they [birth rites] have to focus on the act of birth, and include prayers of thanksgiving for a safe delivery. On the other hand they have to focus on the woman's new role as a mother.<sup>52</sup>

For some, addressing God as mother will be untenable, others might find it affirming. It could be a way of using the imagery more positively. Psalm 116 has been used in the traditional churching service, and I think still has legitimacy. Readings could be used that refer to the mothers of the Bible, such as the story of Hagar, or perhaps the relationship between Ruth and Naomi, or the joy of Hannah at the birth of her son. Rev. 12.13-14 has traditionally been thought of as referring to Mary and could be used here as a positive image of God's protection of the new mother. The pastoral introduction to the service might read like this:

*We meet together to give thanks for [N] (and to mark her transition into motherhood). God has upheld her through the difficult, frightening and exhilarating time of pregnancy and birth. In giving birth, [N] has experienced the miracle of creation – we give thanks to God for his redeeming love revealed throughout all our lives and relationships.*

*Mothers have been important throughout the history of salvation. The Bible stories of women's lives reveal the sacrifice, pain and loss that motherhood entails, as well as the joy, love and fulfilment.*

*So [N] stands today with all those women of the Bible, our matriarchs, who, by giving birth, have entered into salvation:*

*With Eve, the first earthly mother, flawed and beautiful in whose image we stand;*

*With Sarah, laughing at God, matriarch of our faith;*

*With Hagar, cast out into the desert, alone, encompassed by God's care;*

*With Rachel, devoted patient wife of Jacob, who waited so long for her children, and was ripped apart by birth;*

*With Naomi, bereaved and bitter, sustained through the love of her new daughter, Ruth;*

*With Hannah, whose joy at the birth of her son was boundless, who offered back to God the gift of life;*

*With Elizabeth, who prepared the way for the one who prepared the way for Jesus;*

*With Mary, who said 'Yes' to God.*

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<sup>52</sup> Knödel, 'Reconsidering an Obsolete Rite', 121.

*With these mothers and with [N] we celebrate the joy of new life.*

We need to continue to search for new icons and images of positive, not perfect, mothers; to rediscover those Old Testament narratives and use them pastorally and liturgically; to rediscover Mary, thus freeing her from the images into which she has been constrained. Mary should be understood afresh as a woman of courage and strength reflecting God's motherliness.

The drawing of the Pieta by Roger Alderson is a fresh way of looking at this famous image. In it the image of God and of the mother blend together – it is difficult to tell who is comforting whom. It is an image of strength.

So, should we bring back churching? I don't think so. Its implications that sexual intercourse and subsequent childbirth are tainted remain too embedded. Instead, we need a developing awareness of the needs of women who bring their children to baptism: we need a pastoral liturgy which can mark the transition to motherhood; to restore Mary's humanity; to develop other positive, supportive images of mothers in our churches. This will provide a relevant, encouraging ministerial response not just to those mothers with Postnatal depression, but to all mothers.

[www.theologyandministry.org](http://www.theologyandministry.org)

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