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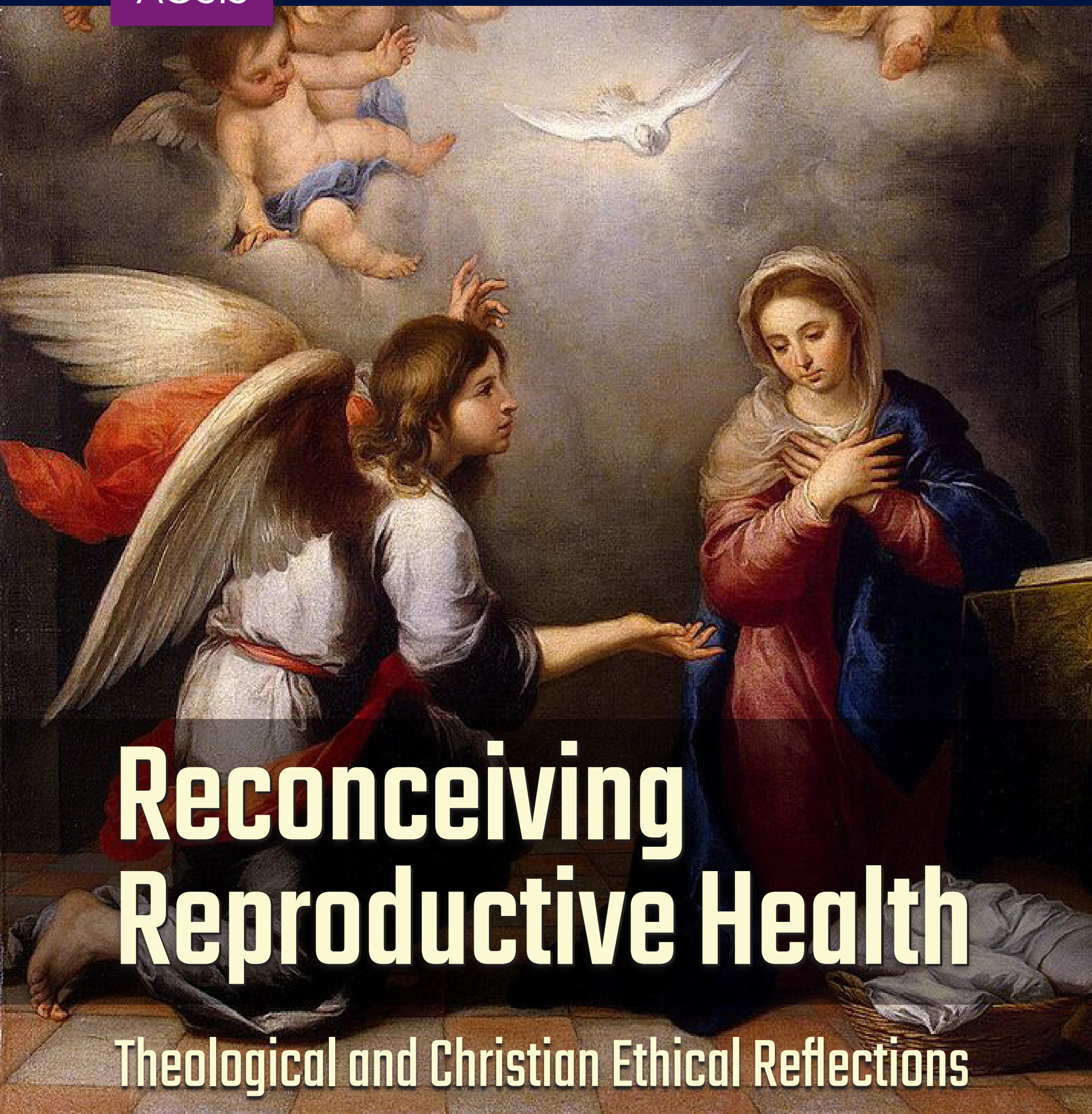

Reconceiving Reproductive Health

Theological and Christian Ethical Reflections

Edited by:

Manitza Kotzé, Nadia Marais & Nina Müller van Velden

Reformed Theology in Africa Series
Volume 1

Reconceiving Reproductive Health

Theological and Christian Ethical Reflections

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Manitza Kotzé, Nadia Marais &
Nina Müller van Velden

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Research Justification

While reproduction is fairly often touched upon in theological and Christian ethical discussions, reproductive health is not. However, reproductive health is a matter of theological and ethical concern. Discussion pertaining to reproductive health includes a number of debates about, for instance, abortion and the termination of pregnancy, reproductive loss, childlessness, infertility, stillbirth, miscarriage and adoption. Additionally, new reproductive possibilities made available by the development of reproductive technology have necessitated theological and ethical reflection on, for example, surrogacy, post-menopausal pregnancies, litter births, single mothers or fathers by choice, in vitro fertilisation and the so-called saviour siblings. These new developments compel us to reconceive our notions of what reproductive health is or should be. Many of these topics are receiving increasing attention in a variety of theological publications. The focus of this volume is unique, however, and to the best of our knowledge, this is the first volume dealing not only with reproductive issues, but also reflecting theologically and ethically on *reproductive health*. It makes a contribution by providing a variety of perspectives from different theological fields on this theme, and in many chapters, focussing especially on the South African context. These discussions are also part of urgent debates within churches, which require developing life-giving theological language and imaginative theological alternatives that may speak to experiences of matters relating to reproductive health. The popular books, TV series and films that touch upon these discussions – including *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Mother!* – strengthen the perception that a more in-depth theological and ethical discussion on the theme may be necessary, particularly towards exploring stories and confessions from our faith tradition that may provide us with a timely opportunity to do the important work of theological 'reconceiving'. The target audience includes academics, professionals and researchers. The methodology utilised by the chapters differ, but all take the form of a type of literature study. No empirical research was conducted and the research, therefore, does not pose any ethical risks. The chapters in this volume are all original research that has not been published elsewhere. It includes a diverse range of perspectives from several disciplines. This volume, we hope, will contribute to scholarly discussion and deeper theological and ethical reflection on reproductive health. It aims to offer a comprehensive view of the theme of reproductive health from theological and Christian ethical viewpoints. This is done by providing new and novel lines of inquiry, new topics for discussion and new insights into established research. At the same time, we are also aware that the theme of reproductive health is much broader than can be (re)conceived in one volume and hope that one of the contributions of this volume will be to spark and become part of a larger conversation and discourse.

Dr Manitza Kotzé, Unit for Reformed Theology and the Development of the South African Society, Faculty of Theology, North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa

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List of Abbreviations

ASRM	American Society of Reproductive Medicine
CCAP	Church of Central Africa Presbyterian
CHAM	Christian Health Association of Malawi
ECM	Episcopal Conference of Malawi
FAQ	Frequently Asked Questions
FBO	Faith-Based Organisations
GAD	Gender and Development
IBC	Internationational Bioethics Committee
ICPD	International Conference on Population and Development
IPCC	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
IVF	In Vitro Fertilisation
LGBTI	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intergender
LISAP	Livingstonia Synod AIDS Program
MCC	Malawi Council of Churches
MDG	Millenium Development Goals
MMR	Maternal Mortality Ratio
NGO	Non-Government Organisations
NRUN	Northern Region Uchembere Network
NT	New Testament
PGD	Pre-implantation Genetic Diagnosis
PHC	Primary Health Care
PTSD	Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
RSV	Revised Standard Version
SADC	South African Development Community
SPM	Summary for Policy Makers

SRHR	Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights
UDBHR	Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights
UDCD	Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UN	United Nations
UNCED	United Nations Conference on Environment and Development
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
US	United States
USA	United States of America
WCED	World Commission on Environment and Development
WHO	World Health Organisation
YASS	Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences

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Preface

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The editors would like to express their gratitude to the contributors for giving their time and energy, as well as to the peer reviewers who contributed to the high quality of the contributions in this volume. The editors sincerely appreciate all the hard work put in by the contributors!

The editors would also like to thank the staff of AOSIS, as well as Mrs Bertha Oberholzer at the *In die Skriflig/In Luce Verbi* office for her assistance, patience and continued communication.

We are truly grateful for the administrative assistance provided by Mrs Marita Snyman, Programme Coordinator at the Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology at Stellenbosch University. Marita was a huge help in communication with authors, circulation of feedback and ticking off boxes; the editors really appreciate her help.

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Theology at Stellenbosch University. The Gender Unit created a space and network for hosting a consultation on reproductive health in 2018, as well as a conference on the theme in 2019.

The editors also gratefully acknowledge the financial assistance from Prof. Koos Vorster and the editorial board of *Reformed Theology in Africa Series* for making the publication of this volume possible.

Chapter 1

Reconceiving reproductive health: An introduction

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Introduction

Reproductive health matters and the aspect of reproduction is touched upon fairly often in theological and Christian ethical discussions, whereas reproductive health is not. Discussion

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pertaining to reproductive health includes a number of debates about, for instance, abortion and the termination of pregnancy, reproductive loss, childlessness, infertility, stillbirth, miscarriage and adoption. In addition, new reproductive possibilities made available by the development of reproductive technology has necessitated theological and ethical reflection on, for example, surrogacy, post-menopausal pregnancies, litter births, single mothers or fathers by choice, In Vitro Fertilisation (IVF) and the so-called saviour siblings. These new developments compel us to reconceive our notions of what 'reproductive' is or should be – particularly within our theological discourses. This volume was born from this concern that reproductive health is a theological and ethical concern that requires academic consideration.

Many of these topics are receiving increasing attention in a variety of theological publications, among which are *African Women, Religion & Health* (festschrift in honour of Mercy Amba Oduyoye [Phiri & Nadar 2006]), *Trauma & Grace* (Jones 2009), *Reconceiving Infertility* (Moss & Baden 2015) and *Adopted* (Nikondeha 2017). This volume has such recent titles in mind, although to the best of our knowledge, this is the first volume dealing not only with reproductive issues but also reflecting theologically and ethically on *reproductive health*.

These discussions are also part of urgent debates within churches, which require the development of life-giving theological language and imaginative theological alternatives that may speak to experiences of matters relating to reproductive health. The popular books, TV series and films that touch upon these discussions – including *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Mother!* – strengthen the perception that a more in-depth theological and ethical discussion on the theme may be necessary, particularly towards exploring stories and confessions from our faith tradition that may provide us with a timely opportunity to do the important work of theological 'reconceiving'.

This volume is divided into three sections, drawing on different theological disciplines. Scholars within the fields of Systematic

Theology, Biblical Studies and Ethics have contributed their reflections on the theme of reproductive health. In the first section of this volume, a number of contributions from Systematic Theology consider the notion of reproductive health.

In *'Bearing fruit'? Doing theology from God's womb*, Nadia Marais argues that theological womb language may help us – in the church – to speak theologically about reproductive health and reproductive loss. She traces the theological metaphor of 'God's Womb' throughout feminist and eco-feminist theologies, and across three doctrines, namely, creation, salvation and (eschatological) consummation. She then argues that key Christological themes of our confessions of faith – such as the incarnation (in the section on creation), the crucifixion (in the section on salvation) and resurrection (in the section on eschatology) – could and should shape theology done from God's Womb. The chapter concludes by illustrating how such a Trinitarian Theology, done from God's Womb, is deeply embedded in the theological rhetoric of human and ecological flourishing.

The womb is reflected on further in the following chapter, *Reproductive health, deconstructed: A nonbinary understanding of the womb*, where Tanya van Wyk notes that despite a substantial contemporary movement towards deconstructing binary thinking with regard to traditional ideas about gender identity and 'roles' of men and women, an emphasis on the role and function of women as mothers (or nurturers) persist. Women continue to face questions about their ability to juggle their career and family life, and women who *do not* have children face scrutiny about their choices in different communities and settings. Women's identities and spaces are, therefore, closely related to their 'use' of their wombs. This happens amidst growing concerns about the sustainability of the health of the ecosystem and the availability of natural resources. This chapter focusses on deconstructing reproductive *health* by highlighting existing gender dichotomies and binaries at the intersection of a woman's right to choose and the well-being of the environment. She concludes with a few ethical considerations.

In *Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel's theology of tenderness: Implications for reconceiving reproductive health,* Fralene van Zyl notes Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel's argument that we have lost sight of the character of God's embodied self and her subsequent proposal of a theology of tenderness. Moltmann-Wendel follows an extensive feminist theological agenda exploring new ways of imagining the narratives of the women around Jesus, focussing on the body as a whole, ecologically sensitive theological anthropology and also showing the liberating possibilities in the friendships women have. Her approach can be described as life-embracing, in that she includes bodies, friendship and tenderness as important issues for feminist theologians and the Christian faith. The bodiliness of God cannot be an inconvenient or an uncomfortable truth for Christian theology because we encounter Jesus's humanity and tenderness. He sleeps, he feels, he touches other people's bodies, he spits, embraces and kisses. Jesus fed, healed, soothed and cared for persons and their bodies, which suggests that the salvation we received is not only for our souls but for our bodies as well. Can this way of thinking about salvation be applied in the discussion surrounding reproductive health? How we are to do theology, a theology of tenderness, in a society withdrawing and yet longing for human contact and connection is the focus of this contribution. How can an embodied God shape our theology? In this chapter, it is suggested that the theological work of Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, especially the concept of tenderness, may hold reconceiving possibilities for the dilemmas and discussions the Christian community encounter when thinking and talking about reproductive health.

Hanzline R. Davids, in *Intersecting reproductive health: Theological and ethical reflections?*, argues that vulnerable bodies often have the least decision-making power in these discussions. In the sacred text of the Christian faith, the Bible, the poor, the widowed, the orphaned and the stranger embody the people that hold the least decision-making power in religion and society. They are social outcasts by religious and societal

standards. Today, vulnerable people who experience abortion, reproductive loss, childlessness, infertility, stillbirth, miscarriage, surrogacy and reassignment surgery are still cast out by religious and societal standards irrespective of language, class, race, culture, sex or gender. Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights (SRHR) discourses have repositioned governments to legislate laws that protect health through rights. The church, especially on the African continent, is in a strategic position to reconceive SRHR. This chapter offers a theological–ethical angle to reconceive ethics towards a justice framework in order to have a dialogue on SRHR.

In *Mothering as sacred duty and metaphor: The theology of Mercy Oduyoye*, Manitza Kotzé discusses the theology of Mercy Amba Oduyoye, who is often called the mother of African women's theologies. Oduyoye, who did not have biological children herself, makes a distinction between the concepts of 'motherhood' and 'mothering'. Motherhood, the biological action of bearing and raising children, is seen as a blessing. On the other hand, 'mothering' involves the enrichment of life and the nurturing of humanity. Reflecting on mothering rather than motherhood as a sacred duty, as well as engaging with Oduyoye's use of mothering as a metaphor, this chapter brings Oduyoye in conversation with the doctrine of creation in order to posit a doctrine of creation that is concerned with reproductive health and human flourishing, and can make a contribution in dealing with reproductive loss.

Theological reflection on this notion of mothering as creative work can also be said to closely image the creative work of God, and as the concept of mothering is broader than the biological, so the biblical creation stories are equally more than material. God speaks creation into being. Conversations around reproductive health often take the creation narratives as their point of departure and/or appeal to other parts of Scripture. In the second section of this volume, a number of biblical reflections on the topic of reproductive health are provided.

Gideon R. Kotzé, in *Reproduction and the responsibility of royal representation: A reading of Genesis 1:26–28*, offers one possible interpretation of Genesis 1:26–28, noting that 'modern critics of the Jewish-Christian tradition' see in the divine commands given to humans in this verse to 'be fruitful', 'multiply' and 'subdue' the earth, the intellectual foundations for the ecological crisis – unlimited reproduction, overpopulation of the earth and the subjugation of nature. He presents critical interpretations of ancient artefacts, which endeavour to make sense of the traditions they preserve in light of the thought-worlds of the cultures that produced and transmitted these artefacts. He suggests that the ideas about humans' responsibility for the continued inhabitability of the created environments and the flourishing of all their occupants come to the fore in the theological reflection on these artefacts. This chapter proposes that unchecked growth in the human population under the guise of the divine command to 'be fruitful and multiply' is not in keeping with the ideas preserved by Genesis 1:1–2:4a, because overpopulation does not enhance the liveability of environments, but rather diminishes it.

Jeremy Punt discusses *Pauline uterine discourse in context* and notes that womb and related notions are important discourse markers in the Pauline letters, especially when these letters are compared to the rest of the New Testament (NT). The apostle's preference for celibacy notwithstanding, the reproductive womb impacts Pauline discourse in significant ways, not the least in his self-reference as ἔκτρωμα. Pauline womb discourse informs both maternal and paternal roles, some of which Paul assumed for himself, while the unproductive and misbehaving wombs impact discursive-theologically on salvation history. Not unlike other ancient male authors, control over the womb, also at the literary level, was of paramount importance for Paul.

In *An attempt to liberate the womb from divine overburdening – In conversation with Mary and Elizabeth (Luke 1:5–45)*, Peter Nagel notes that there is consensus among believers that the God of the biblical text is the one responsible for the gift of life.

This idea is aptly illustrated in Psalm 139:13, where it is stated that the Hebrew deity knits one together in the womb. Luke takes the process a step further by involving the Hebrew deity in the conception phase, filling the foetus and fertilising a human egg with divine sperm. It is, therefore, not uncommon to hear that the birth of a child is a 'gift from God', a 'blessing from God'. The intention of his chapter is not to ridicule, disrespect or ignore these deeply entrenched ideas. The aim is rather to liberate the womb and, in so doing, the act of conception from divine overburdening by problematising the notion of 'divine conception' and the implications it has for the one carrying the fertilised egg. He does this by offering a critical theological reading of Luke 1:5–45 while conversing with and listening to both Mary and Elizabeth.

Within each of the chapters dealing with biblical reflections, it becomes clear that how we read, interpret and understand biblical accounts has direct implications for the ethical guidelines we would deem important. In the third and last section of this volume, ethical reflections come to the fore, where the ethical issues raised in the reconceiving of reproductive health are addressed and engaged with.

Tayla Minnaar asks the question *Whose womb is it anyway?* She investigates the possibilities offered by biomedical progress and artificial wombs and how this challenges our understanding of motherhood, reproduction and fertility. This development, she argues, could either liberate the maternal body of a woman from reproductive responsibilities or it could lead to a more powerless social and political status for women. Both the contributions and concerns of an artificial womb for reproductive life are discussed. The chapter notes that although women have different opinions on their bodies and the possibility of an artificial womb, the tone of these discussions has a moral ring, and women's voices, opinions and views on the artificial womb needs to be part of the conversation and be respected in discussions pertaining to their bodies.

In *Revisiting traditional male initiation in South Africa: A global bioethical perspective on reproductive health and*

culture practices, Riaan Rheeder reflects on traditional initiation and circumcision in South Africa in conversation with the South African Bill of Human Rights and the Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights. In the chapter, this United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Declaration is engaged with, dealing with the only article that carries a restriction, noting that 'human dignity, human rights and fundamental freedoms are prioritised [above respect for] cultural diversity' and pluralism (Rheeder 2017:4). He provides a strong universal bioethical grounding for the point of departure that universal values have more weight than the cultural practice of human initiation and circumcision and argues that respecting cultural practices means that cultural initiation and circumcision should not be prohibited, but rather adapted. This adaptation should occur in such a way that the participants are not wounded and that cultural initiation has no dire implications for the reproductive health of the young men involved, but also in such a manner that the essence of the cultural practice is not altered.

Mwazi Chilongozi and Nadine Bowers du Toit offer *Reflections on the Malawian church's role in maternal health* and remark that maternal health is both a global public health issue and a gender, development, theological and human rights issue. Women (mostly those from the Global South), who often die during pregnancy or childbirth of preventable and treatable complications, are most affected. They investigate the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP) Synod of Livingstonia as a denomination assisting on issues of maternal health, and they argue that the church 'should continue teaching against harmful cultural practices and traditions that deny women and girls their rights and dignity' in order to 'bring more awareness on issues of maternal health and ways that could assist to reduce maternal mortality' (Chilongozi 2017:124). This chapter makes the case that maternal mortality in Malawi can be reduced by collaboration with the churches, Faith-Based Organisations (FBO), Non-Government Organisations (NGO) and the government (Chilongozi 2017:124).

In *A long walk to reproductive freedom: Reconceiving theologies of abortion in South Africa*, Selina Palm notes that South Africa has some of the most progressive abortion laws in the world, signed in 1996 by President Mandela. Nevertheless, over 20 years later, unsafe abortions still kill or damage the bodies of many young women. Religiously fuelled abortion stigma plays a significant role here, leading to standoffs between religious and secular players. Refusal to provide abortion services, often framed as 'conscientious objection' and backed by selected theological claims, shapes the experiences encountered by many women at abortion counselling services, pregnancy crisis centres and hospitals. Fear of this stigma also shapes decisions by emerging medical students, creating a significant gap between legal vision and practical access. Afro-American Christian doctor Willie Parker has made a recent call for a new theology of abortion situated within the intersectional framework of reproductive justice. In this chapter, she explores this call and draws lessons from the 1980s work of feminist-liberational theologian, Beverly Wildung Harrison. She suggests contours for an alternative theological–ethical trajectory around abortion that can nurture new possibilities within current South African abortion debates – especially if reproductive justice is to become a reality for all women.

In *Whose reproductive health matters? A Christian ethical reflection on reproductive technology and exclusion*, Manitza Kotzé remarks that biotechnological and biomedical advances have made even more choices available when it comes to reproductive health. She asks the question, whose reproductive health matters, looking at issues such as access to reproductive technology in South Africa, including aspects of availability and affordability. The phenomenon also investigated concerns those that are excluded, especially women, as they often become part of the system, not as beneficiaries, but as those exploited by the processes of reproductive technology. The egg donation industry is examined as an example in this regard and, based on this reality, tentative comments are made of what could possibly be expected

in the future in terms of the exclusion and exploitation of people in terms of reproductive health.

The chapters in this volume are all original research and have not been published elsewhere. It includes a diverse range of perspectives from several disciplines and a variety of academic perspectives – including a substantial number of women's voices – on this important theme. This volume, we hope, will contribute to scholarly discussion and deeper theological and ethical reflection on reproductive health. It aims to offer a comprehensive view of the theme of reproductive health from theological and Christian ethical viewpoints. This is done by providing new and novel lines of inquiry, new topics for discussion and new insights into established research. At the same time, we are also aware that the theme of reproductive health is much broader than can be (re)conceived in one volume and hope that this volume may play some small part in the larger conversation on reproductive health matters.

Part One

Systematic theological reflections

Chapter 2

'Bearing fruit'? Doing theology from God's Womb

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Introduction[1]

'[D]e patris utero … filius genitus vel natus.'

(Council of Toledo, 675)[2]

1. Paper presented at the Reproductive Health Consultation hosted by the Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University, South Africa (30–31 May 2018), with the theme 'Reconceiving Reproductive Health'.

2. In Latin, the full sentence reads as follows: *Nec enim de nihilo neque de aliqua alia substantia, sed de Patris utero, id est, de substantia eius, idem Filius genitus vel natus esse credendus est* (Moltmann 1992:186 n. 4). It is worth noting that this description – of Jesus Christ from God's Womb – includes no less than three Latin words that affirm this metaphorical scope: God's Son [*filius*], begotten [*genitus*] or born [*natus*].

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Any theological reflection on reproductive health – including the stuff of deeply divisive church debates, such as the debates on abortion, infertility, miscarriage, stillbirth, adoption and sexuality – requires a theological grammar that is rooted in a living faith tradition and the lived experiences of believers, particularly women, today. Such a rhetoric can and should shape how we speak (and do not speak) about reproductive health in churches.[3]

It is well worth noting, perhaps even remarkable, that womb language – and even more specifically, theological talk of God’s Womb – is neither absent nor only recently included in Christian grammars of faith. A small example of such rhetoric can be found already in the seventh century’s Council of Toledo, in a section of theological commentary on the Nicene Creed’s Christology, cited above. Herein it is affirmed that Christ is begotten or born ‘from the Father’s womb’ [*utero*].[4] We should find the rhetorical insistence on reproductive language in such faith confessions curious, if not worthy of further theological consideration, and perhaps see herein a small but unmistakable indication that the Christian tradition may very well have more

3. An example of theologians who work with such a theological rhetoric for and in the church is the recently published book by Lutheran theologian Nadia Bolz-Weber, entitled *Shameless: A Sexual Reformation* (2019).

4. ‘If the Son has come forth from the Father alone, then this process must be imagined both as “begetting” and as “birth”. But that fundamentally changes the image of father: a Father who both begets and gives birth to his Son is not just a “male” Father. He is a motherly Father. He cannot be understood to have a single sex, masculine, but must be understood to be bisexual or transsexual. He is the fatherly Father of his only begotten Son and he is at the same time the motherly Father of his only born Son. It was the orthodox dogmatic tradition which made its boldest statements at this point. According to the Council of Toledo in 675, “We must believe that the Son was not made out of nothing, nor out of some substance or other, but from the womb of the Father, that is, he was begotten or born from the Father’s own being”’ (Moltmann 1992:22).

to offer in shaping the contours of our theological thinking about reproductive health.[5]

In this chapter, I do not revisit the many theological arguments for and against the image of God as Mother,[6] nor do I intend to work out any ethical positions on specific matters. I am more interested in the faith grammar, the grammar patterns and theological rhetoric, in which feminist and ecofeminist theologians employ the image of God's Womb. What does God's Womb signify, theologically? How does the theological language regarding God's Womb function, rhetorically? What are some of the theological contours for such God-talk?

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5. Jürgen Moltmann interprets this reference to God's Womb, in the proceedings of the 11th meeting of the Council of Toledo, as rhetorically connected to God's grace or mercy; as he points out, the Hebrew words for 'womb' and 'grace' rely upon the same cognates. Indeed, '[t]he basis for this image of the motherly father presumably lies in Old Testament traditions of the mercy of God. *Rchm*de notes both the womb (*rechem*) from which life is born and that passionately painful feeling of mercy (*rachamim*) located in the feminine body, which is capable of giving birth. In extended parallels, the reference is to the gut, the entrails, which can become cramped in pain. Having mercy is characterised as a motherly feeling, but what is meant is not soft-heartedness or any feeling of bliss, but that creative love which is like the pangs of birth. So having mercy means more than just being compassionate and being affected by the suffering of others. Having mercy also goes beyond solidarity. Having mercy denotes the pain of bringing the dead to life, of liberating the prisoners and loosing those who are bound. The translation of *rachamim* into the Latin *misericordia* shifts the focal point to the heart as the human centre. The misery of others goes to a person's heart, and the heart burns in participatory and burning love. The elements of strong involvement are kept, but the lifegiving power of mercy is lost. If according to the statement of this ancient council the Son comes forth from the Father's womb [...] then he is the child of the eternal mercy of the Father, and the Fatherhood of God is none other than this life-giving mercy.' (Moltmann 1992:22–23; see also Johnson 1996:100)

6. See, for example, the two books of Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (1993a) and *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (1993b); Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (1993); Dolores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (1993); Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (1993); Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (1996); Mercy A. Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy* (1995); Mary Grey, *Introducing Feminist Images of God* (2001); Susan Rakoczy, *In Her Name: Women Doing Theology* (2004); and L. Juliana M. Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife: Reimagining God's Delivering Presence in the Old Testament* (2012), among many others.

'Life begotten'? Creation from God's Womb

According to Johnson (1996):

> Quite literally, every human person yet born has lived and moved and had their being inside a woman, for the better part of the year it took them to be knit together [...] To see the world dwelling in God is to play variations on the theme of women's bodiliness and experience of pregnancy, labor and giving birth. (p. 234)

Life originates from God, whom we confess to be the living God and the God of Life. Womb language is often employed to describe life – the birth or begetting or beginning of life and living beings – in recent attempts to reimagine the doctrine of creation. Sallie McFague (1987:206 n. 22) notes that '[t]he Hebraic-Christian tradition [...] [carries] imagery of gestation, giving birth, and lactation as a leitmotif'. Womb language is invoked in the work of ecological theologians who argue for a panentheist approach to the doctrine of creation, which portrays the relationship between God and creation as God-in-creation and creation-in-God (or creation as the body of God) (Conradie 2009:233, 242; see also Moltmann 1993). The South African ecotheologian Ernst Conradie (2009:233–244) explores panentheist portrayals of creation as 'the earth in God's Womb'. God therein becomes 'the living space of the world' – a metaphor that implies a motherly relationship between God and creation – as the 'divine womb' in which the earth and all living beings are sustained (Conradie 2009:236). The womb becomes the space of creation, in that 'the original experience of space is the experience of the foetus in the uterus [...] [for w]e grown nine months long "in" the mother' (Conradie 2009:236).[7]

7. Jürgen Moltmann (2004:300–301) elaborates on this experience of being in the womb of the mother by employing the German concept *Geborgenheit*, which he describes as 'safekeeping in the mother's womb'. In short, Moltmann argues (2004:300–301) that this signifies that '[w]e are at once inhabitants and inhabited' for just as 'Christ is for us and gave himself for us, we [too] are in Christ'.

God's Womb is, moreover, the source and well-spring of 'the space to be', argues Colin Gunton (1991:56), for 'the world's otherness from God is part of its space to be itself, to be finite and not divine'). The space to be the other is a crucial constitutive characteristic to the act of embrace, argues Miroslav Volf (1996:144–145), for in reconciliation – as in creation – the otherness of the other must remain intact and cannot be obliterated or neutralised if all-that-is-not-God is to flourish. The space in God's Womb – for the other to be other – is, therefore, an important part of the relationship between the Triune God and all-that-is-not-God (Kelsey 2009:161). This requires affirming that '[t]he earth is not simply an extension of God' but comes from the depths of God's work and life, and therefore 'remains distinct from God' (Conradie 2009:238–239).[8]

It is not only creation that occupies space 'in' God's Womb. Feminist theologians have also argued that the notion of the womb as space has implications for Christology, in that in the incarnation it is a human womb that makes space for God in creation. Mary's womb holds Christ, and therein becomes the 'space within our space for the gestating Son of God' (Holness 2009; see also Holness 2008; Jenson, 2004). The South African feminist theologian Lyn Holness (2009:20) argues that womb language involves not only Christ's person but also Christ's work (and the cross, specifically). As such, womb language encompasses the entire scope of doctrinal loci – from the birth of Christ to the death of Christ – and is, therefore, central to the person and work of Christ.

8. A longer quotation may illustrate this point better: 'Creatures do not have dignity and integrity only because they are extensions of the divine being or because the divine being is present in them. Creation has a worth in and of itself [...] there has to remain distance between the lover and the beloved if the one is not to be subsumed sadistically or masochistically under the other. Distance is required to make room for the other. God has to stand back, as it were, to allow the creature to be itself.' (Conradie 2009:238–239)

Mary signifies that doing theology from God’s Womb cannot be limited to the doctrine of creation, but has implications for the whole work of the Trinitarian God – and, therefore, for the scope of the entire economy of salvation. Life begotten traces its genesis, its origin, to God’s Womb – the fountain of life, from where created life flows forth. Theologians develop the metaphor of creation in God’s Womb in different directions – with creation being born from God’s Womb, maturing as God’s child who continues to rely upon God’s mothering care[9]; to creation remaining in God’s Womb, sustained and nourished within the depths of God.[10] However, the metaphor of God’s Womb is extended, and whether or not it includes birth from the womb, the question to which a doctrine of creation needs to respond is the ‘whence’ of all life. As Elizabeth Johnson notes (1996), this requires asking ‘from whose womb?’, for:

> [*A*]ll creatures are siblings from the same womb, the brood of the one Mother of the universe [...] In her, as once literally in our own mother, we live and move and have our being. (p. 79)

‘Delivering grace’? Salvation by God’s Womb

Should our ‘doing theology from God’s Womb’ stop here? Does God’s Womb only have theological significance for the doctrine

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9. Ernst Conradie (2009:242–244) recognises the strengths of this particular metaphorical extension of creation in God’s Womb and argues that creation’s birth from God – and the image of creation as God’s child – has several rhetorical and theological implications that may be helpful to ecological theology. The origin of creation remains *in* God’s Womb – ‘the primordial, free, hidden depths of absolute divine mystery’ (Johnson 1996:179) – but creation also undergoes birth *from* God’s Womb and becomes that which God the Mother continues to relate to within a process of growth and maturation.

10. Elizabeth Johnson’s (1996:179) portrayal of creation *in* God’s Womb is arguably less insistent that creation is born *from* God’s Womb, and upholds the image of God’s ‘mothering of the universe’. This involves ‘primordial upwelling of the power of being and divine acts of giving life, sustaining it, and encouraging it to grow’ (Johnson 1996:179). Creation remains in God’s Womb, but this does not imply a lack of growth or maturation; quite the contrary: as ‘the mother of the universe’, God’s Womb is ‘the unoriginate, living source of all that exists’ and thereby the host of ‘unimaginable livingness [that] generates the life of all creatures [...] in the beginning and continuously’ (Johnson 1996:179).

of creation? Some theologians who draw upon the image of God's Womb do, indeed, limit the scope of the rhetorical potential of this image to our portrayals of creation.[11] The image of God's Womb does, however, lend itself to the care for 'the well-being of the world', a concern for '[d]elivering every creature into the integrity of their own existence' (Johnson 1996:179). If creation continues to be hosted by God's Womb, and is, therefore, also sustained and safeguarded by God's Womb, a theology from God's Womb is incomplete without an accompanying soteriology that can articulate God's ongoing care for created life. God's Womb therein becomes the host and fountain not only of life but also of flourishing (Johnson 1996):

> God the Mother rejoices in the world's flourishing, has compassion on its weakness, and pours forth her powerful love to resist what damages and destroys. (p. 179)

The task of mothering is, therefore, a work of 'mothering salvation'.[12] Herein 'mothering' becomes an expression of 'care' – which is the affirmation of 'the full humanity of all' (Oduyoye 2002c:59, 72). The mother of African women's theology, Mercy Oduyoye, distinguishes in this regard between '"motherhood" (which she regards as the biological act of procreating and raising children) and "mothering" (which she regards as the act of caring for human beings)' (Marais 2015b:192; Oduyoye 2002b:57–58). Motherhood may include mothering, 'but mothering does not necessarily presuppose motherhood' (Marais 2015b:192). For Oduyoye (1999) – who is herself childless – the task of mothering is not limited to 'individual persons who happen to become mothers, but [includes] the sacred duty [to] nurture and care for

11. Ernst Conradie (2009:242–243), for example, recognises that there is a limit to what metaphors can and should do, and argues that no metaphor – also not the metaphor of God's Womb – can extend beyond the boundaries of its own imaging.

12. This was part of a conference with the theme 'Mothering Community & Care, Mother Salvation? (1 Tim 2:15) Gender and Class in early Christian Household Discourse'. The conference was a joint conference on gender and sexuality, hosted by the University of Johannesburg, and took place from 26 to 28 October 2016. A selection of the conference proceedings was published in the journal *Neotestamentica,* Volume 50, Issue 1 (2016).

the full humanity of all' (Marais 2015b:192; Oduyoye 2002b:57, 62). Mothering embodies 'a style of life that puts others first [and thereby] saves others' but also involves 'refusing to stand by while others are being hurt, exploited, cheated, or left to die' (Oduyoye 2002b:24). The womb, in particular, becomes the site of care in Mercy Oduyoye's metaphor of mothering, for it is God's Womb that 'becomes agitated at the sight of suffering and injustice' (Marais 2015b; Oduyoye 2002b:50).

It is worth exploring the notion of God's agitated womb more carefully. This 'agitated womb' gives birth to new life, argues Oduyoye (2002b:58), and therein expresses a deep concern for the flourishing, well-being and health of all human beings. She calls this '*abadae,* or "womb compassion", which is the source of being for her as an African woman' (Marais 2015b:193; Oduyoye 2002b:175). It is this agitated womb that makes it impossible for African women, as 'life carriers', to 'sit by and watch that life demeaned, oppressed, or marginalized', she argues (Oduyoye 2002a; see pp. 175 & 184 in particular). In caring and being caregivers, and in showing particular 'care and compassion for the weak and excluded', we opt for 'the side of Christ' – as it is here where Christ is also found, argues Oduyoye (2002c; see p. 165 in particular). God's Womb comes to fruition in Christ's womblike agitation, compassion and care for human beings, which culminates in Christ's death on the cross (Holness 2009:20).

God's Womb is, therefore, not only the site of God's care but also the genesis of grace. For the reformed feminist theologian Serene Jones (2001), the death of Christ, the death of God's child in God's Womb, provides us with a key theological image to speak about reproductive health and reproductive loss. The doctrine of salvation reminds us that 'God refuses to turn from us, even in the most brutal grip of tortured death and divine abandonment' (Jones 2001:241). God does not abandon us, but 'instead takes death into Godself' (Jones 2001:241). As she points out (Jones 2001):

> [/]n contemporary as well as classical discussions of the Trinity, theologians have been hard-pressed to give an account of what happens in the Godhead when Christ, a part of this Godhead, dies.

> What transpires in the Godhead when one of its members bleeds away? Theologians like Moltmann and Luther have urged us to affirm that on the cross, God takes this death into the depths of Godself. The Trinity thus holds it.[13] (p. 242)

Serene Jones (2001) invites us to consider the significance of this image – the image of a woman who 'has death inside her and yet does not die' – as an image for the Trinity:

> [*T*]his is a death that happens deep within God, not outside of God but in the very heart – perhaps the womb – of God. It is a death that consumes God, that God holds, making a grace of the Trinity. And yet [...] [*like women who have experienced reproductive loss*], this death-bearing grave of a God paradoxically does not die but lives. And She lives to love yet again and to offer the world the gift of the future. (p. 242)

This portrayal of death and loss in God's Womb offers an account of salvation by God's Womb and 'resting in the Womb of God'.[14] Serene Jones (2001:242) argues that this should not, however, stop the sorrow of women who experience reproductive loss or encourage a redemptive view of suffering. It is an image that holds within itself pastoral potential, and that speaks the grammar of grace, in that it is intended to remind us of the Trinity that enfolds us with God's grace, exactly because this image – of Christ's death as death in God's Womb – is 'not an image of mothering, but an image of maternal loss' (Jones 2001:243). This loss interrupts the logic of 'the ever-producing maternal ground' – so popular in the work of feminist theologians who opt for 'the image of the woman-with-child as an analogy for perichoretic indwelling' – with 'the always gifted economy of grace' (Jones 2001:243). It is Christ's death in God's Womb that 'most effectively captures the nature of God's redeeming grace' (Jones 2001:243).

13. Jones further notes that '[t]his particular issue (and its thematic implications) runs through Jürgen Moltmann's *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and the Criticism of Christian Theology* (San Francisco, California: Harper & Row, 1973)' (Jones 2001:245 n. 26).

14. See the chapter with this title in Curtiss Paul DeYoung's book on *Reconciliation: Our Greatest Challenge – Our Only Hope* (1997:113–132).

'Born again'? Consummation in God's Womb

Perhaps, *this* is the point where our 'doing theology from God's Womb' should stop? Can it be that God's Womb may also have theological significance for the doctrine of last things, eschatology? If there are fewer theologians who invoke God's Womb in soteriology – in comparison to theologies of creation – there are arguably even fewer theologians who have explored the significance of God's Womb for eschatology. Again, however, there are theologians who draw upon womb language for theological portrayals of the eschaton,[15] 'the point of homecoming at the end of the journey' (Johnson 1996:181). God's Womb is not only the source of the universe but also its goal – argues Elizabeth Johnson (1996:181).

Eschatological consummation in God's Womb can be portrayed as God's coming towards the world (Moltmann 2004:23) to receive creation '[w]hen human energy collapses' – as it is this same God who 'has the last word as she had the first' (Johnson 1996:181). This word is, as it was in the beginning and also at the end, 'the word of life' (Johnson 1996:181). This is an outpouring of life that resurrects the dead; but it is also a receiving of life back into God's Womb, for '[t]he beloved offspring return whence they came, mothered into life'

15. In a chapter with the title 'Barrenness and the Eschaton', Candida Moss and Joel Baden explore the theological interpretations – in the New Testament and Early Church Fathers – that surrounded resurrected bodies, barrenness and reproductivity in the eschaton. Moss and Baden (2015:200–228) argue that in the eschaton, barrenness becomes 'the new normal', 'the heavenly ideal' [...] However, for any theological discussion on infertility, childlessness and procreation, it is worthwhile reading the entire book – which is entitled *Reconceiving Infertility: Biblical Perspectives on Procreation & Childlessness* (2015). See also the article 'Blessed are the barren: The kingdom of God springs forth' by Sarah Hinlicky Wilson (2007).

(Johnson 1996:181). In short, God's Womb holds or carries life into the future and draws future life – and death – into Godself.[16]

This future life cannot, however, be (only) portrayed as unjudged life. Sallie McFague (1987:113) argues that judgement forms an important locus of theological thinking about God's Womb. The Triune God's mothering care comes to fruition not only in creation and salvation but also in eschatological consummation. This includes both 'the active defense of the young so that they may not only exist but be nourished and grow' as well as the fierce resistance against '[w]hatever thwarts such fulfillment' (McFague 1987:113).[17] God as Mother is, therefore, not only portrayed as creative and saving but also as deeply concerned about and involved in the fate of living beings – even to the point of anger, when 'what comes from her being and belongs to her lacks the food and other necessities to grow and flourish' (McFague 1987:113; see also Johnson 1996:181). It is exactly because creation and salvation are taken seriously that sin – that which 'thwarts the fullfillment of life' – cannot be left unaddressed, argues McFague (1987:113; see also Johnson 1996:181).

16. There was also a question regarding the role of the Holy Spirit when speaking of the Triune God's Womb – as it pertains here, where eschatology is discussed, but also elsewhere in this chapter (and throughout the creating, saving and consummating work of the Triune God). I thank Rian Venter for pointing out the absence of a pneumatology in the scope of this chapter's argument. It is an interesting and important suggestion, which I have not considered here (mostly because I had not intended to work out a trinitarian theology of God's Womb, but rather attempted to gather some theological fragments together wherein the metaphor of God's Womb had featured). It is beyond the scope of this chapter to address this question as it deserves to be addressed, but I have since wondered whether the metaphor of the spirit as Midwife – and the work of the Holy Spirit as midwifery – may not present us with interesting possibilities for working out theological grammar in this key. It is not a suggestion that I have taken up in this chapter, and it (not only my suggestion but, more importantly, the point of critique raised above) may require further theological consideration.

17. Although this model 'is not built on the extremes of maternal instinct', McFague (1987:118) also qualifies her point by rejecting other extreme interpretations of God as Mother – such as the 'stereotypes of maternal tenderness, softness, pity, and sentimentality'.

The fulfilment of life meets its horizon of meaning in the church’s claim that Christ is risen. The South African feminist theologian Sue Rakoczy (2004:433–434) writes that in God’s living presence in the risen Christ ‘all things are held together’, including the possibility of the fullness of life and a future of flourishing life. This requires affirming that God does not withdraw from God’s good work of creation, but remains present – continually gives the gift of God’s presence, so to speak – by ‘the nourishing, nurturing, protecting love of the mother for the child’ (Conradie 2009:238). The source of this comfort stems from the Triune God’s promises to remain ‘with us’ – promises that are carried into and held within the Triune God’s enduring covenant relationship with living beings.[18] The recognition of a sustained mutual indwelling and reciprocity may also be described as ‘friendship’: a friendship consummated in God’s Womb that restores, repairs and reconciles broken relationships with God and among living beings (Conradie 2009:240, 242–243).

Yet, a lingering theological dilemma is the close association of God’s Womb with life, particularly if life should come to signify life-without-death. If a theology from God’s Womb cannot accommodate death, it has no significance for our lives and no place among theologies that seek the flourishing of all. Serene Jones (2001:227) argues, however, that God as Mother – and particularly, God’s Womb – does not only have the theological depth to ‘hold us’ in the moment of reproductive loss (such as infertility, miscarriage and stillbirth) but that it also can ‘bind us with our sisters in this time of loss and grief’. A particular strength of her theological engagement with reproductive loss is her recognition that death in the womb is

18. ‘The metaphor of the world existing in God’s womb suggests that God encompasses the world, nourishes it and protects it [...] God acts upon the foetus in the womb – through the food the mother eats, through her exercise, through the music that the mother listens to and perhaps through caressing [...]. Here the world may be understood in terms of the model of the world as God’s body, much discussed in feminist discourse [...]. Literally, the mother could live without a womb, but cannot become a mother without it’ (Conradie 2009:240).

simultaneously a death of a future – 'the death of a hope', 'the thwarting of an expectation', 'a future lost', 'a hope forever deferred' (Jones 2001:230, 233).

It is perhaps most deeply in this experience of death – the death of possibility, the death of expectation, the death of the future – that a theology from God's Womb can contribute an important theological imaginary to our church debates on reproductive health. It is in these deaths that God meets us (Jones 2001):

> When Christ is crucified, God's own child dies. For the God who sent this child into the world bearing the hope of God's eternal love, this death is a death of hope, the hope that the people who see this child will believe. It is the death of a possibility that has never been, the possibility of true human community. (p. 212)

Trinitarian Theology 'bearing fruit'?

There is ample theological richness from which to draw womb language – and from Trinitarian Theology in particular – that may already be bearing fruit in our theological rhetoric. This chapter has gathered such theological (mostly contemporary feminist and ecofeminist) strands, with the purpose of illustrating only this small but essential point: that we can drink from our own wells; that there may be many more strands to gather in this regard; and that it is neither necessary nor satisfying to speak about matters of reproductive health – matters that concern both women and men in the church – without a theological, Trinitarian grammar to articulate such speaking.

In this chapter, I indicate that key Christological themes of our confessions of faith – such as the incarnation (in the section on creation), the crucifixion (in the section on salvation) and resurrection (in the section on eschatology) – could and should shape theology done from God's Womb. As such, God's Womb does not merely become another metaphor for the immanent Trinity, or the inner life of the Triune persons in a community, but ought to also provide us with some means to speak about the

economic Trinity, and the economy of salvation. For, as Catherine LaCugna (1993) argues:

> [*T*]he life of God – precisely because God is triune – does not belong to God alone [...] Divine life is therefore also our life [...] [*for it is*] about God’s life with us and our life with each other. (p. 1)

This is a life lived by ‘bearing fruit’.

‘Bearing fruit’– the title of this chapter – is a quotation from the Gospel of John (Ch. 15), wherein Jesus speaks to the disciples about the importance of ‘bearing fruit’ [φέρον καρπὸν], mentioned no less than six times in Verses 1 to 8. The reformed theologian David Kelsey (2009:315) argues that ‘bearing fruit’ is integral to human flourishing, as ‘blossoming’ – a key metaphor for flourishing – includes bearing both seed (a concern for the flourishing of subsequent generations) *and* fruit (nurturing and supporting the flourishing of contemporary others).[19] Human and ecological flourishing is inseparable from being a blessing to our neighbours, including acts of ‘bearing’ that enables both our future neighbours (bearing seed) and our present neighbours (bearing fruit) to flourish (Marais 2015a:134–139).[20]

Flourishing herein becomes not only an imperative for the church but also an assurance of the Triune God’s deep involvement in the lives of human beings and the fate of the earth. God’s Womb bears us, and bears fruit in us, so that our fruit-bearing has its deepest source in God’s Womb. When we bear fruit, as Christ also calls for us to do, it is a fruit already born(e) for us, from God’s Womb. Our flourishing – and the flourishing of our present and future neighbours – is assured because it is a flourishing already taking place in God’s Womb. Therefore, we *should* not

19. See also the chapter on Kelsey’s account of (human) flourishing, entitled ‘Fully alive? On God and human flourishing’, in *Jong teoloë praat saam ... oor God, gemeentes en geloof*, edited by Annette Potgieter and Cas Wepener (Marais 2015a).

20. See also the doctoral dissertation by Nadia Marais, entitled ‘Imagining human flourishing? A systematic theological exploration of contemporary soteriological discourses’ (2015b).

only bear the fruits of faith, hope and love; we *can* also bear these fruits. The Triune God does not bid us to do anything that God has not already done in us. Walking together, serving justice and peace, we too can do such fruitful womb theology – for the sake of the fullness of life, the flourishing of all human beings and of the whole earth.[21]

Conclusion

God's Womb stirs us to faith, hope and love. It is concerned with theological imagination, theological grammar and the flourishing of all. Yet, for the sake of flourishing, we must also learn to speak about death and dying in the womb. The Triune God conceives not only life in God's Womb but also receives death into God's Womb. Our comfort or consolation lies therein that we belong to our saviour Jesus Christ, in living and in dying – and that not only our living and our flourishing is welcomed and received by God but also our death and our dying. This requires a theological vocabulary which can absorb death in the womb; the experience that the womb becomes not only the space of life and of living

21. However, I must include a word of caution. It would be easy – too easy, perhaps, in theological work that engages matters related to reproductive health – to imply an essentialist view of what it means to be a woman: that women are those 'who have wombs', and as 'womb-havers' have to figure out their gendered, sexual and bodily identities around their having (or not having) a womb; and, by implication, having and not having babies. This would be no better than the highly problematic associations between being a woman and being a mother, a wife and a bearer of children. My intention in this chapter is neither to suggest such a view of womanhood, nor to support it. Perhaps, this argument, namely, that theology is done from God's Womb, may lend itself in future discussions to condone a patriarchal view of women as (only) those with wombs, which I will certainly oppose; and perhaps, I am, in this chapter, too naïve to grasp the problematic potential of my argument for discussions around gender, sex and sexuality. I must emphasise that the intention of this line of argumentation was born of academic curiosity regarding the theological rhetoric of God's Womb, and that it is soteriologically bent towards the flourishing of all, including those who die in the womb or because of a womb. My thanks to Tanya van Wyk for pointing out the problematic potential of this line of argumentation, with which I concur.

but also of death and of dying.[22] Church debates surrounding reproductive health *can* be framed by the Trinitarian God’s outworking and ‘unfolding grace’ (Jones 2001:228); for it is the Trinitarian God in whose ‘folds of grace’ we, too, are held – in living and in dying (Jones 2001:228). After all, in the words of another old confession of the church – the 16th century’s Heidelberg Catechism – we confess that our only comfort (in life *and* in death) is that we belong (in living *and* in dying) to our saviour, Jesus Christ.

22. Serene Jones (2001:235) writes that this requires the following realisation: ‘She carries death within her body [...] but she does not die. Death becomes her. It fills her, a final death, and yet she lives to remember [...] a death accomplished and completed in her loins [...]. She holds in her womb the dead, imagined person whose future she has conjured [...] a walking site of death itself [...] [a] death literally inside you [...]. [This is] the self who is meant to produce, be creative, give life, and make a future, but who rather holds the stench of decay in the depths of her being [...]. [And i]f she is lucky, her imagination stops here, with death inside her [...]. [Yet, for many women] this imagery runs more deeply and cuts more harshly as she begins to see herself not only as a grave where death is held, but also [...] [with the] image of killer. Why had she destroyed the other who lived inside her? [...] And why was she left alive to experience its dying? [...] Can one envision a more powerfully anti-maternal image? Not only does she not give life as a mother should, her body takes life away’.

Chapter 3

Reproductive health, deconstructed: A nonbinary understanding of the womb

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Introduction: The question that *should not* be asked

In October 2017, Jacinda Ardern was elected as New Zealand's prime minister. During a radio interview the morning after she won the leadership contest of the Labour Party that ultimately

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won the election, the co-host of the show, Mark Richardson, asked Ardern if she plans on having children. His verbatim question was (Ainge Roy 2017):

> A lot of women in New Zealand feel like they have to make a choice between having babies and having a career or continuing their career [...] so is that a decision you feel you have to make or that you feel you've already made? (n.p.)

The host had said that they had debated the whole day whether he could ask the question or not. Ardern responded, 'I have no problem with you asking me that question because I have been very open about discussing that dilemma because I think probably lots of women face it' (Calamur 2017:n.p.).

After some criticism of the question that was asked to Ardern surfaced, Richardson, the talk-show host, defended his right to ask the question.[23] The future prime minister subsequently responded to him and defended the right of women in New Zealand to keep their childbearing plans private from their employer, a position upheld by the *Human Rights Act* of 1993, which states it is illegal for an employer to discriminate against a current or potential employee on the grounds of being pregnant or wanting to have children in the future (cf. Ainge Roy 2017).

Visibly angered, Arden had said (Ainge Roy 2017):

> 'I decided to talk about it, it was my choice, so that means I am happy to keep responding to those questions [...] But, you', she said, turning her chair to face Richardson and pointing her finger directly at him, 'It is totally unacceptable in 2017 to say that women should have to answer that question in the workplace, it is unacceptable, it is unacceptable'. (n.p.)

Ardern highlighted that society at large still struggles to think and talk about women and gender in ways which are not

23. 'New Zealanders had a right to know whether there was a possibility their potential prime minister might take maternity leave [...] If you are the employer of a company you need to know that type of thing from the woman you are employing [...] the question is, is it OK for a PM to take maternity leave while in office?' (cf. Ainge Roy 2017).

underpinned by binary categories or gender dichotomies.[24] This is not a 'healthy' state of things.

The question that *should* be asked

'What is "healthy" according to the cultural, economic and social standards of a given society?' asks Jürgen Moltmann (2012:91–92) in his consideration of the nature of 21st-century ethics. He refers to what is probably the best-known definition of 'health' – that of the World Health Organisation (WHO) – which was adopted as part of the WHO's constitution in 1948 and utilised in subsequent amendments of that constitution. Therein it is stated (WHO 2014:1), 'health is a [condition] of complete physical, mental and social well-being, and not [just] the absence of [illness and] infirmity'.

Moltmann is only reasonably satisfied with this definition. His critique is directed at the way in which 'health' is depicted, namely, as an attainable condition of all-round well-being. For Moltmann (2012:92), this is an 'inhumane utopia'. The definition was forward-thinking for its time (cf. Bowers Du Toit 2018:8), but, for Moltmann, it is susceptible to the unrealisable claims human beings make on themselves and in a way, it contributes to a consumerist mentality that promotes a never-ending race towards 'perfect' health. To the credit of the WHO, their definition includes the mental, physical and social dimensions of what it means to be healthy (Bowers Du Toit 2018:8), and this chapter aims to contribute the same. However, in this chapter, I use Moltmann's notion of health as the overarching point of departure and interpretative matrix for a deconstruction of reproductive health, namely, that *health is the vital power to be a person*

24. In this contribution, I make use of the terms gender 'binaries' and gender 'dichotomies' interchangeably. Although there is a nuanced difference between the two terms, I use both to denote the problematic 'either-or' approach to women and men and their 'roles' based on biological gender. 'Nonbinary' is used without a hyphen, as it denotes a postmodern recognition that while attempting to move beyond the 'binary', some aspects of it still remain.

(Moltmann 2012:92). A vast amount of research outputs have highlighted challenges relating to women's reproductive health in relation to social inequities; the availability of contraceptives; women's access to health (medical care); women's level of and access to education; and finally also economic, religious and cultural factors impeding health (cf. Rakoczy 2004; Shepard 2015; Bowers Du Toit 2018, to name a few). In reference to Moltmann's understanding of 'health', this contribution presents a deconstruction of reproductive health and aspects of these relatively traditional concerns. The intention is not to exclude these but to consider how their underlying assumptions may run counter to their intended outcome, which is the betterment of women's health.

In reference to Prime Minister Ardern's experience and response, the underlying question of this contribution is if women should be confined to or determined by their reproductive characteristics, that is, if they should be defined by how they 'utilise their wombs'. This is investigated by highlighting existing gender dichotomies in policies, strategies and documents that relate to the betterment of the environment and that are aimed at the betterment of women.

■ Women and nature

There has long been an assumed relationship between women and nature owing to women's biological capacity to bear children (Lerner 1986:17–20; Ortner 1974:76–88). The fundamentals of this argument are that women, through childbirth, child-rearing and menstruation, are perceived as closer to nature than men. From this assumed rapport, it is commonly derived that women are natural (in the sense of unquestioned or innate) mothers and nurturers (Lerner 1986:40–41; cf. Foster 2015:62–63; Klein 2004:9, 18, 176–177). Political scientist Emma Foster (2015:63) describes this as the 'women–nature nexus'. This nexus has historically been linked to the feminine divinisation of nature (the environment; the earth), and in different religions and cultures, it has contributed

to the veneration of female deities (Klein 2004:199; Rakoczy 2004:68–94). A positive outcome of this has been that there is a resource pool for creating and utilising female imagery and metaphors for the divine in religions (such as the Christian faith) where g(G)od is spoken of by making use of overwhelming masculine-gendered language and where in many cases, God is regarded *as* male-gendered (see the work of Sally McFague [1983], Rosemary Radford Ruether (1993) and Mercy Oduyoye (2001) among many others). However, as the historian Gerda Lerner (1986:17) has pointed out, this biological deterministic nexus has been instrumental in the development and enforcement of the notion that women have 'natural' gendered roles, gendered spaces and that their contribution to public, economic and political spheres should be limited (Ortner 1974:67–88), and so the women–nature nexus has primarily contributed to the intensifying and maintenance of patriarchy.

In this regard, Foster (2015:65) offers a noteworthy critique on the dangers of an unquestioned link between women and nature. Besides the limitations to public participation that women face, owing to their 'nature' (Klein 2004:176), the links that are made between women, nature and motherhood and the way this is used as a test case for the determination of femininity reinforces the notion that women have essentialist characteristics. 'An essentialist account of gender rests on the assumption that there is an "essence" of [a] man [or] woman' that ensues issues directly from biological sex (Shepard 2015:28). From this perspective, it is 'logical' that women are naturally more caring owing to their biological or reproductive role as mothers. Furthermore, the unquestioned link between women and nature leads to a generalisation of women's experiences and their identity. This does not allow for any other type of identity intersections, like culture, class or geographical location. In general, the assumed nexus keeps gender binaries or dichotomies intact.

Apart from these effects of the women–nature nexus, it has had a major influence on perspectives about humanity's sustainable relationship *with* nature and the way this relationship

is conceptualised and articulated. This is specifically evident in how environmental policies, strategies and action plans have been informed by *gendered assumptions* based on the nexus (Foster 2015:65). In this chapter, 'reproductive health' is deconstructed by investigating the impact of gender dichotomies on the health and well-being of women and the health of the environment in general; therefore, the way in which environmental politics has been informed by the assumed link between women and nature is of importance for the arguments made here.

Strategies to curb environmental degradation and the role of women

In response to environmental degradation, the United Nations (UN) Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), also known as the Rio Earth Summit of 1992, produced an action plan – *Agenda 21*. The main focus of the strategy was (and remains) 'sustainable development', a concept that was first referenced in the document 'Our common future', which was produced by the UN's World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) in 1987. Sustainable development, in short, refers to the kind of development that meets the needs of the present without compromising future generations' abilities to meet the needs of their own time (WCED 1987:43). It is based on the so-called 'triple bottom line' (Ahman et al. 2010:12) of social inclusion, environmental sustainability and economic growth.

At first glance, the influence of the assumed link between women and nature in *Agenda 21* is certainly not explicit. Throughout the 350 pages, which comprise 40 chapters or paragraphs, substantial emphasis is placed on promoting transparency in decision-making and administration (UNCED 1992:par. 2.37), and empowering women through full participation in decision-making (UNCED 1992:par. 3.7; 5.12; 5.28; 5.48; 6.27[i]). The strategy also calls for programmes aimed at the reduction of the domestic workload of women and children (par 23.2 (d), and it calls for programmes aimed at the elimination of persistent

negative images, stereotypes, attitudes and prejudices against women through changes in socialisation patterns, the media, advertising and formal and non-formal education (UNCED 1992:par. 23.3[i]).

It is, however, very clear that the assumed link between women and nature is utilised, and also solidified, in *Agenda 21*. In this regard, the *absence* of certain references is noticeable with an in-depth reading of the document. The focus of the document is on sustainable development and the environment and has references to the roles of enterprises, governments, international organisations, youth, consumption, economic and market instruments, environmental taxation and international research. There is no mention of the 'role of men' or 'the role of humanity' or the 'role of people coming together' (for example). When it comes to sustainable development, the roles of women are specifically, *verbatim*, only mentioned in relation to 'nature'-related aspects, pertaining to the environment:

- biological diversity
- land and village-life
- farming
- agriculture
- water resources management
- food security health care
- population programmes (UNCED 1992:par. 5.4[g]; 5.48; 6.8; 10.5; 13.17; 14.27; 15.4[g]; 18.12[n]; 18.19).

Why is *Agenda 21* emphasised here? It is because it was the precursor to the manner in which 'sustainable development' as a concept has attained existential prominence in different political, social, economic and public forums across the globe. Sustainable development is a *movement* today, and all major research and development in research fields from medical science to humanities is focussed on and aligned with the current sustainability goals set by the UN in 2015 and represented in *Agenda 2030* of 2015 (UNDSD 2015). *Agenda 2030* reasserted the goals of *Agenda 21* and added 17 goals to the original action plan (UNGA 2015:4). As such, *Agenda 21* is an influential strategy document. It is, therefore, important to

note that it is underpinned by the supposition or ideology that women have special or traditional knowledge of the land or nature and that women have a special ability to nurture and care for nature. This means that dualistic gender binaries are maintained and, moreover, women's concerns are universalised along the lines of 'earth mother' (Foster 2015:64). To be sure, *Agenda 21* and a document like the 2010-Issues Paper by the World Bank, titled *Gender and Environment* (Ahman et al. 2010), have good intentions. I have already pointed out how *Agenda 21* calls for programmes aimed at eliminating negative gender stereotypes. The *Gender and Environment* paper, for example, states that 'environmental policy, strategy and projects cannot be done without gender analysis and consultations with men and women to identify needs' (Ahman et al. 2010:12) and that 'gender relations determine women's access to environmental decision-making as participants and leaders' (Ahman et al. 2010:25). In the World Bank paper, it is acknowledged that there is a 'cost' when 'gender-based needs and constraints' (Ahman et al. 2010:11) are not addressed. I am weary of the possible gender binary sentiment in the phrase 'gender-based needs'. Therefore, I would have to remark that statements about gender-based needs are only valid insofar as they are based on a genuine realisation of the damage, and resulting exclusion, caused by gender dichotomies, and in the case of the World Bank, not based on an economic concern for increased productivity – a point to which I return later.

My concern is that documents like these inherently portray contradicting paradigms concerning women's role in the environment and also their roles in political, economic and social spheres. To acknowledge that gender relations determine women's participation in decision-making, but then to make statements that keep gender binaries intact, is a contradiction. The so-called 'privileged knowledge' of women may not be regarded as evidence of a special closeness to nature. As Leach (2007:75; cf. Leach 1992) has pointed out, the issue on the table should be a concern about the 'struggle for material resources in the context of *gender-ascribed* natural resource [dependency]'. In this regard, the assumed correlation between women and nature as a whole

needs to be deconstructed. It is problematic, to say the least, if strategy documents and action plans aimed at combating environmental degradation actually exacerbates environmental challenges owing to an indirect encouragement to women (by way of the emphasis on women's role as earth mothers and their biological capacity to care for nature) to fulfil their natural role and responsibility towards sustaining future generations and *be* mothers, that is, have children. Some might remark that this is an unfair conclusion. However, these contradictions about the role and place of women coupled with a prevailing pronatalist sentiment (which I discuss in the 'Women and population' section) do lead to the aforementioned impression. The maintenance of the women–nature nexus, which is clear in these documents, has the effect that women's reproductive roles are emphasised before any other. As Foster (2015:69) points out, 'women's bodies are constructed as an interface between present and future generations'.

In 1994, the UN's International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) echoed aspects of *Agenda 21*. It was stated that it was 'common sense' that population regulation is necessary to avoid environmental trauma (cf. Foster 2015:69). In October 2018, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released its projections and recommendations about the current leading causes and possible responses to global warming of 1.5 °C. Mitigation and adaptation measures are suggested, mainly in the form of immediate and drastic reduction of human-caused CO_2 emissions. In Chapter 2 of the report, it is stated that the lack of global cooperation, high inequality and high population growth limits the ability to control land-use emissions. Together with rapidly growing resource-intensive consumption, these factors are key impediments to achieving the reduction of CO_2 emissions (IPCC 2018a:109–110). In the report's summary for policymakers (SPM), there is a close connection between climate change impacts and the sustainability goals set by the UN in 2015. It is stated that (IPCC 2018b):

> The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted in 2015, provide an established framework for assessing the links between global warming of 1.5 °C or 2 °C and development goals

> that include poverty eradication, reducing inequalities, and climate action. (p. 20)

Agenda 21 and later *Agenda 2030* is the foundation of the sustainable development hypothesis and argument. If a large part of the original theory that the sustainability goals are based on utilises the link between women and nature, and if that link remains unquestioned, what is the impact on the environment and the earth's population if women are continuously confronted with their roles as mothers and nurturers, and women, together with men, are continuously reminded that they have gender-based roles to fulfil? Would there, in fact, be a correlation between gender binaries and current ecological problems? Some of the policy and strategy documents I have referred to certainly seem to indicate the possibility of such a correlation and illustrate a degree of awareness, as within these documents the argument is made in favour of 'gender equality', and that women should have the same right as men to freely choose the number and spacing of their children (*Agenda 21*– UNCED 1992:par. 24.2). In light of the greater part of the language used to conceptualise 'earth-keeping' and humanity's role in sustainable development, however, statements about women's natural roles are in contradiction to these statements about women's choice. Men are not equally regarded as caretakers of nature in the way women are. It really seems as if the choice *not* to be mothers or nurturers is not available for women. Furthermore, from the contradictory nature of these strategies and policies, it would seem as if women's betterment is utilised to achieve a developmental means, and that the betterment of women is not an end in itself (Stein 1995:9; cf. Kelly 1994:13). This is an ethical problem.

■ Women and population

The previous section, 'Strategies to curb environmental degradation and the role of women', illustrated how women's 'natural roles' are emphasised in such a way that their biological

capacity for 'being a mother' becomes an underlying responsibility towards the environment and humanity. In other words, one aspect of women's biology – their wombs – becomes determinative for their whole person and the roles they are expected to play in the public sphere and society as a whole. In this contribution, this is highlighted as an ethical problem that has implications for the holistic health of women, humanity and ultimately the environment. This will now be elaborated. As will be illustrated, the overemphasis on the link between women and nature extends to the field of population policy by way of terms and concepts used to categorise 'available options' for how women are able to respond to their natural responsibility and biological determinants, that is, how women can respond to the biological reality that they are born with a womb. Before I get to that, I will sketch a brief overview of the origin and general premise of population growth concerns and policies in order to contextualise the focus on certain terms and concepts.[25]

The field of population policies: A concern over the environment and sustained population growth

Initially (in the 1950s and 1960s), concerns over rapid population growth and its consequences were quite alarming (Kantner &

25. Population policies span quite a few decades, and there is a vast amount of statistics that support different perspectives. These perspectives range from thoroughly alarmist to minimal concern about population growth, and each perspective and argument is supported by a distinct set of statistics. Population policies include studies on the gap between the rich and the poor and of the rate of education in different nations. In this regard, they are intimately linked to different types of environmental policies and strategies and that is why they are mentioned in subsequent sections in this contribution. I reference these policies and strategies only in relation to how gender dichotomies or binaries function within them and, thus, the bearing they might have on a holistic understanding of women's health. It is not my intention to review these policies as such, although this might be a necessary future undertaking. I, therefore, do not pretend to 'paint' the complete picture of these policies here, and I recognise that they attempt to address a multifaceted problem. See, for example, Goldewijk (2005), Scherbov, Lutz and Sanderson (2011) and Kantner and Kantner (2006).

Kantner 2006:3). This was mainly because of another round of concerns based on the 1789 theory of Thomas Malthus (Pearson 2015:17; cf. Sen, Germaine & Chen 1994:4), which posited that population growth will always outrun food supply.[26] If too many people were to reproduce too rapidly, economic growth would be halted, the environment destroyed, social services overstretched and poverty exacerbated. According to Charles Pearson (2015:4–5, 16–17), in *On the Cusp: From Population Boom to Bust*, Malthus's theory has been proven false because both food production and the world population have increased and as a result, life expectancy has increased by a considerable margin. He argues that ageing might be a bigger risk to the environment than uncontrolled population growth (Pearson 2015:6, 165–190). Although Pearson's arguments certainly warrant further examination, it is not the main focus of this contribution. As indicated in the 'Women and population' section, there are presently concerns about environmental degradation and the sustainable development and utilisation of resources, and because of this, perspectives about population size and growth are a main point on the proverbial agenda for the earth and humanity's well-being.

Because of Malthusian-based concerns, public understanding and support of birth control[27] in the 1970s (cf. Sen et al*.* 1994:4) was promoted from within the field of population policy. Family planning programmes abounded across the globe and a World

26. This is a simplified summary of Malthus's theory. He argued that the way food production improves leads to higher population growth, and this then leads to less resources being available, et cetera. For a more detailed analysis of his theory, see Elwell (2001) and Collard (2001).

27. Population policies cannot be read separately from some politicised interests that govern them. For example, during the 1960s and 1970s, the United States gave considerable support to birth control programmes – but not within the United States. Presidents Nixon, Ford and Carter advocated and supported population limitation policy coupled with family planning initiatives and birth control programmes for developing countries only (cf. Stein 1995:5). This is what Dorothy Stein (1995:5–7) refers to as the 'politics of policy'.

Population Conference was held in Bucharest in 1974. The argument was that adequate socio-economic development was the appropriate response to demographic threats. The 1980s witnessed the integration of family planning with broader programmes for health and the advancement of women. This was coupled with policies concerning economic growth. During the 1990s, public and political attention was refocussed on population, the environment and development owing to concern over an impending environmental crisis (Sen et al. 1994:5). This is confirmed by John Kantner and Andrew Kantner (2006) in *The struggle for international consensus on population and development*. The concern over an environmental crisis is still prominent in the 21st century (as discussed in the 'Women and population' section with regard to the IPCC report).

One of the most prominent issues through the latter half of the 20th century with regard to development was the 'concern over the size composition, distribution and growth of the world's population' (Kantner & Kantner 2006:3). Population policies have, therefore, mostly been driven by demographic concerns. In the 21st century, as in the 20th century, concerns overpopulation growth or population decline (in terms of fertility rates) are politically motivated, in the ideological sense.[28] The premise is that individual health and welfare could

28. See footnote 5. However, my country, South Africa, recognised the necessity of a shift from a policy aimed at demographic concerns to a population policy aimed at *sustainable human development*. A draft white paper was sent to Parliament in September of 1997 and subsequently accepted in April 1998. In the 'Foreword' of the policy (Republic of South Africa 1998:i), the following is stated: 'Our country is one of the few countries in the world where the fertility rate has been significantly reduced while the majority of the population has remained poor, which contradicts the belief that the majority of our people are poor because they have too many children. This policy advocates a holistic multi-sectoral approach, so that our efforts to influence fertility, mortality and migration, as well as the size, structure and growth rates of the population, are both a means to and outcomes of sustainable development'. Noteworthy is that although it is stated that women assume primary responsibility for the care of children (Republic of South Africa 1998:20–21), the 'natural' responsibility or inclination towards motherhood or nurturing does not feature in this particular document. This aspect will need to be studied more closely in future.

be advanced by actions (governmental intervention) to assist, persuade or induce individuals to increase or decrease their fertility to meet socially desirable goals. However, as Sen et al. (1994:6) have pointed out, population policies should not only focus on fertility control, but should rather also develop an approach that creates an enabling environment within which people can attain health. This is echoed by Kantner and Kantner (2006:x) as they emphasise that while population policies decline into ideologically motivated contests, human welfare is at stake.

From this brief overview,[29] it is clear that 'various aspects of population have been considered as factors and limiting conditions' to the course of development (Kantner & Kantner 2006:xi). It is also clear that large sections of the strategy of population policies have revolved around women's biological capacity to bear children by referencing 'family planning', 'birth control' and 'fertility'. What is of interest to me is how the role of women in relation to their biological capacity is conceptualised and how this relates to concerns about the increase or decrease of population.

Politics and 'pronatalism'

According to Stein (1995:7), there are uneasy alliances on the issues of population and birth control. Governments that view their populations as being too high or too low do so based on economic considerations. The general nature of population policies ranges from complacency, indifference or encouragement to concern over high birth rates, specifically in the Global South, in regions like Africa and Latin America. Stein conducted this research in the late 20th century, but this trend can be witnessed even today, specifically with regard to the

29. For the broader description of the historical development of the content of population policies, see Kantner and Kantner (2006).

problematic relationship between culture and gender.[30] In this 'environment', most countries and institutions were (and remain) 'pronatalist' (even if it is not 'overtly' so) – social, cultural, media and medical climates are pronatal (Stein 1995:4; cf. also the contemporary contribution about gender critique in film and television conducted by Harry Benshoff [2016:146–168]). 'Pronatalism' refers to the conviction that childbearing and parenthood is necessary for human continuity and represents an approach that is very positive about reproduction and the special place 'the family' occupies in society (former Unites States senator Jesse Helms; cf. Stein 1995):

> The family is a divine institution, which precedes the state and has rights superior to the state. Accordingly, no power on Earth has the authority to dictate to married couples [...] that they can have only a certain amount of children. (p. 5)

These pronatal sentiments are not openly acknowledged or even visible (Stein 1995, [*author's added emphasis*]; cf. Potts & Thapa 1990):

> [*B*]ecause everyone is in on it. In any attempt to understand and analyse the politics of population, account must be taken of the basic assumptions of right, left and centre, feminist and patriarchal stances, which are all still pronatalist – to such an extent that it has been difficult for any of the parties to acknowledge that increasing numbers of women themselves are less than convinced about the virtues of having more than a couple of children at most [...] low fertility rates are not only beneficial to women, children, society and the environment, but are the *preference* of women themselves. (p. 9)

30. Conspiracy theories abound about how population decrease or increase (by way of family planning and birth control initiatives) might serve the interests of the 'the West' by keeping 'the number of "others" at home and abroad down' or either increase numbers and, therefore, provide a steady stream of 'cheap labour and new customers [...] for western business and military leaders' (Stein 1995:8–9). Stein pointed this out in 1995, but aspects of this situation remain unchanged in the 21st century and relate to the current debate about migration in Europe and the influx of migrants into the United States. Furthermore, 'cultural pronatalism' (as pointed out in the rest of this contribution) remains an important contributor to population growth, at least with regard to countries in sub-Saharan Africa (cf. Theron 2015:61–62).

Pronatalism goes hand-in-hand with an emphasis or support of women's natural nurturing roles and biological capacity to bear children. Besides an emphasis on the inalienable or sacred place of the family and marriage (Dreyer 2008, 2011), 'individual rights' are utilised as an argument against any challenge to pronatalist convictions, that is, the respect for 'individual rights' is utilised in service to pronatalist convictions – 'it is my right to have children or I have the right to family'. As Stein (1995:18–19) points out, however, the advocacy for 'individual rights' is only valid insofar as human rights include women's rights to their *preferences* – which might not include a domestic arena, and might entail the choice to have less or no children at all. The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) stated that men and women of full age should have the right to marry and to have a family and that parents have the basic human right to decide freely and responsibly the number and spacing of their children (which is the almost exact wording of the same issue in *Agenda 21*), but obscured the identity of who has the overriding right in cases of disagreement. These sentiments have been carried over to recent renditions of the basic document. Men's rights and responsibilities are rarely (if at all) clarified with regard to (1) the general predominant male power within and outside of marriage, which disadvantages women in the negotiation of childbearing decisions and (2) the general male disinclination to employ male methods of contraception (Stein 1995:23).

It was Judith Blake (1994) who pointed out that 'free choices' of women with regard to childbearing take place in a heavily pronatalist environment:

> People make their 'voluntary' reproductive choices in an institutional context that severely constrains them not to choose non-marriage, not to choose childlessness, not to choose only one child and even not to limit themselves to two children. (p. 168)

The different contexts that constrain free choice in a pronatal direction are religious, nationalist (or political) and cultural in nature and include institutional contexts like the media and medicine (Stein 1995:33).

Religious pronatalism[31] comes in the form of injunctions against abortion and birth control, general encouragement of large families, the conviction that heterosexual marriage is the only or ideal space in which to raise children, the conviction that marriage's sole purpose is procreation and the designation of gender-ascribed roles to males and females (cf. Hadebe 2016; Salzman & Lawler 2012; Cleminshaw 1994). In this regard, religious ideologies (or fundamentalism) are characterised by social conservatism, certainty regarding 'nature', the roles of women and the will of God (Stein 1995:34). Pronatal*ism* (with the emphasis on the '-ism') becomes an ideology in itself. 'Patriotic or nationalist pronatalism' comes in the form of women being encouraged to procreate to increase the numbers of religious groups or nations and with regard to the latter, pronatalism is utilised to aid demographic competition. This could entail, as Stein (1995:40–41) points out, that women being raped are told to look the proverbial 'other way', as the children born from that abuse could still have a positive impact – enlarging the flock, be it a religious group or a nation. It is yet another example of how women's biological capacity to bear children is utilised, or in this case, abused. Women's bodies are a means by which to profit or an instrument by which to harm an adversary by denying him or her recruits. 'Cultural[32] pronatalism' comes in the form of a propensity for patriarchy, which is *overtly* and *covertly* present in many cultures and leads to culturally sanctioned gender inequality (Zulu 2015:81–95). The effect of patriarchy has been well

31. Different religions have pronatalist tendencies as well, as Stein (1995:34–37) points out. Some of these are partly focussed on the growth of certain ethnic or religious groups owing to a mass genocide or trauma. When substantiating religious pronatalism, I make use of references from within the Christian religious tradition owing to the scope of this contribution, which makes it impossible to provide an in-depth discussion on all religions. The Christian religion is the religious tradition I am most acquainted with.

32. I recognise that there are myriad definitions of 'culture' (cf. Spencer-Oatey 2012). In this contribution, 'culture' is defined as social-ethnic traditions with attached values, which includes knowledge, belief, art and social-ethnic practices based on these traditions that include moral conduct, law and customs. Cultural practices in this regard are vehicles for history and identity (Zulu 2015:81).

documented (cf. Lerner 1986; Rakoczy 2004) and, in conjunction with religious and nationalist contexts, serve to keep women's activity limited to predetermined spaces and roles based on their 'natural' abilities and 'inclinations'. This results in *overt* phenomena like polygamy, under-age marriages and under-age girls giving birth to children (Zulu 2015:90–94). In a more *covert* way, patriarchy results in women having to 'do it all', as they try to juggle family life and a professional career, or simply forego the career because they are convinced of their 'natural, nurturing' roles and because the cultural marginalisation that results from making the 'free choice' of not having a family is a burden too heavy to bear (cf. Stein 1995:87).

The ethical issue remains the same; how free are women to choose their way of life, amidst the prevailing emphasis on (or abuse of) their wombs?

Defying the 'pronatalist norm': Being 'childless' or a 'non-parent'

By way of a media sampling (newspaper articles, television shows or films, reviews about the plot of a book, etc.) for over about two years, Dorothy Stein (1995:87–89) had illustrated how childlessness, without exception, is depicted by the media as an involuntary matter and that childlessness goes hand-in-hand with despair, anger and broken relationships. Within this socially created context, the possibility that someone would *choose* not to have children (voluntary childlessness) does not exist and is close to unthinkable. With regard to the cultural and religious pronatalism, this remains the case in the 21st century. This is clear from the language used to describe those who choose not to have children. It is a sign of a stigmatised group that the term by which they wish to be known is a matter of debate and that they are described in terms of what they *are not* or *did not choose*, much the way that people who come from diverse ethnic backgrounds are described as non-white. Women who do not have children are referred to a *child*less, *child*free or a non-*parent.* There is not a way of describing

them as they are, other than using ‘child’ or ‘parent’ as a point of conceptualisation for terminology (Stated by Root Cartwright in a personal communication to Stein [1995]):

> It is hard to know which usage colludes more with pronatalist prejudice. Whereas ‘childless’ implies a deficiency (moral perhaps, as well as physical), ‘childfree’ does suggest both an unnecessarily negative view of ‘the with child state’ and that kind of self-centred consumerism which surfaces in the press all too often […] alternatives, such as ‘elective non-parent’ are clumsy in some ways and seem more about distinguishing ourselves from those who can’t, than defining a neutral status ‘other than parenthood’. (p. 90)

Women who do not have children (voluntary and involuntary) report that complete strangers constantly ask them to account for ‘their condition’ (Stein 1995:92). This has been the case even in my own contemporary religious and cultural setting and corresponds with experiences of other women in my cultural and religious context. This is a common feature of how stigmatised groups are treated. However, unlike other stigmatised people with stigmatised ‘areas of concern’ like skin disorders or facial disfigurements, ‘the childless’ do not receive pity. They are treated with hostility, because of what is perceived as their selfishness, immorality, their conduct which goes against nature’s laws and their disregard for the institution of the family. Gender stereotypes in this regard are plentiful. Stein (1995:92) recounts how during the 1992 United States (US) presidential campaign of Bill Clinton, many Americans got the idea that Hillary Clinton was childless because she was a prominent lawyer. The implication, thus, was that a woman who had a career did not stick to her designated and biological role – a situation or assumption that remains, as evidenced by the questions that Prime Minister Ardern had to face.

There are different kinds of stereotyping taking place in relation to women who choose not to have children. It is purported that they dislike children or that they had a disturbing childhood. Interestingly, all reasons for not choosing parenthood are pejorative ones. Some reasons for having children can be ethically problematic, as they centre upon political and economic considerations (as illustrated

above), but mostly the decision to *have* children does not garner *any* attention because it is 'natural' and 'normal'. In fact, it might not be a 'decision' at all – it is simply the way of things. What is disturbing to me is how 'the intentionally childless' (mostly women) are questioned on why and how they arrived at a decision that is so different 'from the rest'. Stein (1995:96) attributes it to a context in which 'motherhood is taken for granted'. Women are constantly quizzed and measured on how they use – or do not use – their wombs. Why are women not quizzed on how they utilise their teeth, or their feet, for that matter? It reiterates my concern about the ethics of this practice and my opening statement about questions that should not be asked.

Based on the issues I raised here, it would seem that the 'healthy option' for women is to 'reproduce'; there is no marginalisation, no stigmatisation and the order of things is not upset, and women make society a better place by embracing their nurturing role. Furthermore, it would seem as if by being nurturers and earth mothers, women do their part for sustainable development and bring about a healthier environment. I suppose it comes down to your definition of 'health'. If your departure point is a distinct correlation between health and personhood (like Moltmann), what is considered *healthy* for a woman per pronatalist and women-nexus endorsements is quite *unhealthy* – not only for the women in question but also for the environment at large too. For this reason, Eleanor Leacock (1980:25–42) actually rejected the term 'gender equality' in favour of the term 'personal autonomy', because it denotes that an individual (in this case, a woman) has control over the important aspects of her life. This remains a valid perspective today in light of different movements towards the autonomy and participation of women in decision-making today.

■ Going forward: Guiding principles and ethical considerations

In this chapter, I have focussed on the ways in which a unilateral utilisation of and focus on women's 'natural' roles impact

the holistic health of women and the 'health' of the planet. The purpose was to deconstruct and to reconceive the notion of 'reproductive health'. In their reconsideration of the content and nature of population policies, Gita Sen, Adrienne Germaine and Lincoln Chen (1994) made a notable connection between equity and sustainable development in a way that implies that sustainable development is dependent on equity – equal representation, participation and decision-making with regard to gender. They point out that existing international documents, plans or declarations concerned with the environment, population, women and human rights are often ambiguous and mutually contradicting (Sen et al. 1994:5). This confirms my conclusions in this chapter – documents or strategies aimed at the betterment of the health of the environment by referencing women's health, participation or roles (or *vice versa*) should be free of binary categories, as these lead to inherent contradictions.

The conceptualisation and ultimate formulation of any strategy documents that have any bearing on women's reproductive health should foster agency, and it should have dichotomy-free empowerment as a key objective. To this point, Sen et al. (1994:5–6) list certain conditions that are necessary to achieve the kind of empowerment of women that is not contradicting or ambiguous. In the light of concerns about sustainable development and the findings of the IPCC report, these conditions have attained existential importance:

- a shift from passive concepts of women's education
- sustained leadership and organisation by women
- generation of political will
- a critique of gender disparities
- 'provision of infrastructure and social services to reduce women's [triple workloads]' (Westgate 2010:n.p.)
- 'fundamental changes in the power dynamics [between] women and men' (Westgate 2010:n.p.), as well as among women themselves
- reproductive health should be transformed to reflect a fundamental commitment to ethics and human rights.

To this, I would add that reproductive health strategy should convey a commitment to transcend gender binaries. Ultimately, 'reproductive health' should denote a nonbinary understanding of the womb. Considering the womb in a binary way means you are healthy if you use it, unhealthy if you do not, and this approach is underpinned by gender binaries and dichotomies. As a critical response to this, a *holistic* reproductive health approach will consider women as persons and will not categorise a woman in terms of her nurturing capabilities, nor her assumed relationship to nature. Reproductive health, *re-conceived*, then denotes that it is healthy in equal measure to *not* be a mother. The cost of keeping gender binaries (biological, social and cultural-determined roles) intact is a price that humanity is no longer able to pay. *Health is the vital power to be a person*. By transcending these binaries, we create space for each other to be persons and to be healthy.

Chapter 4

Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel's theology of tenderness: Implications for reconceiving reproductive health

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Introduction

Reproductive health includes various issues like abortion, reproductive loss, childlessness, infertility, stillbirth, miscarriage, surrogacy and adoption. Sexual and reproductive health,

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according to the United Nation Population Fund (2017), is a 'state of complete physical, mental and social well-being in all matters relating to the reproductive system'. This will involve a pleasing and safe sex life, the ability to have children if desired and the freedom to decide if, when and how to do so. To be able to obtain this state of sexual and reproductive health, people need access to accurate information on safe, effective, affordable and acceptable contraception method of their choice.

Recent research shows the need for theological reflection on matters regarding reproductive health. Growth in this topic is evident though, according to recent research for available literature on reproductive health matters, it came to light that very limited scholarship exists in the area of religion and reproductive health (Gaydos et al. 2010:479). The work of De Lange (2012:5) shows the lack of interaction reformed church ministers have with issues regarding reproductive health and pregnancy. Her scientific research indicates that ministers of the reformed church never or seldom interact on issues like abortion, IVF, contraceptive issues, foetus testing, moral status of the human embryo and surrogacy (De Lange 2012:5). Regarding the emerging field of reproductive health and religion, it is similarly stated that the urgent reproductive health issues of HIV and AIDS, unintended pregnancies and domestic violence pose challenging questions for religious and faith communities who want to help but seem unable to do so adequately owing to lack of resources, tools and ability to cope up with contradictions (Gaydos et al. 2010:475). Crawford (2011:174) suggests in an article regarding the reproductive health of young people in Jamaica that the church is failing young people when it comes to matters regarding sex, sexuality and reproductive health. Crawford (2011:174) states that the silence of the church on these matters has 'left young persons within the churches at the mercy of their own emerging sexuality and the prevailing secular cultural attitudes and constructs of sexuality'. This research further suggests that the church, or faith communities, should create conducive environments where the reproductive health needs of

young people might be addressed and discussed (Crawford 2011:174). Magezi (2016:2) agrees with this when asking the question if there can be positive engagement and integration of church and community in attending to the sexual and reproductive health issues of young people, and stating that the church or faith communities can have a positive contribution when it comes to the sexual and reproductive health of society.

The research mentioned above, like many others, demonstrates the need for theological thought on reproductive health. As a white, female Dutch Reformed minister, in Johannesburg, South Africa, I am confronted with the reproductive health dilemmas faced by many people today. I receive burning questions from women and their partners with regard to fertility challenges, miscarriage, reproductive technologies, contraceptive use, sexual health and reproductive loss. I often find myself questioning whether the church is a 'safe' place to talk about these dilemmas? Do people have the courage to turn to their faith community or leaders with these questions? Do ministers feel equipped enough to handle these dilemmas with their congregants? A more pertinent question, one I share with various academics developing this field and authors contributing to this journal, is whether Christian theology has kept up with the changes regarding reproductive health and are we generating a theological voice, guidance and language that can adequately guide people of faith when they face various reproductive dilemmas? Do we have adequate theology and theory that can relate to the experiences of women and men when it comes to reproductive health? As a reformed Christian community, writing from my framework, we need to develop adequate theological language that can speak to the lived experiences, lives and questions of people, especially of women.

This chapter will discuss the possibilities of the theology of Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, and the contribution it can make to the development of a theological language that speaks meaningfully to the experiences of women. In her extensive theological work, she proposes a theology of tenderness according

to her interpretation of the life and ministry of Jesus and the people that surrounded him. This research will suggest that this theology of tenderness may have imaginative alternatives and liberative implications for reconceiving reproductive health. This chapter will and can in no way produce the various answers we need with regard to this topic, but can only suggest possibilities for further theological thought.

The theology of Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel: A brief summary

To fully understand and discuss Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel's theology of tenderness, it is necessary to discuss a summary of her collective theological work.

Feminist[33] theology is foundational for most of the theological work done by Moltmann-Wendel, and she was one of the most influential feminist theologians in Protestant feminist theology in Germany. From early on in her life, she focussed on the concerns she had with the sexisms she observed in society and church and took part in the discussions and movements that addressed this issue (Moltmann-Wendel 1997:44, 46). In her autobiography (Moltmann-Wendel 1997), she writes about her discovery of a feminist doctrine of justification:

> I am good –
>
> I am whole –
>
> I am beautiful. (p. 108)

Moltmann-Wendel (1982:75) accurately makes the statement that feminist experience and theology stands alongside patriarchal experience and theology. For Moltmann-Wendel (1986:71), feminist theology is concerned with liberation and developing wholeness of the woman. Moltmann-Wendel

33. See a full definition of feminism as understood by Moltmann-Wendel (1997:68–69) in her autobiography.

(Moltmann-Wendel & Moltmann 1991:54) writes about a world where women are freeing themselves from death, disrespect and non-being – a world where they are discovering their power, using their heads and demanding the right to make this world a better and more humane place. Moltmann-Wendel (2001:30) argues for an introduction into contemporary theological thought-patterns and the social spheres of friendship, 'earthing' embodiment and the notion of contact, which comes from the experience and reflection of women, resulting in healing and healthy perspectives in both theology and our social world.

Moltmann-Wendel has received acclaim for her fresh interpretation of the women in the Bible, especially those surrounding Jesus. She uses theological imagination to reinterpret the narratives of these women, especially restoring the distorted view of Mary Magdalene and Martha. Moltmann-Wendel also produced various feminist interpretations of biblical texts, highlighting the fact that although the disciples deserted Jesus at his greatest moment of suffering on the cross, the women close to Jesus were the first ones to witness the resurrection and that a woman knew about the messianic secret before any man (Moltmann-Wendel 1982:99, 109; Moltmann-Wendel & Moltmann 1991:1, 54). On the subject of the women at the tomb of Jesus, Moltmann-Wendel makes a very important observation. Officially, church history began with the sending out of the male apostles, and officially these apostles did not include women. Moltmann-Wendel argues that the presence of the women at the tomb of Jesus in Matthew 28 should actually be presented as the beginning of church history and not the sending out of the male apostles (Moltmann-Wendel & Moltmann 1991:1). The beginning of the church was governed, moulded and led by men. God is thought of in predominantly masculine terms, such as judge, king, warlord and ruler. Feminine attributes such as warmth, nearness and tenderness are ignored (Moltmann-Wendel & Moltmann 1991:1).

Moltmann-Wendel contributes significantly to the theological thinking about friendships between people, and between

humanity and God. Moltmann-Wendel (2001:119) writes that an everyday experience like friendship can break with alienation and hostilities in our lives, and that the word friendship can break down the hierarchies that oppress us. Living in this process of friendship can result in friendliness, attentiveness, tenderness and take us to a place where we can experience the secret of God's power (Moltmann-Wendel 2001:120). She also connects the theological thinking around friendship with the topic of bodiliness, stating that the relationship of friendship and the body is yet to be explored, the fact that God has taken a body requires us to reassess our thinking about our bodies (Moltmann-Wendel 2001:99).

Moltmann-Wendel dedicated a significant amount of attention to the body and embodiment in her theological work. Reflections documented in her autobiography, Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel (1997:33, 37, 56) writes of the early encounters with ideas and revelations of 'freeing' the body, asking whether the body should not be just as important as the soul, and often wrote about the rediscovering of the body. Moltmann-Wendel stated that we should not lose the fundamental truth, that God has become body, and is body, in our doing theology.

Moltmann-Wendel (2001) specifically asks the following:

> What, for example, would a feminist theology of the body look like which begins with the body, disempowers all male conceptuality and is based on reality? What magic could we develop in ourselves and among ourselves if we learned again to detect and see Spirit in the body in us and among us? (p. 103)

Moltmann-Wendel (2001:108) connected the discussion around embodiment and our relationship with our bodies to that of the need for re-examination of our ecological framework. Moltmann-Wendel (2001:108–109) urges that we as human beings can live in friendship with the earth, and that our use of theological language is very important in this regard.

■ Jesus and his life of tenderness

According to Moltmann-Wendel (1991:54), the humanity of Jesus was, for long periods of time, hidden under the masculinity that the church and the society so badly wanted him to portray, but that he was a person who experienced happiness, grief and fatigue is clear. He experienced hunger and could be offended; at times he was uncertain of himself and doubted God. We see Jesus maturing, that he needed others and that other people could anger and disappoint him. Throughout the Bible, we encounter Jesus's humanity and tenderness – he is full of compassion; he needs cushions when he sleeps; he feels; he touches other people's bodies; he spits, embraces and kisses (Moltmann-Wendel 2001:84; Rigby 2012:185).

Jesus was a feminist, feminist being a human being who affirms and realises the sameness of man and woman, someone who seeks to treat women primarily as human beings (Moltmann-Wendel 1974:132). Moltmann-Wendel (1974:132) shows how Swidler interprets biblical texts where Jesus encounters different women and how these encounters can be described as being feminist. Jesus questioned the notion of women as sex objects, rejected the blood taboos of his day, showed compassion to a women no one dared to, challenged marriage and divorce traditions where it concerned especially women, gave high priority to the intellectuality of women and used a metaphor that compared God to a woman (Moltmann-Wendel 1974:138–146).

Jesus also ignored the body taboos of the time and society he lived in, for him those taboos did not exist, he touched and healed those who were sick, obliterating the boundaries sustained by the beliefs that these bodies should be isolated, restoring them as part of God's created good (Moltmann-Wendel 1982:103). The same goes for the encounter Jesus had with the body of a dead girl and a menstruating woman, both unclean, seen as untouchable and off-limits. Rigby (2012:185, 186) shows how this notion is very

important because of our culture and the society which isolates people and ignores their senses.

Moltmann-Wendel makes a persuasive argument regarding the salvation of Jesus with regard to the human body. For Moltmann-Wendel, Jesus makes the body as well as the human soul a priority in his ministry. She argues that healing was central to the saving actions of Jesus – this did not only affect what was within human beings, but it was concerned with the whole person, body and soul (Moltmann-Wendel 1995:36–37). Moltmann-Wendel (1982:143) shows how Jesus challenges the dualistic thinking, between body and soul, with her interpretations of the stories surrounding Jesus, using, for example, the story of the crippled woman in Luke 13, stating that this narrative shows how the soul and the body for Jesus is not two separate entities, '[c]rippling of the body, is at the same time crippling of the soul'.

Moltmann-Wendel uses this same narrative to show that what oppresses you surely oppresses your body as well. This woman in Luke had been isolated because of her sickness. Jesus frees her, not only of the crippling of her body but also of the oppression, separation, loneliness and isolation her body experienced (Moltmann-Wendel & Moltmann 1991:58). Through this healing process, attention, warmth and nearness are experienced. Part of freeing all women from what oppresses them is for them to be recognised as complete and whole human beings with anxieties, cares, deformities, hidden talents and hopes (Moltmann-Wendel 1991:59). In the warmth women experience from the healing power and acts of tenderness from Jesus, they can stand upright again. Johnson (1994:12) states similarly, on the subject of salvation, that if Jesus fed, healed, soothed and cared for persons and their bodies, and if his resurrection affirms our part in the wholeness God can give, then salvation is not only for the soul but for the body as well. Salvation then is not only for heaven but for this world too. Moltmann-Wendel takes this approach of non-dualistic salvation when discussing the stories of the woman suffering from blood flow in Mark.

The story of the healing of the woman suffering from blood flow in Mark 5 is part of Moltmann-Wendel's argument for a return to embodiment, more specifically a theology of embodiment. The story in Mark 5 'plunges us deeply into the dimensions of the body and shows us the body as a field of energy'. This story is vivid, physical, painful, deeply bodily, disgusting and extremely liberative. It speaks of the bodily experiences of bleeding, puberty, sexual maturity, suffering, medical abuse, illness, emissions, odours and impurity (Moltmann-Wendel 1995:ix). These bodily experiences also meant this woman suffered from religious and social isolation, and bleeding for the time that this woman had, meant death on more than one level (economic, psychological and religious). Her encounter with Jesus was nothing less than an emergency and, in light of the purity laws of ancient Israel, exceedingly dangerous. Her healing meant much more to her than just the healing of her body; Moltmann-Wendel (1995) describes it the following way:

> Her blood remains in her. Her strength no longer flows out. Something belongs to her which has previously been shedding. She is somebody, a body which does not suffer and has to give itself up. (p. x)

Moltmann-Wendel (1995:x) argues that this healing, unlike other biblical narratives, is purely about bodily well-being; it is not about the promise of salvation, and it is something that she found for herself, without help and against all rules and regulations. Both the woman and Jesus had a bodily experience, energy and strength flowed out of Jesus's human body, and the woman received something in return. Jesus's body releases a force that makes another body healthy, breaking an order which was built on the logic of purity, setting himself above the taboos of his time. More than one biblical narrative tells of the ways Jesus challenged the taboos of his culture (Moltmann-Wendel 1982:103). Jesus also uses his own body for healing purposes in further narratives, for example, using his spittle as a means to cure another body (Moltmann-Wendel 1995:37). According to Moltmann-Wendel (1995:xi), with this healing action in the story of the woman suffering from blood flow, Jesus promises *shalom*,

wholeness and well-being, and shows how salvation has 'come about in her body'. Nothing can take this body away from you, discriminate against it, isolate it or induce pain on it. This body belongs to you; it makes you a person, peaceful and liberated.

For Moltmann-Wendel (1995:xii), this story makes it clear what the body, the body of Jesus and the human body, especially that of women, once was to Christianity. This story can and should motivate and inspire us to challenge the loss of our bodies we are experiencing and to ask new questions about our bodies today. This was what Jesus successfully did with his time on earth; his movement was marked by a re-evaluation of the body (Moltmann-Wendel 1995:36). We cannot still afford to proclaim a Jesus, stripped of his passion, anger, relationships, bodiliness and tenderness. His body cannot be distinguished from other human bodies and only be the body of the cross and resurrection without any relationship towards his earthly life (Moltmann-Wendel 1995:45–49).

■ Theology of tenderness: Implications for reconceiving reproductive health

Moltmann-Wendel's argument for a theology of tenderness, according to the earthly and human life of Jesus Christ, contributes to theological language and new imaginative ways of thinking about bodies and embodiment. She says that if we are to regain lost spontaneity we have to learn to think, feel, live and act with our whole sense of being and to do this we should begin to use our imagination when doing theology (Moltmann-Wendel 1982:9). This according to Moltmann-Wendel (1982:9) is important because we have become a church and a theology that has lost touch with women specifically, and is in need of imagination in order for it to affect the whole person.

For Moltmann-Wendel (2001:87), tenderness can transform our reality. This is why Moltmann-Wendel argues that this theology of tenderness should find its place in culture as a

means of communication. We associate tenderness with closeness, warmth and snuggling up and causing people to think of sexuality or more simply just love (Moltmann-Wendel 2001:82). With this being said, Moltmann-Wendel shows that tenderness is not a theological concept and is not present in Dogmatics or directly in the Bible. Therefore, we cannot find these terms in any sermon. She draws on the work of Heinrich Böll when writing how the term tenderness was described as feminine, belittled and ignored, but was revived when he stated that we have a church that was anything but tender (Moltmann-Wendel 2000:84). Moltmann-Wendel (2000:85) called this a 'cultural shift' where the distinction between body and soul was being questioned. Rigby (2012:186) asks a relevant question regarding what the implications are for this theology of tenderness with regard to the current phenomenon of the Internet church and virtual communion. How are we to do theology, and in this case a theology of tenderness, in a society withdrawing and yet longing for human contact and connection? How are we to do theology in a church that can, in many cases, only be described as without tenderness?

Moltmann-Wendel insists that touching will help us experience and accept our bodies. According to Rigby (2012:187), we cannot commune without our bodies, because this is what we are and because God entered into our bodies with us, showing and receiving tenderness from us. Consequently, Moltmann-Wendel invites us to experience God, ourselves and others. Touching makes us experience, accept, love, see and listen to our bodies again. Our body is stimulated through our skin, our largest and most sensitive organ, and this can make it possible for us to experience once again the holistic being that is our body, soul and spirit (Moltmann-Wendel 2000:86). This was the way Jesus healed, by his tender touch, not by great words or speeches, inviting the church of today to follow his example, because through touching and being touched by others, healing and incarnation can take place (Moltmann-Wendel 2000:86, 98).

Moltmann-Wendel (2000:88) offers a brief critique of the thoughts and arguments of a theology of tenderness saying that women are afraid to be forced back into these notions of tenderness and motherliness. It can be viewed as the opposite of renewing, liberation and emancipation. When a theology of tenderness is being professed, especially when it comes to women and their bodies, sensitivity should be given to the fact that tenderness in this case is not seen as weak, soft or only feminine.

Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel's theology of tenderness proposes imaginative reading of the healing narratives in the life of Jesus, showing how the human body had as much importance to him as the human soul, resulting in the clear argument that, for Jesus, salvation was in many cases located in the body itself and the location of the body in community, culture and society. Taking an approach of tenderness towards people, especially women, in need of healing and liberation, with his life and ministry Jesus showed that the body and embodiment remain central, as he lived with his incarnate body in its entirety, being fully human.

The question this chapter would like to address is, what can this theology of tenderness, with the body as being central to the ministry of Jesus, mean for the current discussion in the church with regard to reproductive health? As previously mentioned, the field of reproductive health includes various areas of discussion and study. Discussions can range from abortion, the ethics of reproductive technology, surrogacy, contraception, sexual health, both male and female fertility, reproductive loss to miscarriage. The scope of this chapter limits the possibility of discussing in detail each possible field of study included in reproductive health and how a theology of tenderness can contribute to these discussions, but I want to suggest possible implications.

When keeping the theology of tenderness of Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel in mind, the discussion on reproductive health can change and open our eyes to new possibilities. From personal experience, the dilemmas surrounding reproductive health

experienced by women, in particular, are rarely openly discussed, especially not in the sphere of faith or church communities. As previously mentioned, and with the inspiration behind this journal as evidence, it is clear that there is a need to engage reproductive health theologically, because existing theology cannot adequately speak to the everyday reproductive dilemmas women face. Moltmann-Wendel argues for a theology that can affect the whole person, and to further this argument it will include the reproductive health of a person, and women in general.

To take a brief look at the extensive and mostly aggressive theological discussions, controversies and debates surrounding abortion, it becomes evident that it is devoid of tenderness. Without offering a personal point of view, I would like to reimagine or reconceive the debates surrounding this highly sensitive topic and reality, keeping in mind the argument Moltmann-Wendel makes for a theology of tenderness which she draws from Jesus' tender encounters with the women in John 4, a woman no one dared to talk to, and John 8, a woman doomed by her actions. Moltmann-Wendel's argument for a theology of tenderness offers the possibility for a more theologically tender discussion on abortion and the people (women) it affects and has affected in the past.

Fertility challenges, and consequently infertility, are affecting 15% of South Africans.[34] A theology of tenderness can assist a Christian faith or church community in appropriate theological language, helpful biblical interpretation and educated pastoral guidance when dealing with men and, more specifically, women who are faced with fertility dilemmas. Learning from Moltmann-Wendel's interpretation of the life and work of Jesus, who especially challenged the disconnect with our bodies, blood and body taboos and engaged in a liberating way with the woman who suffered from blood flow in Mark 5, a new approach of tenderness can be imagined. This will have the implication of

34. See https://www.health24.com/Medical/Diseases/Infertility-general-20120721

reconceiving our daily confrontation as church and faith communities and leaders with the ever-increasing fertility challenges people face today. The stigma surrounding infertility and the isolation that childlessness brings are just a few realities a theology of tenderness can begin to counter. A similar argument can be presented for the discussion surrounding the ethics of the use of reproductive technology where infertility is a reality. If our aim is to reconceive reproductive health, and consequently the ethical debate surrounding the current application and development of reproductive technologies, the implications of a theology of tenderness can contribute to liberating and imaginative theological language, ethics and biblical scholarship.

In her book, *Trauma and Grace,* Serene Jones (2009:146) presents a compelling and liberating theology for women who suffer reproductive loss. Webb (2001) writes the following:

> She emphasizes how the borders of the divine persons are fluid, so that the Son who is sent into the world to die is still 'inside' the Father, who maternally cares for the Son and suffers at the Son's death. (p. 510)

She argues that traditional feminist accounts of the self-struggle of taking loss are severe. She suggests that women who have experienced their wombs as the graves of their unborn children while remaining alive themselves can teach us something about the Trinity (Kenneson 2001:344). The heart of the Triune God is a mystery, but through the experience of reproductive loss, a powerful image of God can be made possible. Jones argues that the death of God's Son can be an image that provides a necessary and possible grace-filled resource for women who suffered from reproductive loss and are still embracing the future. Jones suggests that because of the painful experience of the Trinity witnessing the death of Jesus Christ on the cross, women experiencing the similar loss of a child in their bodies can find comfort and solidarity in this knowledge. Dealing with reproductive loss in this theologically and pastorally tender way may contribute to more open, honest and helpful conversation surrounding reproductive loss.

Moltmann-Wendel's previously mentioned argument that Jesus was not only concerned for the salvation of our souls, but our bodies as well, can possibly contribute to further development of our theology when dealing with reproductive loss. Jesus was very much aware that the suffering people experienced in their bodies, contributed to oppression on various other levels as well. When dealing with reproductive loss, the traumatic experience is located wholly in the body. By applying Moltmann-Wendel's suggested theology of tenderness and the salvation Jesus offered to the bodies he encountered in his time on earth, new imaginative theological approaches are possible. Johnson and Moltmann-Wendel both show in their research how Jesus offered *shalom* [wholeness] to the bodies he encountered. Johnson (1994:12) states on the subject of salvation, that if Jesus fed, healed, soothed and cared for persons and their bodies, and if his resurrection affirms our part in the wholeness God can give, then salvation is not only for the soul, but for the body as well.

Through his tender approach, his healing and concern for people's bodily well-being, Jesus offered a wholeness only he can give. A woman suffering from reproductive loss or the loss of an unborn child is greatly in need of such wholeness. Similarly, as mentioned above, when we deal with reproductive loss in this theologically and pastorally tender way, we may possibly contribute opportunities for healing when it comes to reproductive loss and health in general.

If I can be as bold as to say Jesus followed a feminist agenda, on many occasions, in his work and ministry while on earth, it becomes clear how he gave more than one woman agency for her life, her position in her community and especially for her body.

With various encounters, Jesus showed people, especially women, that their bodies belonged to them. Keeping this in mind, what will be the implications for the debates surrounding contraceptive use, availability of contraceptives, affordability of contraceptives and the taboos still surrounding it in our modern

world? What can Jesus's views on women, their bodies and agency contribute to the discussions surrounding domestic violence and sexual abuse?

These brief thoughts and pieces of theology can have liberating and healing implications for women who struggle with dilemmas, such as abortion, fertility, reproductive loss, sexual health, domestic violence and bodily agency in general.

Conclusion

This chapter scratched the surface with regard to the possibilities of a theology of tenderness and the implications for reproductive health. I want to conclude by encouraging theologians, especially female theologians, to further develop research on this topic. May we include the various experiences and stories of different women when it comes to the subject of reproductive health and the theology that can assist us in developing theological language, biblical interpretation and Christian ethics. I firmly believe that the proposed theology of tenderness that Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel learnt and interpreted from the life, work and interactions of Jesus can help us in this enormously important task.

Chapter 5

Intersecting reproductive health: Theological and ethical reflections?

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Introduction

The SRHR of all human beings is a matter of justice. The church in various traditions developed ethical lenses to investigate moral questions of abortion, reproductive loss, childlessness, infertility, stillbirth, miscarriage and surrogacy. These ecclesiastical ethical lenses were mostly developed by men in patriarchal contexts. This chapter approaches SRHR from the perspective of women and queer bodies (umbrella term referring to sexual orientation, gender identity and gender

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expression of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people). 'South Africa is [still] the most unequal country in the world' (Harmse 2013:2). Black women in South Africa within the context of culture, economy and religion do not necessarily have access to reproductive rights as a choice. Queer bodies, because of religious and cultural intolerance and discrimination, cannot freely access health care even in a constitutional democracy where the rights of queer bodies are legally protected. Patriarchy as a hierarchal system of oppression controls the decision-making power of women and heteropatriarchy the decision-making of queer bodies. This chapter engages SRHR through two lenses. Firstly, black feminist scholars have argued for an intersectional instead of a rights-based lens to reproductive health, thereby reconceiving choice (rights) towards reproductive justice (intersectionality). Reproductive justice emphasises gender, race, sexual orientation, class and economic status in decision-making. Secondly, North American philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff (2008), in his book *Justice: Rights and Wrongs*, takes a different approach to traditional rights-based theories by arguing that human rights rest in God who bestows worth on and in human beings. This chapter will employ the theological method of critical bisexuality as developed by the Latin American theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid to the lenses to engage with SRHR. Furthermore, this method will possibly indicate a theological basis for ethical reflections to reconceive SRHR.

■ Reproductive rights and health?

The development of universal human rights after World War II brought a genesis of rights discourse, even for sexual and reproduction rights. Ahlberg and Kulani (2011), in their chapter entitled 'Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights' within the book *African Sexualities*, provide a global and African overview of SRHR. The UDHR and Millennial Goals provide a global context of SRHR (Ahlberg & Kulani 2011:315). The African Charter on

Human and People's Rights (Ahlberg & Kulani 2011:315) of the African Union and South African Bill of Rights Section 9 are examples of the African continent's engagement with SRHR.

These declarations provide a legal framework. While engaging with theological, ethical reflections, we need to define what SRHR is. According to Oranje et al. (2011), the following working definition describes SRHR as:

> [*U*]nderstood as the right for all, whether young or old, women, men or transgender, straight, gay, lesbian or bisexual, HIV positive or negative, to make choices regarding their own sexuality and reproduction, providing these respect the rights of others to bodily integrity. (p. 2)

This is an inclusive definition of sexual and reproductive rights. From this definition, it becomes evident how contested the epistemological and conceptual formulation of SRHR is. Chitando and Njoroge (2016) in the introduction to *Abundant Life: The Churches and Sexuality* admit that the definition of SRHR 'remains contentious'. The contention is evident in the above definition, as it omits people living with disabilities and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people, the most vulnerable in SRHR policies and practices (Mprah 2016:16–20).[35] Despite international and national treatises and legislature advances, SRHR patriarchy and heteropatriarchy hinder decision-making.[36]

35. The contentiousness of defining SRHR remains a vital component in the dialogue between those who hold opposing views to abortion and the conceptual understanding of when life or rather a human being's life commences. This chapter gives a preferential option to the vulnerable women who within patriarchy, moral and ethical agency have been nullified for centuries. Throughout this chapter, vulnerable people include those with less or no power within patriarchal regulatory systems of life.

36. Kezia Batisai writes that '[w]omen find themselves struggling to subvert longstanding gendered hierarchies that are deeply entrenched in and reinforced by patriarchal traditional and religious structures'. Furthermore, Batisai (2015:7–9) notes that '[African] women's reproductive and sexual rights are also regulated by the gendered structures of marriage practices especially the traditional practice of lobola. Whether married through traditional or religious institutions, women's rights to their reproductive and sexual bodies are negotiated through their relationship to the men (fathers, brothers, husbands, in-laws, patriarchal leaders) who represent these institutions. The payment of lobola, through which uxorial

In the United States of America (USA), black feminist activists and scholars coined the term 'reproductive justice' by shedding light on the intersectional[37] struggle of women, LGBTIs, people living with disabilities and people living with HIV. Reproductive justice goes beyond the traditional theoretical framework of women. Ross (2017), one of the reproductive justice movement activists, defines reproductive justice as:

> Reproductive justice is based on three interconnected sets of human rights: (1) the right to have a child under the conditions of one's choosing; (2) the right not to have a child using birth control, abortion, or abstinence; and (3) the right to parent children in safe and healthy environments free from violence by individuals or the state. (p. 290)

Furthermore, according to Ross (2017):

> Reproductive justice is rooted in the belief that systemic inequality has always shaped people's decision making around childbearing and parenting, particularly vulnerable women. Institutional forces such as racism, sexism, colonialism, and poverty influence people's individual freedoms in societies. Other factors – such as immigration status, ability, gender identity, carceral status, sexual orientation, and age – can also affect whether people get appropriate care. (p. 291)

(footnote 36 continues...)
rights are transferred to the husband and his family, effectively grants a man the right to demand sex from his wife. The woman is left with very limited (if any) power to resist her husband's demands, and a challenge to his authority is often the basis for gender-based violence within marriages. Inherent in this practice are silence around women's sexuality and the absence of reproductive and sexual rights in marriage because women feel obliged to fulfil their wifely responsibilities against all odds. The religious narrative that "we [the married couple] are morally upright" further undermines women's ability to raise suspicions of infidelity or to negotiate safe sex and entrenches their vulnerabilities'. Patriarchy polices women's bodies through cultural and religious beliefs. Heteropatriarchy, a belief system favouring heterosexuality as a normative life system, contests the sexual, gender identity and expression of LGBTI people. The SRHR of LGBTI is, therefore, opposed because these sexualities and gender identities defy heteropatriarchy's 'normative systems' of life.

37. 'Intersectionality means that discrimination is both vertical and horizontal and takes place at multiple levels among various identities. Thus, racists are likely to be homophobes and sexists. Multidimensionality suggests that oppression takes place in multiple dimensions. We can be oppressed as women but also women who are lesbians' (Mutua 2011:461).

Reproductive justice, therefore, becomes an umbrella theory also for sexuality and gender (Ross 2017):

> [*T*]rans and intersex people are frequently coerced to undergo gender reassignment surgery that results in involuntary sterilizations in order to obtain vital identity documentation such as driver's licenses that match their preferred identities. (p. 291)

The refusal of SRHR to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intergender (LGBTI) people is the result of religious and cultural intolerance. Thus, failing to secure reproductive justice for all violates the health and well-being of LGBTI people.

In a *festschrift* to Mercy Amba Oduyoye, entitled *African Women, Religion, and Health*, Phiri and Nadar (2006:9) define '[h]ealth [...] in its broad context, encompassing the physical, emotional, psychological and social domains'. Health 'involves a completeness in all aspects of life' (Akoto 2006:99). Authors (all women) in *African Women, Religion and Health* witness and analyse the impact of religion on the health of women. From their witness and analysis, they reconceive life-affirming theology influenced by Oduyoye (Njoroge 2006:63–68).

If SRHR is a rights and health matter that attests to life-affirming, or rather to a good life, then it is a matter of justice. In Africa, the rights-approach discourse is a stumbling block for African church leaders (churches). Chitando and Nyambura (2016:3) argue that '[w]hat is required is an engagement which utilizes the language and idiom of religion and theology'.[38] This chapter, thus, is perhaps a contribution towards reconceiving language and idioms within religion and theology from the African continent. Phiri and Nadar (2006:4) do point out, however, that 'we have yet to systematically and theoretically interrogate [...] meaningfulness within our context [...]' In the next section,

38. Chitando and Njoroge (2016:3) elaborate: 'This is predominantly due to the sensibilities around human rights amongst the African political and religious elite. There is a deep-seated conviction that when the West makes references to human rights, the net result is to portray Africa and Africans as backward, unsophisticated, and in need of tutorship. There is, therefore, an urgent need for sensitivity if greater progress is to be achieved'.

the theology of the late Latin American theologian Marcella's Althaus-Reid will be discussed, and insights will be drawn from Althaus-Reid's work for theological–ethical reflections on a theology of reproductive justice.

Indecent Theology: Towards a theological method for sexual and reproductive health rights?

Intersectional approach as a critical hermeneutical lens in womanist, feminist and queer theologies ushered in multiple angles for the liberation of vulnerable bodies. The heart of the intersectional approach is liberation for those who are oppressed by religious and societal norms that sustain systems of oppression. Traditional arguments of pro-life positions, traditional family values and sex reassignment surgery interpret moral codes for ethical decision-making without considering the context of people, especially those who are vulnerable. Christian ethics ought to be aware of the multiple dimensions and complexities in which ethical and moral decisions are made.

The theological monographs of the late Marcella Althaus-Reid, a bisexual theologian,[39] namely, *Indecent Theology: Sexual Perversions in Sex, Gender, and Politics* (2000) and *Queer God* (2003), are indecent proposals to the decency of oppressive heterosexual theologies. These oppressive theologies are evident in the ideological framework of heterosexuality of twos – man and woman, life and death, sin and grace. Priestly theology in the Old Testament that influenced how Israel and later the church would understand God is a testimony to this 'heterosexual ideology'. Eilberg-Schwartz (1997) explains that:

> [*T*]hey not only believe that God commanded humans to be fruitful and multiply (Genesis 1:27), but regarded reproduction as a central dimension of the covenant between God and Abraham (Genesis 17).

39. Anon (2009).

> This impulse, however, which sprang from the social organization and self-understanding of the priestly community, came into conflict with an important religious conception, namely, that humans are made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26–27). (p. 22)

The Queer God provides an alternative to 'mainstream theological metanarratives [...]' (Cornwall 2011:148).[40] Althaus-Reid 'questions assumptions about the structure and nature of culture and social interactions, particularly those grounded in norms or truths often considered unquestionable or incontrovertible' (Cornwall 2011:149). The Queer God is an indecent '[...] production of God and Jesus' (Althaus-Reid 2003:98). Indecent Theology intersects Liberation Theology and Queer Thinking, located in the lives of ordinary people (2000:2–4). Althaus-Reid was deeply aware of the complexity of ethical–moral decision-making, especially for the vulnerable.[41]

The theological art of Althaus-Reid introduces vulnerable people to a Queer God that is a faggot and a whore.[42] In obscenity,

40. For Althaus-Reid (2000:20), religious and political institutions hide the knowledge of the metanarratives under their skirts when reflecting: 'Every discourse of religious and political authority hides under its skirts suppressed knowledge in exile, which is marginal and indirect speech. This is knowledge which people dictate through religious and political counter symbols and mythological contradictions of the official versions. Indecent Theology is, therefore, made of these contradictions and contradictums, and a transgression which is a regression, a going backwards to some struggle or primary resistance to the discourses of religious power, not to a beginning of sexual resistance fixed in time, but to the several openings which were suppressed or calmed down in the process of the hegemonisation of meaning'.

41. Reflecting on this complexity, Althaus-Reid (2000:n.p.) writes: 'In theology, and in revolutionary theology, it is discontinuity and not continuation which is most valuable and transformative, so the location of excluded areas in theology is crucial. For instance, poverty and sensuality as a whole has been marginalised from theology. Why does a theology from the poor need to be sexually neutral, a theology of economics which excludes their desires?' Althaus-Reid (2000:n.p.), furthermore, responds to these questions: 'Indecent Theology is based on the sexual experiences of the poor, using economic and political analysis while unveiling the sexual ideology of Systematic Theology. Theology is a sexual act, and Indecent Theologians are called to be sexual performers of a committed praxis of social justice and transformation of the structures of economic and sexual oppression in their societies'.

42. Indecent Theology, which is part of Queer Theology, uses transgressive concepts to talk about God (Cheng 2011:9–10).

Althaus-Reid develops her Bi/Christology theology. Defining Bi/Christology, Althaus-Reid (2003) writes:

> Bi/Christology walks like a nomad in lands of opposition and exclusive identities and does not pitch its tent forever in the same place. If we consider that in the Gospel of John 1:14, the Verb is said to have 'dwelt among us' as in a tabernacle (a tent) or 'put his tent amongst us', the image conveys Christ's high mobility and lack of fixed spaces or definitive frontiers. Tents are easily dismantled overnight and do not become ruins or monuments; they are rather folded and stored or reused for another purpose when old. Tents change shape in strong winds, and their adaptability rather than their stubbornness is one of their greatest assets. The beauty of this God/tent symbolic is that it can help us to discover Christ in our processes of growth, the eventual transformations through unstable categories to be, more than anything else, a Christ of surprises. (pp. 119–120)

Here God is stripped of fixed theological models and understanding. Cheng (2011:9–10) notes that the 'erasing of the boundaries of essentialist categories of not only sexuality and gender identity, but also more fundamental boundaries such as life vs death, and divine vs human' disrupts 'heteronormative Christologies' (Goss 2003:161). The SRHR of vulnerable people seek God who is located or rather incarnated in their struggle of abortion, reproductive loss, childlessness, infertility, stillbirth, miscarriage, surrogacy, adoption and involuntary sterilisation.[43]

Althaus-Reid (2003:4) locates 'God's face in loving relationships outside the borders of decent theology, and in the context of the Other as the poor and excluded'. Doing theology, according to Althaus-Reid, is a critical bisexual method. This method is

43. Feminist theologian Letty Russel reflecting on the birth narrative of Jesus reads the account of Matthew's Gospel. Russel (2006:45) sees in Matthew's depiction of the genealogy of Jesus subversive 'cracks in this patriarchal framework'. 'Matthew includes Tamar, Ruth, Rahab, and Bathsheba in the genealogy. They are viewed as dangerous women because they are outside the traditional patriarchal marriage or family structure of Israel' (Russel 2006:45). Here we see the God of Israel transgresses, subverts and destabilises heteronormative theological binaries of inclusion versus exclusion.

epistemologically located in Trinitarian Theology.[44] As a method, critical bisexuality[45] is unstable, subversive and triad other than to heterosexuality's binary system. This theological method is an indecent proposal to the ethical narratives of heterosexual theologies. In the following section, Nicholas Wolterstorff's *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (2008) and *Justice in Love* (2011) will furthermore frame the discussion on theological–ethical reflections for SRHR.

Reconceiving choice towards justice?

African church leaders and perhaps indirectly churches' contestation of the rights-based approaches on SRHR challenges activists and scholars to reconceive rights from an African experience. American philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff reconceives traditional rights-based approach towards justice.

44. Althaus-Reid (2003:16) explains this Trinitarian approach of a critical bisexual method as '[by] believing in the Trinity, we mean that there is an acceptance that theology is not a symmetrical art (a dyadic, one-to-one relationship with issues of dogma and tradition) but is a twisted one, following a path of reflections marked by disruptions of dyads or scandals. For we are not saying that God is one, manifested in a father–son relationship, but that God is a relationship of three. This is a disruption of scandalons or little stones on the pavements of theology (to use a biblical metaphor) which are an important part of the presence of the "third" in theology as a process. Apart from that, Queer relationships provide the encounter of the third type in theology par excellence. For instance, the confessionary scene is made by an encounter of the third, or the encounter with the Queer, because the dyad is disrupted by someone else who confesses a difference, or non-alignment with herself'.

45. Critical bisexuality means here to think in a triadic way; it is not complementary but permutative, thus providing a location of non-rigid exchanges among people's actions and reflections, as a base for a theology rooted in more genuine (and diverse) dialogues. The point is that because 'bisexual desires do not relate indiscriminately to any form of sexual identities' (Althaus-Reid 2003:16), but only to some form of sexual identities which heterosexuality cannot necessarily grasp, and on a fluctuating basis, theology as a critical bisexual art can still be thematic and particular. Perhaps, the point in Bisexual Theology is that the instability of the sexual construction of Christian ethics, the reading of the Scriptures and Systematic Theology becomes more obvious in their contextual and transitive processes of desire. That is the nature of the subversiveness in theology, which lies at the core of critical bisexual praxis. It is because bisexual desires 'cannot be pinned down in a stable or fixed way' (Althaus-Reid 2003:16) that the theological process differs.

In *Justice: Rights and Wrongs*, Wolterstorff (2008:vii) admits that 'injustice [...] impelled [him] to think about justice'.[46] Justice, here, was 'not the imperatives of some theoretical scheme or the duties of some academic position', it is because '[t]he victims confronted me; I was not looking for them' (Wolterstorff 2008:vii). Wolterstorff explores justice from a theological and philosophical perspective.[47] Wolterstorff engages the concepts and narratives of rights-order[48] of justice and inherent rights[49] by archaeologically investigating the genesis of rights. For Wolterstorff, the problem with rights order is not natural rights; however, inherent rights are the issue.

46. 'In September of 1976 I attended a conference at the University of Potchefstroom in South Africa. The University of Potchefstroom was then very much a white university, founded and maintained by a branch of the Afrikaners known familiarly as "Doppers." There were Afrikaner scholars present at the conference, and "black" and "colored" scholars from South Africa. There were Dutch scholars who were extremely knowledgeable about what was going on in South Africa and furious with the Afrikaners over the South African policy of apartheid. And there were North Americans like myself who had heard of apartheid but were nowhere near as well-informed as the Dutch' (Wolterstorff 2008:vii). Wolterstorff (2008:viii) was also involved '[f]or almost thirty years' in the Palestinian struggle against Israel.

47. In his own words, Wolterstorff (2008:xiii) describes his work: 'The book as a whole is philosophical; I offer a philosophical account of justice. But in addition to philosophy of the usual sort, the reader will find theology, biblical interpretation, medieval intellectual history, late-antique intellectual history, and wisps of sociology'.

48. The rights-order theoretical conception of justice holds that '[t]he rightly ordered society is the one that measures up to some socially transcendent standard for right order' (Wolterstorff 2008:29). Furthermore, contemporary rights-order theorists argue '[...] that in a just society there will be rights conferred on members of the social order by the legislation, the social practices, and the speech acts of human beings. But that, they hold, is the extent of rights; there are no natural rights and, in particular, no natural human rights' (Wolterstorff 2008:31).

49. 'The inherent rights theorist agrees that many of the rights we possess are possessed on account of something conferring them on us – some human agreement, some piece of human legislation, some piece of divine legislation, whatever. But he holds that, in addition, we possess some rights that are not conferred, some rights that are inherent. On account of possessing certain properties, standing in certain relationships, performing certain actions, each of us has a certain worth. The worth supervenes on being of that sort: having those properties, standing in those relationships, performing those actions. And having that worth is sufficient for having the rights. There does not have to be something else that confers those rights on entities of this sort' (Wolterstorff 2008:36).

On the one hand, rights-order theorists contend that rights are conferred to individuals and institutions (Wolterstorff 2008:35). On the other hand, inherent rights derive from a person's inherent worth (Wolterstorff 2008:37). In Wolterstorff's (2008) view, the problem with inherent rights is:

> [*T*]o think of ourselves as bearers of inherent rights is to promote possessive individualism in society, to encourage individualistic modes of thought, and – to mention a point that has been lurking in the background all along – to remove God from the picture. (p. 43)

This argument paves the way for Wolterstorff to contest traditional narratives of natural rights to introduce his theistic theory of inherent rights. By contesting narratives that rights derive from the Enlightenment period, Wolterstorff's (2008:44–64) archaeological findings from Roman and canon lawyers and the early church fathers subvert these traditional perspectives. Destabilising traditional perspectives and arguments of the genesis of rights, Wolterstorff (2008:64) proposes that '[...] natural inherent rights goes back to the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Scriptures'.

Wolterstorff engages with Old and New Testament conceptions of justice to claim his assertion that biblical writers were aware of inherent natural rights; however, they did not conceptualise it. The Hebrew word for justice *mishpat* is twofold, namely, primary and rectifying justice. These forms of justice, argues Wolterstorff, is directed at a quartet of the vulnerable.[50] Justice for the vulnerable, according to Wolterstorff, paves the way towards discovering that God loves justice and God is justice (Wolterstorff 2008:81). Thus, Israel as a nation is called to do justice as 'public remembrance, as memorial' (Wolterstorff 2008:80).

50. 'The widows, the orphans, the resident aliens, and the impoverished were the bottom ones, the low ones, the lowly. That is how Israel's writers spoke of them. Given their position at the bottom of the social hierarchy, they were especially vulnerable to being treated with injustice. They were downtrodden, as our older English translations nicely put it. The rich and the powerful put them down, tread on them, trampled them. Rendering justice to them is often described as "lifting them up"' (Wolterstorff 2008:76).

Elaborating on the concept of justice in Old Testament Wolterstorff (2008) writes:

> God desires that each and every human being shall flourish, that each and every shall experience what the Old Testament writers call shalom. Injustice is perforce the impairment of shalom. That is why God loves justice. God desires the flourishing of each and every one of God's human creatures; justice is indispensable to that. Love and justice are not pitted against each other but intertwined. (p. 82)

In the Old Testament, justice establishes the well-being of the vulnerable and all people. Although the Old Testament used the term *mishpat* as justice, in the New Testament this term is widely used. This usage, says Wolterstorff (2008:110–113), culminates in translation challenges. However, Wolterstorff locates justice in the New Testament in Jesus.

Wolterstorff (2008) accounts justice from the Gospels whereby 'Jesus is the Spirit-anointed servant who proclaims the coming of justice'. Three Christological models of justice are explored. Firstly, Jesus (Wolterstorff 2008):

> [*I*]dentified himself as God's anointed one, the Messiah, whose vocation it is to proclaim to the poor, the blind, the captives, and the oppressed the good news of the inauguration of 'the year of the Lord's favour' when justice-in-shalom will reign. (p. 115)

Secondly, 'Jesus as a martyr of justice being crucified without justice being rendered' (Wolterstorff 2008:118). Thirdly, 'Jesus as King announces the coming of the Kingdom of God. These Christological models are expressed in "Jesus" inclusion in his company of those perceived as religiously defective or inferior [...]' (Wolterstorff 2008:127). Jesus, for Wolterstorff, sees the 'rights' of people as having worth; therefore, the vulnerable because of their worth ought to receive justice.

This account of justice leads Wolterstorff to develop his theory of theistic justice. Again, subverting and destabilising traditional views, Wolterstorff (2008:342–352) asserts that it is wrong to locate human rights in the *Imago Dei*. Wolterstorff (2008:352, 353)

calls his theistic account of justice 'bestowed worth', because 'being loved by God gives a human being great worth'. This worth, Wolterstorff (2008) explains, finds form in 'love as attachment'. Wolterstorff (2008) summarises what he means by a theistic account of rights as follows:

> If God loves a human being with the love of attachment, that love bestows great worth on that human being [...] And I conclude that if God loves, in the mode of attachment, each and every human being equally and permanently, then natural human rights in here in the worth bestowed on human beings by that love. Natural human rights are what respect for that worth requires. (p. 299)

Criticism against Wolterstorff's theistic account is wide-ranging. However, Wolterstorff's account of theistic justice that transgresses, disrupts and subverts traditional thinking of justice finds expression in the image of Santa Librada that bestows indecent justice to vulnerable people. Althaus-Reid (2003) transgresses, destabilises and disrupts Christology by dressing Christ up as Santa Librada.

Marcella (in Althaus-Reid 2003) explains the historicity of Santa Librada as:

> [*A*] young woman who looks like the Virgin Mary, yet she is crucified and her body hangs. [...] Librada is the crucified Woman Christ of the poor; others tend to see her as a crucified Virgin Mary. Who is Librada? She is not Christa, the crucified Christ woman icon of the Anglican Cathedral of New York. Christa is the iconic image of a female Christ without ambiguity; Librada is the popular ambiguous divine cross-dresser of the poor, the unstable image of a Christ dressed as a Mary. Librada as a cross between Christ and the Virgin Mary is a much sought-after icon. (pp. 79–80)

Santa Librada offers, however, the crossing of boundaries of legality, which Mary and Jesus would not or perhaps otherwise could not cross. Santa Librada does not only challenge the decency of Latin American gender behaviour, but that of Africa and South Africa in particular.

Conclusion

The intersectional approach in reproductive justice reconceives theological engagement in SRHR. Reproductive justice for women, LGBTIs and immigrants contest the dominant church interpretation of the Bible, tradition and society's ethical narratives. Wolterstorff's account of justice reconceives SRHR theologically to think about Sexual and Reproductive Justice and Health. Subverting the binary conceptualisation of rights order and inherent rights towards inherent natural rights, Wolterstorff transgresses and disrupts heteronormative ideological thinking of justice. Erasing the boundaries of the hierarchal order of patriarchy reconceives Sexual and Reproductive Justice and Health on the African continent to discover our own African Bi/Christological models that are rooted in African people's liberation from oppressive cultural and religious systems.

Chapter 6

Mothering as sacred duty and metaphor: The theology of Mercy Oduyoye

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Introduction

Reconceiving reproductive health includes, among many other valuable themes of exploration, reconceiving the notion of motherhood. Motherhood is often referred to as a sacred duty and childlessness, voluntary or otherwise, is seen as a bane directly opposing the divine command given at creation to 'be fruitful and multiply' (Gn 1:28). In theological reflection, motherhood is often metaphorically linked to the doctrine of creation, as mothers create and nurture life in their wombs and

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give birth to new life. Motherhood is also a prominent theme in the theology of Ghanian theologian Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye.

For an extensive period of time, Phiri and Nadar (2006:2, *emphasis in original*) remark, Oduyoye was 'the *only* African woman [...] to write and publish theological reflections of any significance'. Furthermore, Oduyoye is regarded as the mother of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians and while various descriptions have been ascribed to her work, as summarised by Marais (2015:172), one of the best-known monikers assigned to her is 'the mother of African women's theologies' (Phiri & Nadar 2006:10). In reflecting on motherhood as a metaphor, Oduyoye is then a particularly relevant theologian to focus on, as she is not only a leading African theologian, but being childless herself has written extensively on the notion of mothering. In this chapter, Oduyoye's distinction between 'motherhood' and 'mothering' will be discussed in order to consider the notion of mothering as a sacred duty and metaphor. This will be done by first making this distinction clear, looking at Oduyoye as a mother and examining the mythical figure of Anowa as found in Oduyoye's theology as a mother. Reflecting on Oduyoye's use of mothering as a metaphor, this contribution will then refer to the doctrine of creation and end by briefly proposing how Oduyoye's theology can be helpful in thinking in theological terms about reproductive loss.

The distinction between motherhood and mothering

In making this distinction between motherhood, a biological action of bearing and raising children (Oduyoye 2002:57–58), and mothering, the 'enhancement of life', Oduyoye expresses her 'vision of the care for human beings' (Marais 2015:192). Motherhood, the biological act of procreation, is a communal

blessing that women bring to their communities (Pemberton 2000:99), but Oduyoye does not refer to motherhood as a duty, religious or otherwise. On the other hand, mothering, caring for other human beings, is (Oduyoye 2002):

> [*A*] religious duty. It is what a good socio-political and economic system should be about, if the human beings entrusted to the state are to be fully human, nurtured to care for, and take care of, themselves, one another and their environments. (p. 57)

Accordingly, Oduyoye claims that mothering, this sacred duty, applies to all people and not only individuals who become biological mothers. Women and men alike are called to the sacred duty of mothering, and Oduyoye, therefore, defines liberative African theology as a 'two-winged theology' that, like a bird needs two wings to fly, both women and men are required to fulfil this duty (Marais 2015:173; Pemberton 2000:107). With this distinction between motherhood as biological and mothering as a sacred duty applicable to all people in mind, this chapter now turns to Oduyoye herself as a mother.

■ Oduyoye as mother

In African culture, Oduyoye (2008:84) remarks, 'a mother is considered a happy state while childlessness is a bane to be avoided at all costs'. Jones (2011:230) refers to this bane of childlessness when she states that the grief related to reproductive loss, such as infertility, stillbirth and miscarriage does not occur in a void but is always 'socially mediated'. Like other griefs, cultural context will shape the grief of reproductive loss on many different levels. She notes the 'powerful cultural assumptions about the value of motherhood' (Jones 2011:230).

In an interview with Oluwatomisin Oredein (2016:155), Oduyoye states that her childhood formation in a matrilineal system is not something that she consciously reflected on, until after her marriage when she 'moved into a patrilineal culture – a culture that was not only patrilineal but also patriarchal'.

She went on to explain that while the matrilineal system she grew up in was also rooted in a patriarchal culture, women are allowed to develop 'with a sense of self-esteem, with a sense of importance in their family' (Oredein 2016:155). Within this system, a person's status is dependent on their mother, and familial responsibilities fall on the firstborn. Oduyoye indicates that if the firstborn is a girl, 'everyone is assured that the family will continue' (Oredein 2016:155).

She goes on to explain that as her mother's firstborn child of nine, she became 'the second mother' (Oredein 2016:156), caring for her younger siblings, tending to the other aspects of the household and being hospitable to others. When a person comes to your door needing help, she expounds, 'these are human beings. The point is that they need your assistance; you give it, and you treat everybody the same' (Oredein 2016:156). This is then tied with Oduyoye's conception of what mothering is – taking care of others.

She (Oduyoye 2002:57) notes that while she has not experienced motherhood, she knows what mothering means, 'I have accompanied my mother through her motherhood [...] I am not a mother but I have children'. It is in this manner that Oduyoye (2002:57) can then claim that mothering 'is a religious duty'. This is because mothering is about nurturing and taking care of ourselves, others and the environment (Oduyoye 2002:57). Accordingly, biological motherhood can be said to be the embodiment of this sacred duty and calling, but not its exclusive form.

Speaking of mothering as a religious duty in Oduyoye's theology, therefore, does not apply only to individuals that become biological mothers, but a sacred duty and calling to all people. Mothering includes the calling to live a 'life of letting go, a readiness to share resources and to receive with appreciation what others offer' (Oduyoye 2002:58). Therefore, for Oduyoye (2002:24), mothering is living the style of life that God brings to us in Jesus, a way of life 'that puts others first, that saves others'.

This way of life is one that refuses to 'stand by while others are being hurt, exploited, cheated, or left to die' (Oduyoye 2002:24). For this reason, Oduyoye (2008:83) can state that 'Jesus was a mother par excellence'. She describes Jesus as 'compassionate and caring', anticipating the needs of others and rendering service unto others, 'teaching them, healing them, waking up their dead, saving them from exploitation and victimization' (Oduyoye 2008:83).

A significant aspect of Jesus' life, Oduyoye (2008:85) indicates, was to care for the 'downtrodden and the marginalized of society'. For Jesus, she continues, a crowd is always more than a crowd, and the way that he interacts with crowds – feeding them, touching them, healing them and hearing their cries (Oduyoye 2008:85) – demonstrates this. These are all actions that are usually seen as the duty of the mother, especially when it relates to children. Traditionally, mothers would be responsible for feeding and comforting children, tending to them when they hurt themselves or become ill. Mothering in Oduyoye's theology then becomes more than descriptive, but can be seen as a metaphor. This notion will be examined in the following section.

■ Mothering as metaphor

In her reflecting on mothering as a sacred duty, Oduyoye applies this duty to more than only individual persons bearing and raising biological children, as indicated in the 'Oduyoye as mother' section. Accordingly, mothering can also be described as a metaphor in her theology, one that is involved in caring and nurturing, the unwillingness to stand to the side while people are exploited and mistreated.

Oduyoye states, 'I have the responsibility to make the earth thrive, to make the community thrive so that I can also thrive' (Oredein 2016:162). African women, Oduyoye (2002:24) notes, 'carry a mothering agenda'. The metaphor of mothering is

particularly expressed through Oduyoye's (2002:50) discussion of the womb as the location of care, because the womb is said to become distressed at witnessing 'suffering and injustice' and should, therefore, 'give birth to new life' (Oduyoye 2002:55; see also Marais 2015:192–193).

In calling for all people to partake in the sacred duty of mothering, Oduyoye reconceives traditional conceptions of marital relationships. She asks whether one can claim that there is 'mutuality and reciprocity in marital relationships when the wife is required to complement the husband's needs' (Pui-lan 2004:14), but not the other way around. Ultimately, Oduyoye challenges the image presented by John Mbiti of what the African perspective on love and marriage should be, noting that this comes from a male point of view. While Mbiti views childless women as outcasts, Oduyoye (1993b) states:

> He is presenting a man's concerns for marriage. That the whole issue of the contemporary struggles of married women in the modern sector is not discussed is related to the factor of perspectives and experience. (pp. 360–361)

At the same time, Oduyoye is culturally sensitive and places the issues faced by African women within the broader context, including social and economic realities. Kwok Pui-lan (2004:20) indicates that 'Oduyoye knows that polygamy sometimes arises out of dire economic conditions, and she does not condemn the practice outright'. Oduyoye (1993b:362) notes that changing outlooks on procreation and a developing consideration of mutuality and partnership in marital unions will make polygamous marriages less attractive.

In Oduyoye's self-understanding and positioning herself as an African woman theologian, Oduyoye (2002:70; see also Marais 2015:172) has quite extensively engaged with the mythical figure of Anowa, 'Africa's ancestress'. In the following section, the figure of Anowa as mother will be looked at, indicating how Oduyoye's understanding of mothering is prevalent in the figure of this ancestress.

Anowa as mother

Oduyoye (2002:72) describes her people, the Akan, as 'the children of Anowa', and tells the story of Anowa leading the people to 'freedom and prosperity' (Oduyoye 2002:72). Anowa, she states, has always held a fascination for her, and she has been haunted by the ancestress' 'dreams and would-have-been priestly vocation' (Oduyoye 2002:73). Oduyoye (2002:73) further describes herself as being empowered by Anowa's resolve on chosen hard work as self-realisation and her model of 'life-in-community'. At the same time, Oduyoye (2002:73) is frightened by Anowa's final surrender to what society dictates.

In Anowa, Oduyoye (2002:70) sees the continent of Africa; her 'life of daring, suffering and determination'. Anowa is further the personification of a woman wholly taking part in that which is 'life-sustaining and life-protecting, someone worthy of being named an ancestress' (Oduyoye 2002:76). Oduyoye calls African women the 'daughters of Anowa' in her work with the same name (Oduyoye 1995).

While she does not make an explicit connection between Anowa as mother and the theological concept of mothering she discusses, these 'beads and strands' can be quite easily drawn together. She describes Anowa and her people as someone 'characterised more by a communal instinct' than a 'selfish urge for self-glorification' (Oduyoye 2002:76). This is very similar to the image of mothering that she describes, where mothering entails putting others first and seeking the welfare and flourishing of others and the community.

Anowa, as a personification of the continent of Africa, is described in terms of her 'love and respect for life, for people, and for nature' (Oduyoye 2002:73), all characteristics of mothering that Oduyoye describes elsewhere. Furthermore, the daughters of Anowa are described in terms of the tasks that African women usually perform, with Oduyoye remarking that they 'pick up the old hoes and their wooden trays and go to

the farm to gather the familiar harvest and the firewood, so that the familiar soup may be ready' (Oduyoye 2002:74).

Oduyoye (2002:72) reflects on 'the Christian claim to promote the worth (equal value) of every person' and notes that it is often contradicted by women's experiences in the church. It was previously noted that mothering as a metaphor in Oduyoye's theology applies to all people, and as such, she can claim that liberation, observing, analysing, thinking and creating is the responsibility of 'all of us, women and men' (Oduyoye 2002:43). It is, in particular, the notion of mothering as creating which will be examined in the following section.

■ Mothering and a doctrine of creation

Oduyoye (2002:63) reflects on creation and notes that in the economy of God, 'the human being is a necessary and integral part'; however, as God has given the earth's management to the human beings that he created, this management 'has become exploiting, except where mothers are concerned'. To manage the survival of those who depend on them, mothers, as previously noted, put others first.

In considering creation, Oduyoye (2002:62) notes the interdependence of creation, as she has indicated the interdependence of men and women in her 'two-winged theology'. While salvation is the prominent doctrine throughout her theology, and Oduyoye (1986:246) remarks that 'for theology to be relevant to African culture it has to speak of salvation', her discussion of mothering can also be intimately related to a doctrine of creation.

Thompson (2011:395) indicates that theological interpretation of giving birth is often viewed as 'an image of God's life-giving work of Creator'. One such prominent example is Sallie McFague, who utilises metaphors such as mother, lover, friend and spirit to speak of the agency of God in the universe. The first of these metaphors is God as Mother, and McFague (1987:83–84)

emphasises God's mode of agency in creation by describing the act of creation as birthing and sustaining.

Thompson refers to the creation of life as making room. During pregnancy, she indicates, 'a woman's body makes room for the child growing within her, the protective space of the womb swelling outwards' (Thompson 2011:396). Making room is not only a biological process, however, and in a more contemplative interpretation, Jones focusses on a mother's creative work also in terms of its narrative dimensions. A mother, she notes, performs tasks of envisioning, imagining, conjuring and anticipation as she prepares and hopes for the future of her child (Jones 2011:233). It is not only the body of the mother but her 'whole being' that 'stretches itself' into the future of her child, connecting 'the space of her own becoming' with that of her child (Jones 2011:233–234).

The importance of space and creating room in the doctrine of creation is further emphasised in Jürgen Moltmann's (1993a:108) description of creation, where he makes the distinction 'between creation *outwards* and *inwards*' (Kotzé 2013:188). Moltmann indicates that creation is an act of the Triune God in unity, directed outwards. In creation, similar to other doctrines such as incarnation and redemption (Kotzé 2013):

> [*T*]he inner life of God [...] has to be distinguished from the outward acts of God. The inner life provides the reason and justification of the outward acts. A self-limitation of God who is infinite and omnipresent must be assumed because of the *creatio ex nihilo*, creation out of nothing; there is for God a 'within' and a 'without' and God goes creatively 'out of [*Godself*]'. It is only because God withdraws into Godself that the space exists where God becomes active creatively; rather, therefore, creation exists simultaneously outside and inside of God [*(Moltmann 1993b:87–88)*]. The trinitarian relationship is so wide that there is space, time and freedom for the whole of creation within. Creation is therefore a feminine concept, a bringing forth by God letting the world become and be in Godself. In Moltmann's opinion, the very act of creation is one of self-humiliation and self-limitation. God clears out in order to create space for the world that is to be. To make something 'outside' [*of Godself*], 'the infinite God

> must have made room for this finitude beforehand' [*(Moltmann 1993a:109), inside Godself*]. In this sense, creation itself is the zone of godforsakenness. (p. 189)

While Moltmann (1993b:146) does not make use of theological language that speaks of creation taking place in the womb of God, he does recognise the metaphor of God as Mother in the creation of the world as a living space. The notion of the space of creation and the creation of space in life is prominent in Oduyoye's theology.

She surveys the ways in which mothers in African communities especially are appreciated for the work they do in creating and sustaining homes. Broadening rather than restricting the act of creation and sustaining, she argues, leads to homes becoming 'living structures [...] not places where women are placed but a space in which to be human' (Oduyoye 1993a:15). In this way, the home serves as a metaphorical extension of the womb as well, the continuance of creative work, where 'a helpless thing' can grow to become 'a confident self-naming adult' (Oduyoye 1995:142–143). This description again serves to extend mothering beyond biology, but to a larger, also social and political, calling. In commenting on Oduyoye's work, Thompson (2011:397) remarks that this creative work 'considered in the work of their bodies, their narratives, and their communities – images the creative work of God'.

Oduyoye (1986:2–3) is sceptical of 'traditional dogmatic and systematic theology', does not attempt to 'set out to give an account of systematic theology in Africa' (Oduyoye 1986:vii) and even describes her work as 'unsystematic' (Oduyoye 1986:vii). At the same time, however, Marais (2015:178) notes that Oduyoye 'attempts to account for her insights into "traditional doctrines"'. Later, Oduyoye (2002:x) reassures her readers of her awareness of the analytical nature of doctrine and expresses her desire to contribute to 'the struggle to shape orthodoxy, biblical and historical'. The importance of contextual and *lived* theology is highlighted in Oduyoye's theology. In this line of thought, in the

last section of this chapter, I wish to indicate briefly how an understanding of the doctrine of creation and, in particular, Oduyoye's understanding of mothering can be highly contextual to theological thinking around reproductive loss.

Oduyoye's concept of mothering, creation and reproductive loss

It was noted earlier that viewing the act of God's creation as God withdrawing from a space in order to create that space, as described by Moltmann, means correspondingly describing creation as a space of godforsakeness, which might well in some cases be defined as an experience of being forsaken by God, when the desire to become a mother, to create a living space for a child in one's womb and life, is thwarted. Reproductive loss can incorporate many realities, such as infertility, miscarriage, stillbirth and even the loss of an existing child.

Jones (2011:230) discusses reproductive loss and indicates that at the same time the desire to want to have biological children is also more complex and notes the 'reality of competing and often conflicting desires about its possibility'. The grief that comes with reproductive loss can be described as the ruining of a prospect and expectation (Jones 2011:230). When reflecting on reproductive loss from the perspective of a doctrine of creation and, in particular, in terms of Oduyoye's concept of mothering, the question can be asked, what one does with the 'analogy between the creative work of the mother and the creative work of God' (Thompson 2011:n.p.) when faced with the reality of reproductive loss?

Thompson indicates that the mourning of a child appears to reflect much of the work a mother does in preparing for a living child, including physical, narrative and communal. Mourning mothers often continue to identify themselves as mothers to the deceased child, and continue to create spaces for the child in mourning; 'speaking of the child, caring for the grave, and

identifying themselves in terms of their relationship to the child' (Thompson 2011:398). In this sense, the narrative work of mothering continues to create space for the child in memories and in the narrative of the family and community.

In imaging God, Thompson (2011:399) continues, mothers 'make room for the other to be human in both childbirth and mourning'. This is a communal notion that is closely related to mothering as understood by Oduyoye. In creation, like a mother creates room for a child, God creates room for us. Viewing creation in this manner includes seeing 'the human story as full of potential, but still incomplete, like the story of a child' (Thompson 2011:409). This story plays out in a world filled with suffering, violence and death, and, therefore, a theology of creation is influenced by the 'eschatological and apocalyptic hope that sees not just the potential of the "not yet," but also remembers and mourns the lost potential' (Thompson 2011:410). Such an eschatological hope does not deny the reality of suffering, also the suffering of reproductive loss, or turn away from mourning the loss of individuals and communities, but develops its power from the communal life, renewing the human story in the presence of God who offers new hope.

In Oduyoye's vision of God unifying creation and eschatology, she offers the vision of her grandmother busy stringing beads. Some beads are new, some are polished, some are on old damaged threads, some are timeworn and broken, and some are no longer beautiful. In restringing the beads, her grandmother mixes old and new, fixes broken strands and polishes dull old beads to reuse. She is recreating, and 'all is flexible, all is renewable' through her 'deliberate choices and delicate handling' through which she recreates a new united whole (Oduyoye 1995:208). Oduyoye (1995) interlaces this representation of her grandmother with images of human and divine mothering, noting:

> I think of wholeness, a whole being who mothers a whole universe and clothes it with love [...] I see a time-consuming affair, a new challenge, and I see her transparent joy. I see shredded lives being bounded

> together by intertwining them. I see her, with her back straight and her eyes straining to join the ends of a broken thread, creating a new pattern. (pp. 209–210)

In this vision of God's mothering, our interrelatedness to one another and to God comes to the fore and in this communal space, the empty space of mourning, Thompson (2011:410) indicates, 'has the potential to become once again the full, expectant space of birth'. Oduyoye's doctrine of creation and vision of mothering can in this manner contribute to a beginning to deal with reproductive loss.

Conclusion

Reconceiving reproductive health includes, among many other responsibilities and tasks, rethinking the manner in which motherhood is understood. This chapter discussed Mercy Oduyoye's distinction between 'motherhood' and 'mothering'. The different ways in which Oduyoye describes these two concepts, where 'motherhood' is seen as the biological act of bearing and raising children, and 'mothering' is nurturing and the sacred duty of taking care of others and resisting injustice, have profound implications for the discussion of mothering as a religious duty. In looking at Oduyoye as a mother and the mythical figure of Anowa as mother in Oduyoye's theology, mothering as a metaphor was discussed in this chapter to make the argument that all people are called to mother within the Christian community. Mothering is concerned with the flourishing of others and includes living a life where resources are shared and the gifts of others appreciated and celebrated. This way of life, for Oduyoye, is the style of life that God has brought to us in Jesus Christ and results in the refusal to stand by while others suffer.

As a mother cares for her children, metaphorically, the Christian calling includes the care for others, and in this way mothering can be said to be a sacred duty, one which we are all called to fulfil, men and women alike, whether we have biological children,

adopted children, are trying to have children, choose not to have children, are unable to have children or have lost children. As metaphorical mothers, we are called to care for and nurture each other, speaking out against oppression and exploitation of people and the earth. Communities of mutual flourishing fulfil the sacred duty of mothering as understood in Oduyoye's theology as a metaphor that applies to all people. This chapter, moreover, discussed a doctrine of creation in terms of mothering to indicate how Oduyoye's theology can be contextual not only in terms of mothering as a metaphor and a sacred duty, but in reflecting on and dealing with reproductive loss.

Part Two

Biblical reflections

Chapter 7

Reproduction and the responsibility of royal representation: A reading of Genesis 1:26–28

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Introduction

Human procreation is a complex contemporary ethical issue that has ties with the present ecological crisis and requires a considered and accountable response from a theological

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doctrine of creation. This doctrine deals with the belief in God as 'the creator of heaven and earth' [*creatorem coeli et terrae*][51] and has the task of rethinking and reformulating this article of faith in a context where humans continue to contribute to and compound the crisis of creation.[52] Rampant reproduction and overpopulation exacerbate the problem, and a theological doctrine of creation can therefore ill afford to ignore ethical questions regarding humans' ability to procreate and how often they do so. Of course, theology is not the only stakeholder in these issues, and for it to find its distinctive voice in the clamour of opinions, it should critically engage with its vast intellectual heritage. Indeed, modern theologians are in a very fortunate position; they are heirs to unbroken streams of traditions whose sources reach back to the 'foreign country' of the ancient past. This embarrassment of riches includes the sought-after 'wisdom of all the ancients' (Sir 39:1). By this 'wisdom' I mean ideas and convictions embedded in the thought-worlds of ancient cultures that are inferable from available artefacts. Some of these traditions of ideas and convictions are foundational for articles of Christian faith and are important resources for theology. To be sure, the traditions are not disembodied ideas or convictions and they do not exist in a vacuum. Theologians have access to them only by means of the artefacts in their surviving forms, which were informed

51. Cf., for example, Barth (1945:1–44).

52. According to Moltmann (1993:20): 'Our situation today is determined by the ecological crisis of our whole scientific and technological civilization, and by the exhaustion of nature through human beings. This crisis is deadly, and not for human beings alone. For a very long time now, it has meant death for other living things and for the natural environment as well. Unless there is a radical reversal in the fundamental orientation of our human societies, and unless we succeed in finding an alternative way of living and dealing with other living things and with nature, this crisis is going to end in a wholesale catastrophe [...] If we turn back from the ideas and behaviour which are leading to a foreseeable universal death, and move towards a future for all the living beings in the common survival of human beings and nature, what does this change of direction look like? It is here that the really serious questions are put to the Christian belief in creation today. A new theological doctrine of creation must take up these questions, and try to find an answer to them'.

by the circumstances and cognitive environments of the ancient people who produced and transmitted the artefacts. The traditions that are resources for theology include, but are not limited to, the ideas and convictions transmitted by the compositions in Bible corpora. Even in their long and intricate textual histories, these compositions merely present a partial view of the traditions and they are not the only artefacts that provide evidence of these traditions. Theologians would, therefore, do well not to treat the biblical texts in isolation when they endeavour to understand the traditions preserved, in part, by these compositions.

The importance for theology to constantly reflect critically on its intellectual heritage, which entails, *inter alia*, ongoing efforts to understand the traditions transmitted by ancient artefacts, may be illustrated with the example of Genesis 1:28. Moltmann (1993:29) notes that 'modern critics of the Jewish-Christian tradition' see in the verse's divine commands to 'be fruitful', 'multiply' and 'subdue' the earth the 'intellectual foundations for the ecological crisis: unlimited reproduction, overpopulation of the earth, and the subjugation of nature'. In his opinion, there are several misunderstandings here, 'which have regrettably often been promoted by theology and the church, for apologetic reasons' (Moltmann 1993:29). Such misunderstandings are caused by taking texts out of their traditional context and using them to justify other concerns (Moltmann 1993:30). With this example in mind, I present, in this chapter, interpretive comments on ideas reflected by Genesis 1:26–28 that may prove useable to theological reflection on creation, especially as it pertains to human procreation as an ethical issue. A number of presuppositions underlie my interpretation of Genesis 1:26–28. I briefly mention here some of the important ones as points of reference for my comments on the text:

- I treat Genesis 1:1–2:4a as a distinguishable unit that may be interpreted without reference to the decidedly different account of creation in Genesis 2:4b–24. The unit is demarcated by Genesis 1:1 and 2:4a, which can be taken as the account's

'prologue' and 'epilogue', respectively.[53] Genesis 1:1–2:4a can be profitably read together with parts of the flood narrative in Genesis 6–9 and Psalm 8 which share language and subject matter with the creation account, but I will not do so in this study.

- The extant Hebrew manuscripts and ancient translations preserve more than one version of Genesis 1:1–2:4a.[54] These textual representatives exhibit many differences in wording that affect the subject matter of the unit. Most of the differences in wording cannot be regarded as errors; rather, they provide evidence of creative scribal activity in transmitting the text of Genesis. Given that we hardly have any detailed extra-textual information about the scribes who created the differences in the wording of Genesis 1:1–2:4a, when and where they made the changes, and why or for whom they did so, I make two assumptions. I assume, firstly, that more than one version of the unit circulated at the same time, and, secondly, that the subject matter of the versions could have been meaningful in more than one rhetorical setting. From this perspective, no single version of the wording deserves special treatment as the basis for interpretation. This means, among other things, that neither the vocalised Masoretic text nor idealised wordings, such as those in an eclectic edition or in critical commentaries, should be treated as though they are the 'best' or 'most appropriate' representatives of the passage's wording and subject matter. For the purposes of this chapter on

53. The syntax of the opening three verses of Genesis 1 continues to be debated by scholars without any prospect of a meeting of minds. Cf., for example, Tal (2015:77); Day (2013:6–7); Stipp (2013a:3–40; 2013b:41–51); Oswald (2008:417–421); Weippert (2004:5–22); Rechenmacher (2002:1–20); Jenni (1992:311–314); Rottzoll (1991:247–256); and Groß (1981:142–145; 1987:52–53). The disagreements revolve especially around the lack of a definite article in the vocalisation of בראשית in the Masoretic text, the absolute or construct state of ראשית, and the relationship of the verses to one another. I choose to read Verse 1 as an independent or main sentence with the prepositional phrase בראשית ('in the beginning') as a temporal adjunct of the verb ברא. In my reading, therefore, בראשית is not in the construct state with the sentence ברא אלהים את השמים ואת הארץ in the place of the *nomen rectum*. I also do not take this sentence as an asyndetic relative clause. Furthermore, I understand Verse 2 as background information to the events related from Verse 3 onwards.

54. Cf., for example, Krüger (2011:126–129).

Genesis 1:26–28, I choose to base my comments primarily on the (unvocalised) wordings of available Hebrew textual representatives,[55] but I also include noteworthy readings preserved by ancient translations in my own translation.

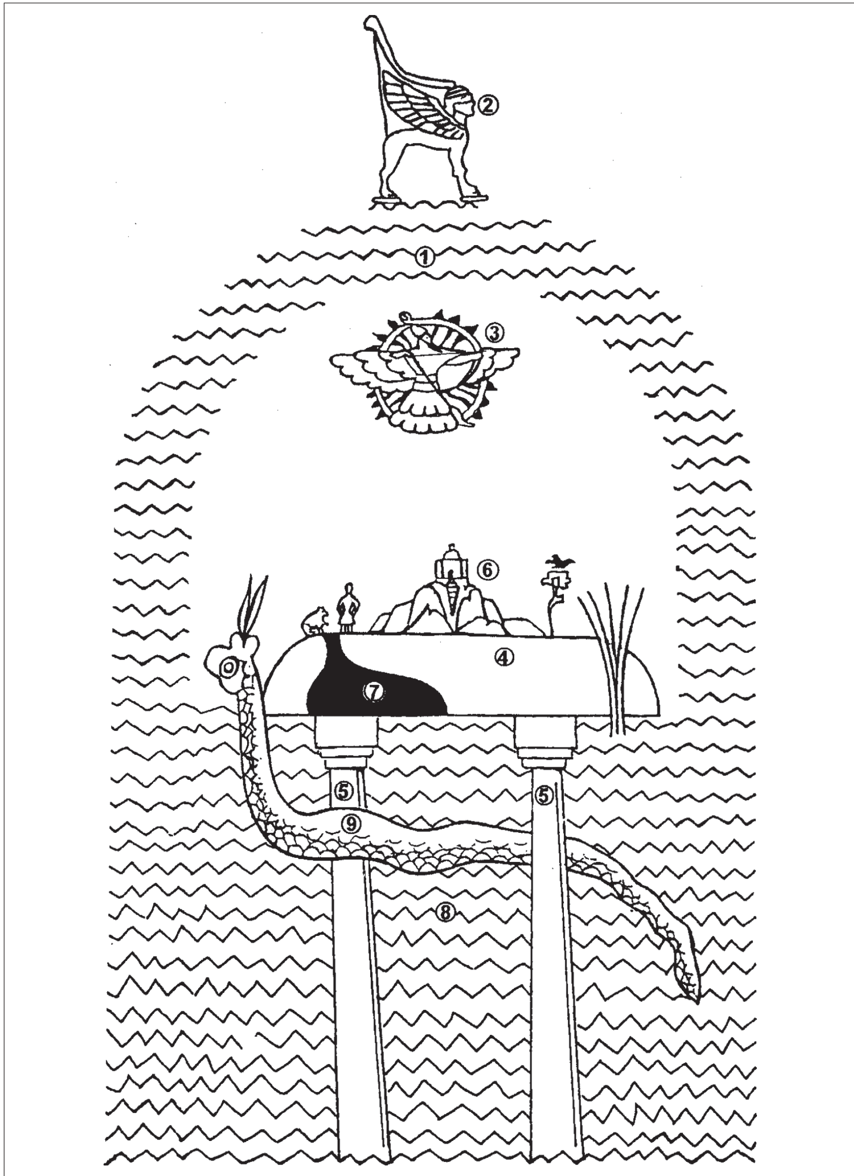
- I interpret the wordings of Genesis 1:1–2:4a as cultural artefacts and the products of ancient scribes whose work was influenced by many conceivable variables, including their training, cultural conventions, their circumstances and their intellectual heritage. As such, the wordings of Genesis 1:1–2:4a transmit ideas and images that are embedded in the thought-world of the ancient scribes and their audiences. The wordings show similarities and differences with ideas and images expressed by other cultural products from the ancient Near East.[56] For example, the account in Genesis 1:1–2:4a reflects a view of the world, or cosmic geography, that has much in common with the general ancient Near Eastern conception of a tripartite (or three-tiered) cosmos (Figure 7.1),[57] and the idea of creation through divine word is also found in Egyptian literature, such as the Memphite Theology, where Ptah is the creator god who conceives of everything in his heart and then articulates them with his tongue.[58]
- Multiple interpretations of the Hebrew wording of Genesis 1:26–28 are possible and defensible, because readers make meaning and, from their different viewpoints and points of departure, they can understand the evidence in diverging ways. For my interpretation of the verses, in addition to

55. The Hebrew textual representatives are manuscripts of the Masoretic text and Samaritan Pentateuch, as well as manuscripts from Qumran. Individual words from Genesis 1:26–28 are preserved in 4QGen[b], 4QGen[d] and 4QGen[k] (Davila 1994a:35; 1994b:44; 1994c:77). 4Q483 might contain words from Genesis 1:28, but the identification of the composition on the small papyrus fragments is uncertain (Baillet 1982:2).

56. Cf., for example, Hoffmeier (1983a:39–49) and Lambert (1965:287–300). In this regard, I do not think that the creation account in Genesis 1:1–2:4a was directly influenced by or dependent on other textual or pictorial compositions from its larger ancient Near Eastern environment; rather, the account draws from 'a widespread fund of images and ideas' for its presentation of creation (Fretheim 2005:65).

57. Cf. the discussion of De Hulster (2015:51–52, 53–55); and Cornelius (1994:196–203).

58. Cf., for example, Assmann (2000:382–392; 2005:24–30); Görg (2001:53–56).



Source: Cornelius (1994:Fig. 10).

FIGURE 7.1: A schematic representation of the cosmic geography reflected, in part, by Genesis 1:1–2:4 compiled by Cornelius and Deist.

linguistic and literary features, I use information about and data from ancient Near Eastern cultural artefacts to make sense of the ideas and images I recognise in Genesis 1:26–28.

Translation of Genesis 1:26–28

In Genesis 1 we read:

> And God said, Let us make humans[59] as our image,[60] [*and*] like our visual representation,[61] in order to tread on the fish of the sea, and the birds of the sky, and the animals, and all [*the living creatures of*] the earth,[62] and all the creeping animals that creep on the earth. (v. 26)
>
> So, God created humans as his image; as the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

59. In this verse, אדם, דגה, עוף, בהמה,[חיה, implied by the reading of the Syriac translation (see below)] and רמש are collective nouns. Köhler (1966:118) notes that the common assumption that Genesis 1 relates to the creation of a single human couple is mistaken: *Diese Annahme stammt aus naiver Übernahme von Zügen, die sich im nächsten Kapitel finden. An sich hinder nichts anzunehmen, daß Gott Männer und Frauen in größerer Anzahl, also eine ganze Reihe von Menschenpaaren, geschaffen habe*.

60. I take the preposition of בצלמנו as a *beth essentiae*. Cf., for example, Van der Merwe, Naudé and Kroeze (2017:342); Janowski (2004:189); Jenni (1992:84).

61. Wagner (2010:173–180); Schüle (2005:9–11); Janowski (2004:189–196); and Schroer (1987:322–332) provide helpful discussions of the meaning potential of צלם and דמות. In the bilingual inscriptions on an anthropoid statue from Tell Fekheriye, the Aramaic words *dmwt*ʾ (lines 1, 15) and *ṣlm* (lines 12, 16) are used interchangeably to refer to the monument. In the corresponding lines of the Akkadian version, the word *ṣalmu* (NU), 'statue', is the only equivalent of the two Aramaic words. *dmwt*ʿ and *ṣlm* therefore appear to be synonymous in this text. In my opinion, the Hebrew cognates, דמות and צלם, are also alike in meaning in the context of Genesis 1:26. Cf. Donner and Röllig (2002: no. 309); Abou-Assaf, Bordreuil and Millard (1982:14, 23).

62. The Peshitta translation has the phrase ܘܟܠܗ ܚܝܘܬܐ ܕܐܪܥܐ ('and all the living creatures of the earth'), instead of just ובכל הארץ ('and on the whole earth') in the Hebrew textual representatives. Cf. Peshiṭta Institute Leiden (1977:2). Tal (2015:5) and Hendel (1998:122) see the reading in the Syriac text as an assimilation to the wording of Verse 25. Other scholars, however, prefer the reading preserved by the Peshitta to the one in other textual representatives, and attribute the minus to a scribal error. Cf., for example, NRSV, New International Version and Westermann (1976:110): *Das Wegfallen kann nur durch ein Versehen des Schreibers erklärt werden*.

> Then God blessed them, and God said to them, be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the earth, and trample it, and tread on the fish of the sea, and the birds of the sky, [*and all the animals and all the earth*,][63] and all the living creatures that creep on the earth. (vv. 26–28)

Interpretive comments on Genesis 1:26–28

According to the account in Genesis 1:1–2:4a, God created the ordered and inhabited world in six days, completed it either on the sixth or on the seventh day (the versions differ on this point),[64] and rested on the seventh day. Within this chronological framework, the acts of creation are also divided into two cycles of three days each (De Hulster 2015:52). The acts of the first three days parallel those of the next three days. On days 1–3, God first makes life possible by creating light and separating it from the pre-existing darkness. He then creates inhabitable environments (sky, sea and earth with edible vegetation) by separating the water that was already there with the dome he newly made, and by separating the water under the dome from the dry land. The observation that God gives names to the light, darkness and inhabitable environments underscores the impression that the deity begins to bring order in existence during the first three days. He continues his establishment of order on days 4–6 by making various inhabitants to occupy the environments he put in place. Although God does not give names to the inhabitants of the sky, sea and earth, he orders creation further by giving

63. There are pluses in the wordings of the Septuagint and the Peshitta when compared to wordings of the Hebrew textual representatives. The Greek translation has the phrases καὶ πάντων τῶν κτηνῶν καὶ πάσης τῆς γῆς ('and all the cattle and all the earth') and the Syriac translation has the phrase ܘܒܥܝܪܐ ('and the cattle') that have no equivalents in the Hebrew texts (Peshiṭta Institute Leiden 1977:2; Wevers 1974:81). In both cases, scholars interpret the pluses as harmonisations with the wordings in earlier verses (cf. Tal 2015:5; Prestel & Schorch 2011:159; Hendel 1998:30–31).

64. According to the Samaritan Pentateuch, Septuagint and Peshitta wordings of Genesis 2:2, God completed creation on the sixth day, while he did so on the seventh day in the versions represented by the Masoretic text, the Vulgate and the Targums.

TABLE 7.1: God's creation of the ordered and inhabited world in six days.

Phases of Creation	Day	Creation Events
Creation of inhabitable environments	1	Separating light and darkness Naming 'day' and 'night'
	2	Separating water above and below the dome Naming 'sky'
	3	Separating water from dry land Naming 'earth' and 'sea' Vegetation
Creation of inhabitants	4	Celestial bodies
	5	Sea creatures and birds
	6	Land animals and humans
God rests	7	Sabbath

dominion to some of the inhabitants so that they would maintain the order he creates. The celestial bodies fulfil this role in relation to light and darkness and the rotations of day and night (vv. 14–18), while humans are made responsible for the earth and the other inhabitants of the environments (vv. 26–28).

This ordering of creation into inhabitable environments and their inhabitants over the span of six consecutive days (Table 7.1) brings about the opposite of the chaotic conditions described in Genesis 1:2. In this verse, the earth is said to have been empty and desolate [תהו ובהו] before creation; in other words, it was an uninhabitable and unoccupied waste. It was covered by darkness [חשך] and submerged in the primeval ocean [תהום]. The darkness and water here have life-threatening connotations (cf. Keel and Schroer 2008:176), and they complement the description of the earth as an empty desolation that was not fit for habitation.[65]

The ideas regarding the responsibility of humans in creation and the images with which Genesis 1:26–28 express these ideas

65. The opinions of scholars are divided over the meaning of the phrase רוח אלהים in Genesis 1:2. They debate whether אלהים has a superlative sense, in which case, the phrase would refer to a mighty or strong wind, or whether it denotes a wind of God. Cf., for example, Day (2013: 9–10); Janowski and Krüger (2009:12–19); Weippert (2004:14 n. 33); and Rechenmacher (2002: 13–16). A wind from God that moves about on the surface of the water might be interpr eted here as a harbinger of life. Its dynamic movement contrasts with the lifeless darkness, the life-threatening water and the unliveable state of the earth.

can be understood in light of this motif that God creates order from chaos by turning the uninhabitable wasteland in the primeval ocean into liveable environments that are suitable for their occupants.

The first noteworthy idea inferable from the wording of Genesis 1:26 is of God as a supreme King presiding over a court of divine beings.[66] It is not necessary to interpret the number of the verb נעשה ['let us make'] as a *pluralis maiestatis*, a plural of deliberation, or as the deity's inner monologue,[67] because the idea of a divine court is not necessarily in conflict with the emphasis on the oneness and uniqueness of God[68] or the 'inclusive monotheism'[69] that some scholars see in Genesis 1:1–2:4a.[70] God is the only acting

66. Cf., for example, Parker (1999:797). It is noteworthy that in visual representations of ancient Near Eastern rulers, they are often depicted together with one or more attendants, courtiers or members of the army (cf. Keel 1980: Abb. 123, 233, 331, Taf. XXIII, XXIV). The positions, poses, sizes and accoutrements of these figures contribute to the ideas about the royalty that the scenes convey. In this light, it makes sense that God refers to 'our image' and 'our visual representation' when he speaks to his court in Verse 26.

67. Cf., for example, Wagner (2010:171–172); Westermann (1976:200–201).

68. Cf., for example, Stolz (1996:190); Westermann (1976:200)

69. According to Niehr (2010:31), in post-exilic times, 'YHWH is described in the so-called priestly code [including Genesis 1:1–2:4a GRK] as *'ĕlōhîm*, attesting to the emergence of the concept of an inclusive monotheism'. Keel (2007:1275) compares the inclusive monotheism of Judah to the exclusive monotheism of Akhenaton: *Der Montheismus Judas war im Gegensatz zu dem Echnatons inklusiv, integrativ. Echnaton hatte Göttlichkeit exklusiv dem empirischen Sonnenlicht zugesprochen … Der jud. Monotheismus war vollständig anders strukturiert. Unterschiedlichste Erfahrungen und Geschichten unterschiedlichster Götter und Göttinnen wurden auf JHWH übertragen und als Erfahrungen mit JHWH verstanden*.

70. In a discussion on monotheism (the individuation of divinity in one being), as reflected by passages in some writings of the Hebrew Bible corpus, Smith (2014:15) argues that Israelite monotheism restricted divinity to YHWH: 'all positive divine power and character resided in this God or Godhead. Whatever could be said positively about divinity in ancient Israel was predicated only of Israel's god. In turn, other divinity is abolished […] Oneness of divinity was located in a single divine figure, with the remainder being angelic figures drawing their reality from this one'. Regarding the divine court (Smith 2014:15), it 'was viewed as populated only by angelic "sons of God" (see Job 1–2). In other words, "sons of God," formerly important members of upper divine hierarchy, were demoted to angels, and the divine council became a new vehicle for reflection on divine agency of a single deity (again Job 1–2)'. Van der Toorn (1999:363) notes that '[t]here can be no question of true monotheism, in the philosophical

divine protagonist in this account, and the idea of a divine court, which lies behind the plural verb נעשה and the suffixes of בצלמנו and כדמותנו, casts the deity in the role of a monarch. This implied picture of God as a king is not unimportant for the interpretation of humans as his image and for the stated purpose of their creation, namely, to 'tread' on the other inhabitants of the sea, sky and land.

Over the years, the creation of humans as the image of God has been much debated by interpreters. The different interpretations need not be enumerated or rehearsed here[71]; it suffices to say that I do not read the *Imago Dei* as a reference to a spiritual quality of human beings, their external, physical (upright bodily) shape, their creation as counterparts of the creator and their fellow human beings, their divine parentage or familial relationship to God, or their qualitative likeness to God.[72] I interpret בצלמנו as a metaphor and כדמותנו as a simile. These tropes are literary images (pictures put into words) that compare humans to sculptures in order to express ideas about their role in creation. The point of comparison between humans and sculptures of deities and kings in the ancient Near East is that both make visible what is invisible.[73] Statues of deities and kings, for example, make their unseen referents present in the places where the image is located. Kings put their statues in conquered territories, donors dedicate statues to deities as their substitutes in temples, and the images of gods are set up in sanctuaries to

(footnote 70 continues...)
sense of the word, as long as the belief in other heavenly beings is not eschewed. Only when the subordinate deities are degraded to angels, created by the God they serve, can one speak of monotheism'. It is a matter of some debate and disagreement when this development took place in Judah. Cf. Niehr (2010:31); Keel (2007:17–21, 1270–1282); Stolz (1996:184–187).

71. Cf. the survey by Bosman (2010:561–571).

72. Cf., for example, Schroer (2017:304); Schüle (2017:420–421); Crouch (2010:1–15); Schellenberg (2009:105, 111); Staubli and Schroer (2014:67–68); Keel and Schroer (2008:180); Moltmann (1993:216–225); Westermann (1976:217); Köhler (1966:135); and Barth (1945:205–210).

73. Clines (1998:480) correctly notes that the meaning of the image of God in Genesis 1 'cannot be understood without reference to the significance of the image in the ancient Near East'. This does not imply that every aspect of that significance is transferable to the thought-world underlying the tropes in Genesis 1:26–27.

make their presence visible there.[74] In this regard, statues are not pictures or portraits of deities or kings[75]; they do not capture or reproduce the likeness (outward appearance) or physiognomy of their referents. Like other types of material imagery of the ancient Near East, such as reliefs, stelae, seals and scarabs, statues are communicative media that convey ideas about the nature and function of the deities and kings they represent (Cornelius 2018b):

> The ancient Near East created conceptual rather than perceptual images. It is not so much a matter of what is seen but of what the viewer is supposed to see or perceive – a notion or symbol that was communicated or was supposed to be communicated. Images are neither always realistic nor historical in the sense of representing reality. It is not a case of what some ruler or historical person really looked like or what really happened that matters, but rather, for example, the 'idea' of kingship that is communicated. This is important, as it means that iconography provides information on the world of ideas of the ancient Near East. (p. 153)

Sculptures from Mesopotamia do not only represent deities in anthropomorphic or other forms that evidence ideas about them (e.g. standards and symbols, such as a star, a winged sun disc, a crescent moon, lightning and a horned crown). They are also one of the means by which gods and humans interact and, to this end, statues and other cultic objects mark the presence of deities (cf. Nunn 2014:61; Pongratz-Leisten 2014:114). The main function of cultic statues is to serve as loci for the divine presence and as media that make communication with deities possible (Pongratz-Leisten 2014:114). They are not living organisms or lifeless representations, but physical objects that are ritually sanctified and animated for the deity to be present in them (Machinist 2014:77–78). This does not mean that the statues and the gods were identical or isomorphic, but only that the physical objects possess something of the deities' divine 'life-force' (Machinist 2014:79;

74. Strawn (2009:131–132; 2015:68–69); Staubli and Schroer (2014:67); Keel and Schroer (2008:179); and Clines (1998:482–483).

75. Cornelius (2017:206–207); Nunn (2014:52); Pongratz-Leisten (2014:103); Berlejung (1998:40–41); and Hornung (1983:113–125)

cf. Pongratz-Leisten 2014:111). Regarding representations of rulers, royal sculptures are also not merely illustrations of kings' appearances[76]; instead, their physical features in these images reflect ideals associated with the office of kingship (cf. Winter 2009:254–270) and the images make the ruler's persona present in the place where the images are placed.[77] In Egypt, cultic statues are, in a certain sense, the bodies of deities.[78] Deities did not only inhabit the statues in their temples but were also physically present on earth in sacred animals, as well as in the king (Baines 2013:21–22; Hornung 1983:135–137, 229). It is therefore not surprising that, since the Middle Kingdom and Second Intermediate Period, but especially during the New Kingdom Period, pharaohs are called the images of gods. This might be a development of the idea of the kings' divine sonship and implies that they are equated with cultic statues of gods (cf. Otto 1971:345). As the images of

76. The inscription on the statue from Tell Fekheriye may hint at the fact that sculptures such as this were not meant to capture the exact physiognomy of their referents. Lines 16–18 of the Akkadian version and lines 11–12 of the Aramaic version mention the possibility that someone could remove the name of Haddayisʿi's name from the statue and replace it with his own. This would be a way for the perpetrator to reappropriate the monument as his own dedicatory statue and to rob Haddayisʿi from its benefits. The inscription expresses the wish that the god Hadad be the adversary of the person who commits such a misdeed [*ma-nu šá šu-me ú-na-ka-ru u šum-sú i-šak-ka-nu adad*(U) *qar-du lu-ú bēl di-ni-šú*; *wzy* : *yld* : *šmy* : *mnh* : *wyšym* : *šmh* : *hdd* : *gbr* : *lhwy* : *qblh*]. Donner and Röllig (2002: no. 309); Abou-Assaf, Bordreuil and Millard (1982:13–14, 15, 23).

77. The relief of Hammurapi's stela is a good example (Figure 7.2). It shows the king standing in a devotional pose in front of the enthroned Šamaš, who holds out a rod and ring, symbols of the just order instituted by the gods, to Hammurapi. The scene communicates the idea that Hammurapi has divine authority to establish divine order and justice on earth (Cornelius 2018a:229). The epilogue of the law collection states that Hammurapi inscribed the words on the stela and set it up *ina maḫar ṣalmiya šar mīšarim* (CH col. xlvii, 78). *ṣalmu* here probably refers to the relief of the stela and not to a statue of the king (cf. Winter 1997:366). Cornelius (2018a:227) argues that Hammurapi 'inscribed the laws on the stela, their validity confirmed by his image, a special image with a name, *šar mīšarim*, "king of justice." The image is charged with power, serving as a substitute of the king, demonstrating and communicating to the viewers in a very clear way the divine authority of the king'.

78. *Die Statue ist nicht Bild des Leibes, sondern Leib der Gottheit. Sie bildet nicht seine Gestalt ab, sondern gibt ihm Gestalt. In der Statue nimmt die Gottheit Gestalt an, so wie in einem heiligen Tier oder in einem Naturphänomen* (Assmann 1984:57).

Source: Photograph taken by Gideon R. Kotzé, on 08 April 2017, at the Louvre in Paris, published with permission from Gideon R. Kotzé.

FIGURE 7.2: Diorite stela, Susa, Hammurapi (1792–1750 BCE).

gods, the Egyptian kings make the deities visible and present on earth (Otto 1971:345; Hornung 1983):

> The king, like the cult image of a god, is normally hidden, being separated from the people in his palace. But when he steps outside and 'is manifest' to his subjects, surrounded by symbols of power

> and protection, he becomes the *deus praesens* for the adulating and rejoicing people, allowing them to feel the presence of the creator god, whose deeds he accomplishes again. (p. 139)

In both Egypt and Mesopotamia, the descriptions of rulers as the images of deities cannot be divorced from their roles as the representatives of the gods who are responsible for maintaining order in the world. This order conforms to the cosmic order the gods established at creation. Baines (2013:41) notes that it was the mission of the Egyptian king and elite to maintain, interpret, transmit and enhance the civilisation that embodied the order of the cosmos. They, and the pharaoh in particular, are tasked with upholding *maat* (Baines 2013:44; Cornelius 2010:326; Hornung 1983):

> [*M*]*aat* is the order, the just measure of things, that underlies the world; it is the perfect state of things toward which one should strive and which is in harmony with the creator god's intentions. This state is always being disturbed, and unremitting effort is necessary in order to recreate it in its original purity. Like the injured and perpetually healed 'eye of Horus,' *maat* therefore symbolizes this pristine state of the world. (p. 213)

Foreign enemies outside the borders of Egypt represented chaos and were among the dangers that could disturb the created order. The pharaoh, therefore, safeguarded the order by defeating and subduing such enemies (Baines 2013:44–45; Cornelius 2010:326–330). This idea is reflected, for example, in a stela inscription of Amenhotep III where Amunre calls him 'my beloved son', who 'came out of my body', and 'my statue' [*ẖnty.i͗*].[79] He says that he placed Amenhotep on the earth and allowed him to rule it in peace in that his mace destroyed 'the heads of all the foreign lands' [*tpw ḫꜣst nbt*].[80] Another noteworthy passage is from the great sphinx stela of Amenhotep II. In the closing lines

79. Interestingly, according to the *Teaching for Merikare* (E 131–132), humankind in general (*rmṯw*), not specifically the king, is said to be the images of God who came out of his body (*snnw.f pw pri͗w m ḥꜥw.f*). Cf. Quack (1992:196).

80. Sethe and Helck (1906–1958: no. 1676); Helck (1961:208).

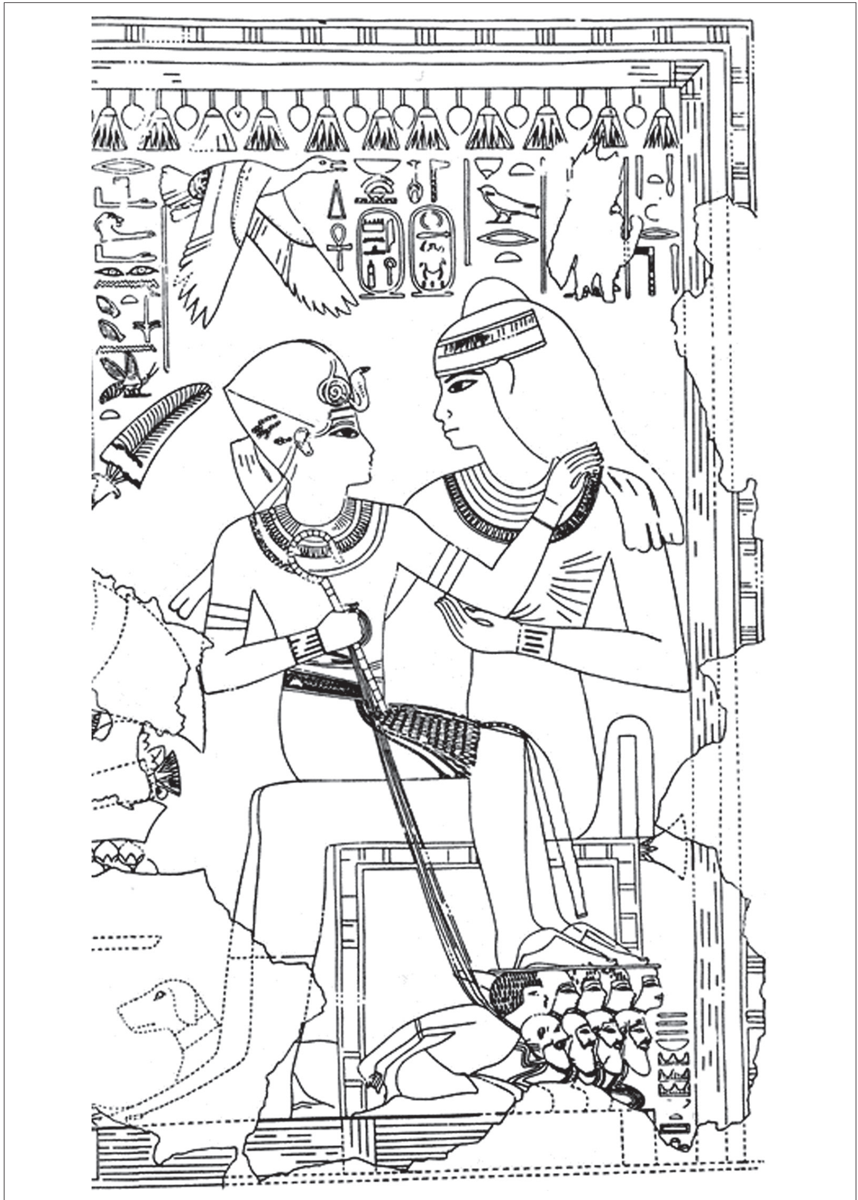
of the inscription (lines 26–27), the pharaoh is called 'the image of Re' [*tỉt rˁ*], and it is said that all was well under his rule; 'the land, as before, was in peace under its lord, Aakheprure, who ruled the Two Lands, while all foreign countries were bound under his soles' [*ḫ3st nbt dm3 ẖr tbty.f*].[81] The image of defeated enemies under the feet of the pharaoh is also found in visual media, where they are depicted as nine bound men, serving as the pharaoh's footstool, or nine bows, a symbol of the enemies' military might (cf. Figure 7.3 and Figure 7.4). Pharaohs are also pictured in human, lion, bull, sphinx or griffin form treading on enemies (David 2011:87), while images of bound prisoners are sometimes found on the soles of sandals painted on the underside of the foot coverings of mummies (cf. Robins 1997:251). A pair of Tutankhamun's sandals also have depictions of bound prisoners and tied bows on the insoles (Figure 7.5), and 'every time the pharaoh put on his sandals he symbolically trampled the enemy' (Cornelius 2010:329).[82] The treading on enemies indicates their complete subjugation and powerlessness and, at the same time, the domination and control of the Egyptian king.[83] Seeing as the enemies represent chaos, their trampling underfoot also implies that the pharaoh maintains order.

In Mesopotamia, kingship was God-given and sacred. Invested in the office by the gods, the king was their chosen representative and the intermediary between heaven and earth. There was a reciprocal relationship between the king and the gods. He performs his duties, and they provide him with protection and

81. Lichtheim (2006:42); Varille (1941: plate 1).

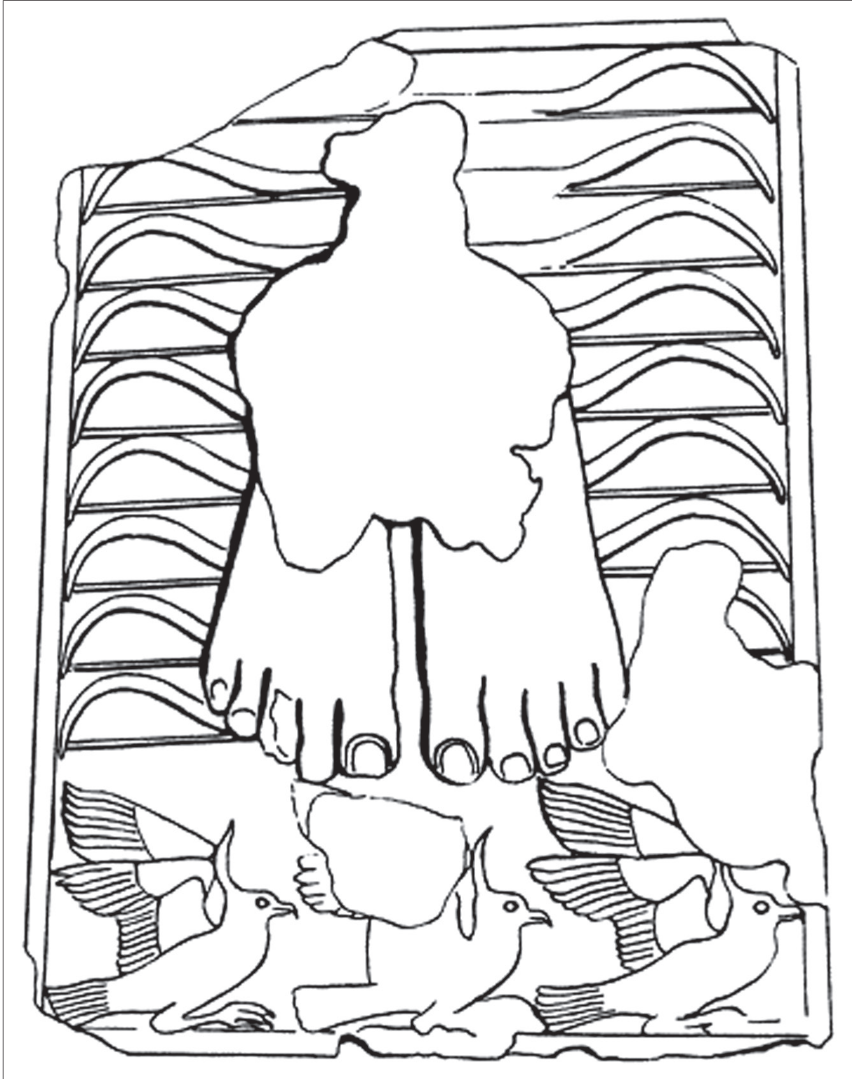
82. Cf. Hoffmeier (1983b:60); Rühlmann (1971:74–75).

83. It is noteworthy that, in the Amarna letters, loyal subjects of the pharaoh also proclaim their submission to him by describing themselves as the footstool of the king's feet (GIŠ.GÌR.GUB *šà* GÌR.MEŠ-*pí* LUGAL), the dirt at his feet, the ground on which he treads (*ep-ru ša* GÌR.MEŠ-*šu ù qa-qa-ru ša ka-ba-ši-šu*) and the dirt on the bottom of the king's sandals (*ep-ru iš-tu šu-pa-li ši-ni* LUGAL). Cf., for example, Rainey (2015: no. 106:6–7; no. 147:4–5; no. 149:4–5; no. 151:4–5; no. 185:4–6; no. 195:5–10; no. 198:6–7; no. 232:5–6; no. 233:7–8; no. 234:5–6; no. 241:5–7; no. 254:3; no. 255:4–5; no. 295:4–5; no. 366:5–6).



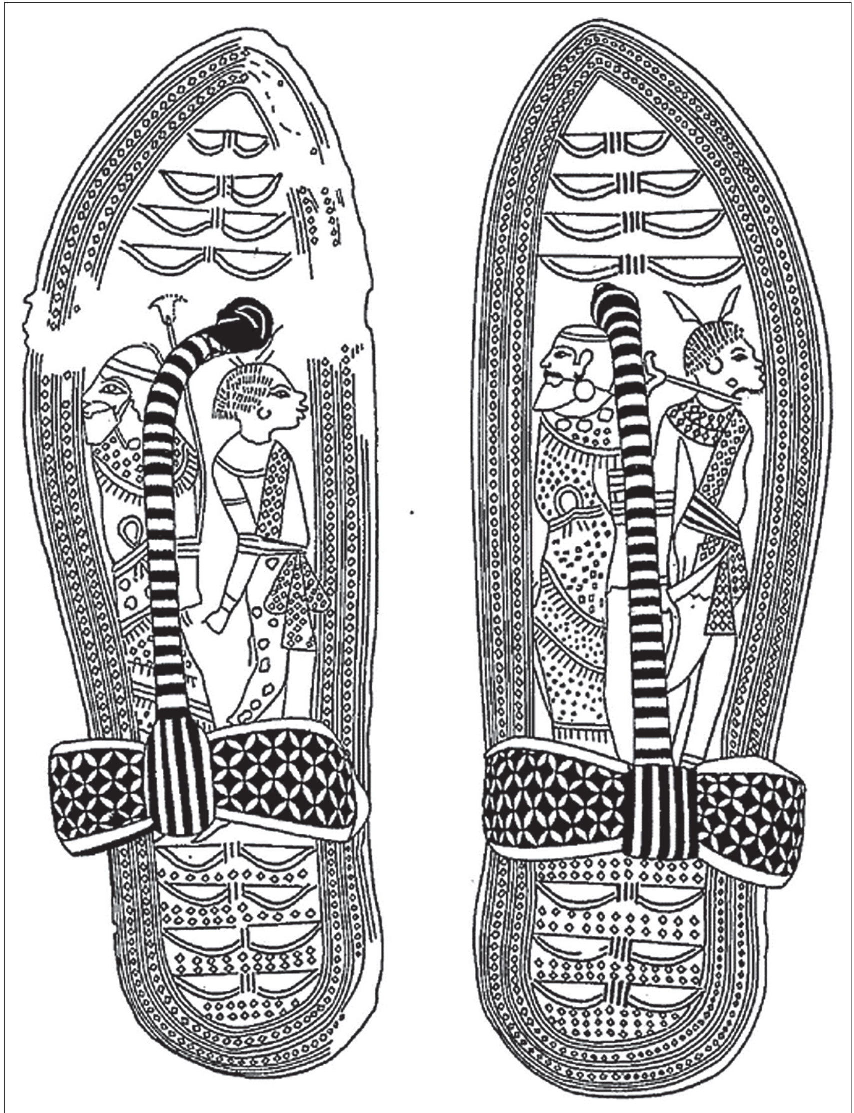
Source: Keel (1980: Abb. 341).

FIGURE 7.3: Detail of painting, the tomb of Kenamun (TT 93), Amenhotep II (1425–1401 BCE).



Source: Keel (1980: Abb. 342a).

FIGURE 7.4: Base of statue, Saqqara, Djoser (ca. 2654–2635 BCE).



Source: Rühlmann (1971: Abb. 21).

FIGURE 7.5: Sandals, the tomb of Tutankhamun, Valley of the Kings (KV 62), Tutankhamun (1336–1327 BCE).

prosperity, which he then mediates to the people. The royal duties include building temples for the gods, maintaining their cults, dispensing justice and eliminating threats from the wilderness and foreign enemies (cf. Suter 2013:201, 206–215). In other words, it was the king's responsibility to uphold order in the world. He was 'the protector and guarantor of the divine order, the enforcer of the divine will' (Cornelius 2018a:220; Pongratz-Leisten 2015).

> In the Mesopotamian *weltanschauung*, any force that disrupted the social order had to be pushed toward the periphery of the controlled territory and beyond it, either by means of war or through ritual action. Establishing and maintaining order and eliminating disruptive forces was, therefore, the primary task of the king, whose duty it was to harmonize the condition of the world with the ideal primeval order created by the gods. The task situated the king at the threshold between history and the mythological and emblematic, helping to explain the recurrent use of the tropes of the king as hunter, as warrior, as caretaker of the cult, and as shepherd of his people. (p. 145)

There is a link between the social order and the cosmic order, epitomised by the repeated daily cycle of the sun (Maul 1998:66–67).[84] Just as the sun-god ensures that the cosmos is in order, the king is tasked with ordering the socio-political domain. In view of the king's role as guardian of the world order, it makes good sense that Mesopotamian rulers are sometimes identified with the sun-god.[85] For example, in the prologue to the collection of laws recorded on his famous stela, Hammurapi describes himself as 'the sun-god of Babylon, who makes the light rise on the lands of Sumer and Akkad' [*šamšu Bābilim mušēṣi nūrim ana māt*

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84. '[I]n Mesopotamian religion the conceptualization of the cosmic order was modelled on the social order, entailing interdependence between human action and the dynamics of the cosmic order decreed by the gods. Consequently, in this *weltanschauung* the king's ordering of the world was the fulfilment of the original divine plan, implying that everything and everyone had their proper position within the larger cosmic and social system' (Pongratz-Leisten 2015:146–147).

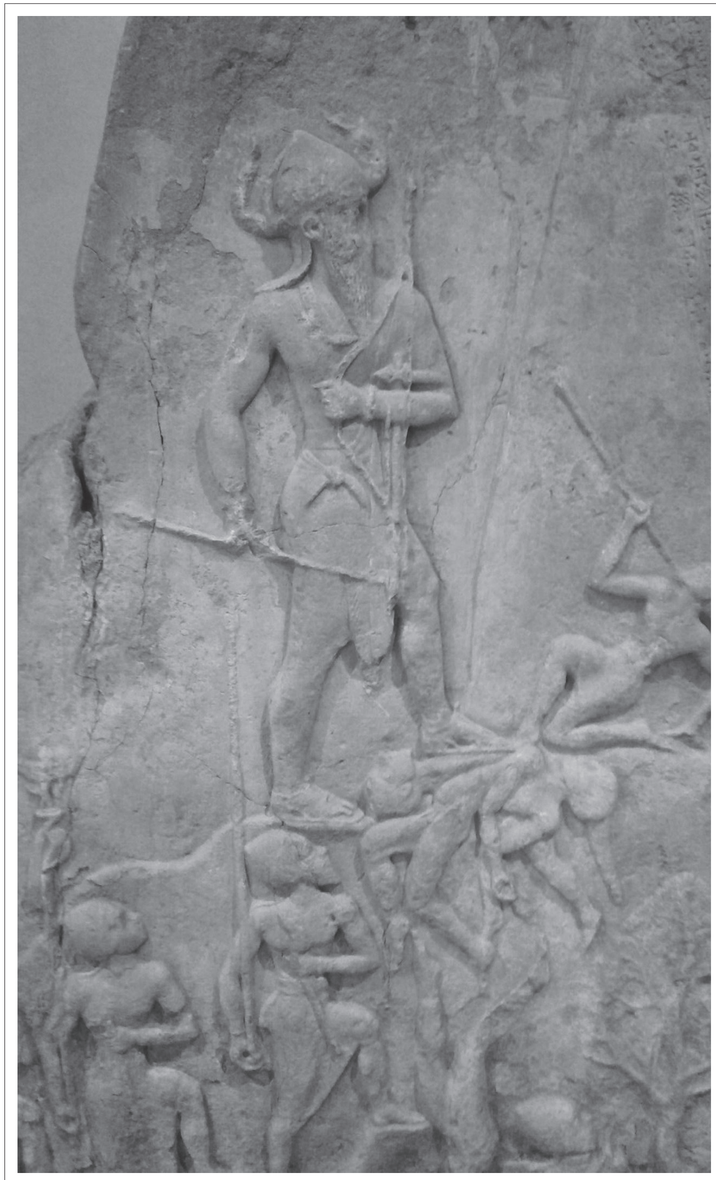
85. The Egyptian king is likewise called 'the sun-god' (^{d}UTU) or 'my sun-god' (^{d}UTU-*ia*) in many of the Amarna letters. ^{d}UTU$^{\check{S}I}$ ('my sun-god') is also an important title of the Hittite king (Beckman 1995:532; 2002:37–43).

Šumerim u Akkadîm][86]; Middle and Neo-Assyrian kings are called 'sun-god of all people' [^d^*šamšu kiššat nišē*] in their inscriptions[87]; and, in a letter to Esarhaddon, Adad-shumu-usur, his personal exorcist [*āšipu*], says that the king, the lord of the world, is the image of the sun-god [LUGAL EN KUR.KUR *ṣalmu šá* ^d^UTU].[88] One way in which kings maintain order in the world is to fight the forces of chaos represented by their enemies on earth. By making war on these foes who threaten the order, the kings act in analogy with the warrior god Ninurta, 'whose functions and roles came to constitute the model for Assyrian kingship' (Pongratz-Leisten 2015:229; cf. Maul 1998:74). The Assyrian kings conduct the wars on the command of the god Aššur, who is the real ruler of Assyria (Lambert 2013:68; Maul 1998:75). The kings are Aššur's regents and the divine command to enlarge the territory under Assyria's control, by conquering enemy lands, is tantamount to the divine imperative to expand order in the world (Maul 1998:76–77). The destruction of enemies is, therefore, part and parcel of their duty to uphold the world order. Claims that kings successfully execute their duty of establishing order by defeating enemies are expressed in visual media that picture the ruler stepping on fallen foes. Well-known non-Assyrian examples include the victory stele of Naram-Sin of Akkad (Figure 7.6) and the rock relief of Anubanini, the chief of the Lullubi, from Sar-i Pul (Figure 7.7). The victory stela of Naram-Sin celebrates his military victory over the Lullubi and the territorial expansion of his kingdom. The Akkadian king is shown centre stage, in the upper part of the relief's image field. He is larger than all the other figures, armed to the teeth, and his horned helmet and perfect physical features indicate his divine status (Winter 1996:11–26; 2008:76). He strides upwards,

86. CH col. v, 4–9. Cf. Richardson (2004:40).

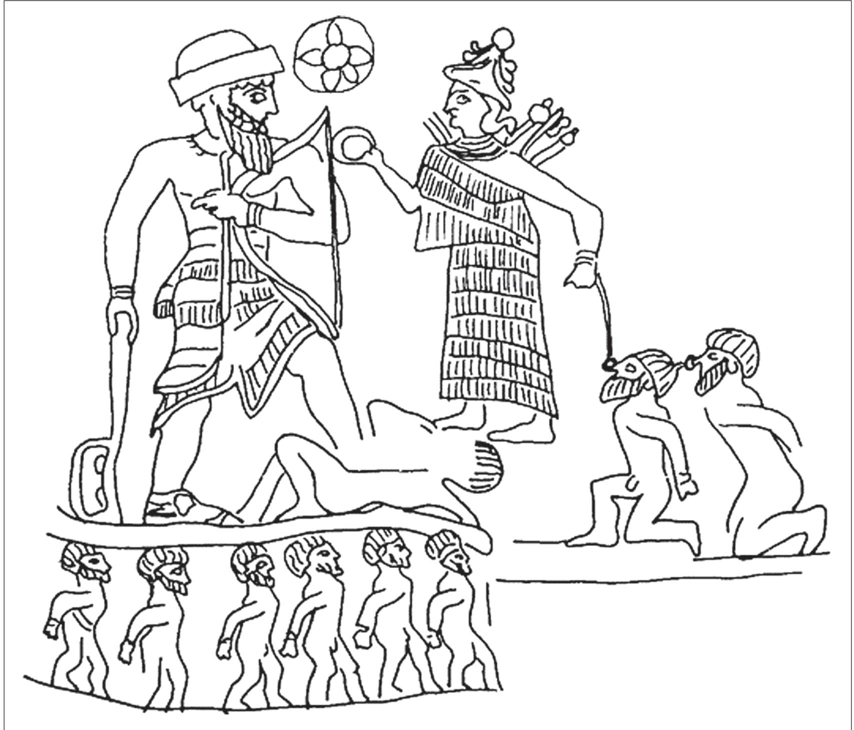
87. Cf., for example, the inscriptions of Tukulti-Ninurta I (Grayson 1987: A.0.78.5, 3; A.0.78.19, 2); Adad-nirari II (Grayson 1991: A.0.99.2, 10); Ashurnasirpal II (Grayson 1991: A.0.101.1, i 10; A.0.101.3, 18; A.0.101.19, 22; A.0.101.28, 8; A.0.101.56, 2); Shalmaneser III (Michel 1955:145); Esarhaddon (Leichty 2011: no. 48, 34).

88. Cf. Parpola (1993:159).



Source: Photograph taken by Gideon R. Kotzé, on 08 April 2017, at the Louvre in Paris, published with permission from Gideon R. Kotzé.

FIGURE 7.6: Detail of the victory stela of Naram-Sin, Susa, Akkadian period (ca. 2250 BCE).



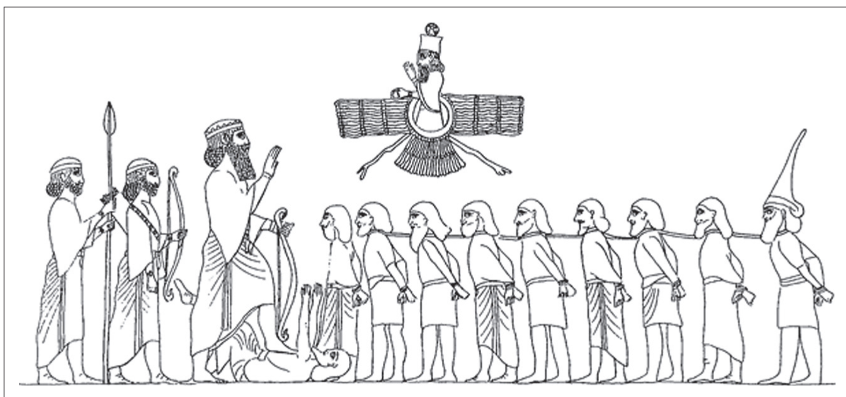
Source: Cornelius (1995: Figure 12).
FIGURE 7.7: Rock relief, Sar-i Pul, late Ur III period.

stepping on the contorted corpses of his enemies. The bearing of the king is reminiscent of the depiction of the sun-god rising between mountains in contemporary cylinder seals (cf. Nigro 1998:290).[89] Like Naram-Sin's trampling of enemies, the sun-god puts his foot on a mountain, and this motif symbolises his dominion over the world (Cornelius 2017:224). The comparable poses might also evoke the idea that there is a connection between Naram-Sin (who spreads social order by conquering his enemies and their territory) and the sun-god (whose daily

89. Cf. Schroer (2005–2018: no. 249, 250); Keel (1980:Abb.9).

appearance signifies the continuation of the cosmic order). In his relief, Anubanini strikes a pose similar to that of Naram-Sin. He faces the goddess Ištar, who approaches from the right with two leashed captives in tow (Cornelius 1995:22–23; Suter 2010:335). She extends a ring to Anubanini and thereby confirms that his rule is divinely endorsed. A line of six more captured enemies appears below the dominating figure of the king. He holds his weapons in a way that suggests that there are no more threats for him to overcome. His supremacy is also indicated by the enemy lying defeated under his left foot.

Another noteworthy example comes from ancient Persia. In the rock relief of Darius the Great at Behistun (Figure 7.8), the imposing figure of the king dwarves the two armed attendants behind him and the nine bound rebel leaders in front of him. His pose, with his left foot on the body of a fallen foe, complements this indication of Darius' dominance. A caption identifies the foe, who stretches his hands out in a supplicating gesture, as the liar and pretender to the throne, Gaumata. Darius faces a figure in a winged disc that hovers above the row of captured rebels. The identity of this figure is disputed, but like Ištar in the relief of Anubanini, he holds out a ring to the victorious king. The figure in



Source: Schroer (2005–2018: no. 1973).

FIGURE 7.8: Rock relief, Mount Behistun, Darius 1 (522–486 BCE).

the winged disc might, therefore, point to the legitimacy of Darius' kingship (cf. Cornelius 2014:152–153). Indeed, the image and the accompanying trilingual inscription in Elamite, Babylonian and Old Persian deal with Darius' right to rule and his support from above (Feldman 2007:267). The texts of the inscription relate how Darius, by the favour of Ahuramazda, overthrew Gaumata, quashed rebellions, and in so doing restored order to the kingdom as its rightful ruler.

These examples and those from Egypt demonstrate that the motif of defeated enemies being trampled underfoot, which symbolises the power and authority of a king in establishing order, was widespread and very popular in the ancient Near East. It evidently circulated far and wide and over a long period of time in different media. It is possible that the literary imagery of Genesis 1:26–28 partook of ideas about the establishment of order that are associated with this motif, as well as of ideas connected with royal sculptures and identifications of kings as images of gods.[90]

With regard to the metaphor בצלמנו and the simile כדמותנו in Verse 26, the tropes imply that humans, like statues, make visible something that cannot be seen. More specifically, the mental picture of God as a king with his divine court, evoked by the number of the verb נעשה and the suffixes of בצלמנו and כדמותנו in Verse 26, suggests that the tropes here compare humans to royal sculptures. This means that these literary images convey the idea that humans visibly represent the reality of God's dominion over chaos. According to Verse 26 and Verse 28, the purpose of their creation and their responsibility as representatives of divine rule is to 'trample' the earth and 'tread' on the other inhabitants of the

90. Many scholars see connections between the image of God and ancient Near Eastern royal ideology. Accordingly, the ideas underlying the description of humans as the image of God seem to be that they are God's representative regents on earth who exercise dominion over creation. Cf., for example, the comments and discussions by Schmid (2019:376–377); Jeremias (2015:347–348); Strawn (2009:130–131; 2015:67–68); Frevel (2006:133–134); Janowski (2004:183–214); Schmidt (1996:266); Wolff (1974:235); and Von Rad (1969:160).

created environments (sea, sky and land). The verbs רדה (vv. 26, 28) and כבש (v. 28) can both mean to tread on an object.[91] Their secondary meanings, 'to rule, dominate, subjugate', are connected to the idea that placing a foot or feet on someone or something is an expression of power that indicates control and dominion over the object underfoot.[92] As mentioned above, the depictions of kings trampling enemies in visual media clearly get the message of the rulers' dominance across, and, at the same time, this representation of defeated foes underfoot implies that the kings maintain order in the world. In Genesis 1:26 and 28, the actions expressed by רדה and כבש are metaphors that link humans' role as visible representatives of God's dominance with the idea of upholding order in creation. God created this order by making liveable environments out of empty, uninhabitable chaos and by providing these environments with inhabitants. The sequence of directives נעשה ... וירדו in Verse 26 and the imperatives וכבשה and ורדו in Verse 28 suggest that God created humans in the role of visible representatives of his rule so that they fulfil the responsibility of maintaining the order he created. This means that humans are tasked with the duty to ensure that the environments God created, the sky, sea and land, remain habitable and occupied by their respective inhabitants, the fish, birds, land animals and humans, so that the world would not resemble the uninhabitable and desolate (pre-creation, chaotic) state described in Verse 2. In other words, on this interpretation, צלם and the verbs רדה and כבש are metaphors that draw on royal imagery to present the idea of the responsibility of humans to keep the sea, sky and land fit for fish, birds, land animals and humans

91. Stipp (2013c:53–93); Gesenius (2013:527, 1221); Koehler, Baumgartner and Stamm (2001:460, 1190); and Brown, Driver and Briggs (1906:461, 921).

92. Cf. Cornelius (2017:223); Wagner (2010:141). Boecker (1993:81) suggests that the dominion of humans over animals in Genesis 1:26–28 should be understood in light of language used in connection with ancient Near Eastern kings' relationship with their subjects. In this regard, he notes that 'shepherd' is a common royal epithet that functions as an image for the kings' benevolent rule (Boecker 1993:82). Although I agree with Boecker that the language of Genesis 1:26–28 is rooted in ancient Near Eastern royal ideology, it is debatable whether the terminology used in the passage allows for a pastoral interpretation of the images (cf. Keel 1993:175 n. 23).

to live in and to allow all the inhabitants of these environments to flourish. From the perspective of this interpretation, two more details in Verse 27 and Verse 28 gain in clarity. Firstly, it makes sense why, in Verse 27, בצלם אלהים and ונקבה זכר, the fronted foci of the two parallel sentences that observe how God created humans in the image of God and as male and female correspond to each other. For humans to fulfil their role as visible representatives of divine rule by preventing the world from becoming unpopulated and unliveable, they should procreate, and biology dictates that this requires the participation of men and women. Stated differently, in the ancient thought-world of Genesis 1:1–2:4a, the biological differentiation of humans as male and female is an essential condition for procreation, and procreation is one of the ways they accomplish their duty of maintaining order in creation. Secondly, by the same token, it becomes clear why, in Verse 28, the divine directives for humans to 'trample' the earth and to 'tread' on the inhabitants of the sea, sky and land (that is, to maintain order in creation) follow immediately after the blessing and command to be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth. The occupation of the earth in large numbers by humans is only possible if their environment remains inhabitable. The same is true for the sea creatures and the birds (cf. v. 22). Although humans, birds and land animals partake of a herbivorous diet, according to Verses 29–30, and they, therefore, share one environment's resources, the allocation of different foodstuffs to humans and to birds and land animals by God suggests that the earth has sufficient vegetation to sustain all of its inhabitants.

To summarise, in the creation account of Genesis 1:1–2:4a, God prepares liveable environments and makes inhabitants occupy them in six days. He thereby completely transforms the desolate and unliveable condition of the earth before creation into an ordered (populated and inhabitable) world. Humans are given the responsibility to uphold this order, as the visible representatives of God's dominion over chaos, by making sure that the created environments remain liveable and by allowing all their inhabitants to flourish.

Conclusion

The foregoing comments present only one possible interpretation of Genesis 1:26–28, guided by the presuppositions that are mentioned in the introduction. Other interpretations are also possible. Critical interpretations of ancient artefacts endeavour to make sense of the traditions they preserve in light of the thought-worlds of the cultures that produced and transmitted the artefacts. It is the privilege and responsibility of Christian theology to critically reflect on how the various interpretations of the ideas inferable from the ancient artefacts can inform, confirm or correct modern theological thinking, if at all. Given that the foundations of Christian articles of faith lie in these traditions and their importance as resources for theology, on the one hand, and that the different versions of the biblical texts are not the sole representatives of the traditions and only partially preserve the traditions, on the other hand, a considered and accountable doctrine of creation cannot be naively or stubbornly Biblicist or be too eager to jump on the bandwagon of every cosmological theory *du jour*. I would not hazard a guess as to how my interpretation of Genesis 1:26–28 might play a positive part in the rethinking and reformulation of this doctrine, especially as it pertains to ethical issues involved in human procreation. Nevertheless, I suggest that the ideas about the responsibility of humans for the continued inhabitability of the created environments and the flourishing of all their occupants are worth further theological reflection. The royal images in which the texts couch these ideas do not have to be a guiding aspect of this reflection. I also propose that unchecked growth in the human population under the guise of the divine command to 'be fruitful and multiply' is not in keeping with the ideas preserved by Genesis 1:1–2:4a, because overpopulation does not enhance the liveability of environments, but diminishes it.

Chapter 8

Pauline uterine discourse in context

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Introduction

For someone who apparently had little regard for human sexuality, who saw social institutions such as marriage as useful for controlling or regulating if not curbing sexual passion and thus curtailing fertility (1 Cor 7) and who at times ostensibly affirmed (1 Cor 11) and even subscribed to (1 Cor 14) a subsidiary role for women in the communities he addressed, Paul did not shy away from invoking images related to the womb.[93] Then again, Paul's

93. To be clear, fertility was a highly prized attribute in ancient times and before the modern-day population explosion. However, in the ancient context, the deferment of sexual passion should not be all too easily aligned with the failure to produce offspring. In fact, neither was acting on sexual passion a guarantee for legitimate offspring given the variety of sexual outlets available to men and the precarious nature of children born unwanted, nor was the presence of passion deemed a necessary prerequisite for impregnating a woman.

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direct or overt invocation of the womb was not uncommon for his time because uterine-informed discourse was related to the earthy grittiness of first-century life, where people were confronted by the vicissitudes of everyday, corporeal human life. Moreover, in a context where fertility was highly prized and determined the status of women and stability of households, communities and the like, the womb was guaranteed to be part of people's frame of reference, and even to determine their positions, well-being and future. The womb, then, was central to life in NT times, even if not all the NT texts reflect as much, or rather, if interpreters typically have spent more time on related themes such as kinship in the Pauline letters, reflecting on how he employed family or household imagery and considering how such imagery formed and guided his thinking.[94] This contribution, however, while it does not deny the links between womb-related kinship and household-related rhetoric, wants to briefly and contextually map out uterine discourse and its function in the Pauline letters.[95]

The womb in antiquity

Reference to the womb is neither a common nor a recurrent theme in our modern-day world. Today, people frequently invoke references to the body and body parts, also in public fora and discussions, but the womb hardly features as a primary discourse marker. It may be that with modern life's focus on bodily appearance and health, as public media suggest, not much room is left for the womb. When the womb does attract attention, though, it is in discourses about reproduction and increasingly, in the modern context of scarcity and environmental concerns, in

94. See, for example, the bibliography in Punt (2010).

95. Given the reach and importance of the topic for NT studies, it is important to make the implicit caveat clear, namely, that the constraints of this volume allow only for a preliminary and brief investigation of a wider-ranging topic with a commensurately wide spectrum of cognate concerns and interests – inevitably, further studies will have to explore such matters.

discourses about control over reproduction.[96] In ancient times, but for altogether different reasons, concerns about control over the womb were prominent. In the NT, Paul is one of the authors whose rhetorical use of the womb, pregnancy and childbirth served different purposes simultaneously:

- asserting God's power over humanity and creation
- securing what was deemed to be the requisite social control over women's bodies
- depicting the end times.[97]

The spectrum of connotations with the womb illustrates that for the ancients, the reproductive body was an important link between human life and the divine, as well as between the present and the future, in both religious-apocalyptic and imperial discourse.[98] The religious connection is unsurprising because as Felder (2008:vii) reminds us, 'Reproduction was a cultural imperative achieved, at least in part, by means of appeals to the divine'. Before we turn our attention to how the Bible and the Pauline letters in particular enlist the womb in their arguments, a few remarks on the womb in antiquity are in order.

In antiquity, objects like uterine (and phallic) amulets as well as ritualised behaviour such as 'votive offerings and uterine amulets related to pregnancy and childbearing' demonstrated the 'centrality of [fertility] and [reproduction for] women and their families' (Felder 2018:vii). The womb, understandably, was

96. 'In our fast changing world, issues of reproductive capital, surrogacy, and fertility relate to global discourses of rich and poor, medical technology, gender, transnational health, bodily integrity, and parenthood' (Kartzow 2012:38).

97. It is understandable, then, that 'The reproductive bodies of women become the ground upon which claims of divine authority and human futurity are made and disputed' (Felder 2018:viii).

98. The Bible, too, makes strong connections between the womb and God: '"Opening" or "closing" the womb – fertility or barrenness – was believed to result from divine resolution, and human beings are not able to have any influence on it – as is to be concluded from Jacob's words told to Rachel when the latter was reclaiming children (Gen 30:1)' (Fröhlich 2015:120; so also Moss & Baden 2015).

the subject of discussion in medical treatises of ancient authors in particular. One belief that developed in the medical texts of ancient Greece, albeit not without contestation, came to be known as that of the wandering womb, the notion that the uterus moves, and that its displacement causes medical pathologies in women. The belief persisted in European academic medicine and popular thought for centuries. The tradition is often connected to Hippocrates (5th–4th century BCE), based on claims like (Hippocrates, *Nature of Women* 8):

> If her womb moves towards her hips, her periods stop coming, and pain develops in her lower stomach and abdomen. If you touch her with your finger, you will see the mouth of the womb turned towards her hip [...] When her womb moves towards her liver, she suddenly loses her voice and her teeth chatter and her colouring turns dark. This condition can occur suddenly, while she is in good health. The problem particularly affects old maids and widows – young women who have been widowed after having had children. When this condition occurs, push your hand down below her liver, and tie a bandage below her ribs. Open her mouth and pour in very sweet-scented wine; put applications on her nostrils and burn foul-scented vapours below her womb. (p. 3)[99]

99. See http://www.stoa.org/diotima/anthology/wlgr/wlgr-medicine346.shtml. See also Hippocrates (*Places in Human Anatomy* 47), 'As for what are called women's diseases: the womb is responsible for all such diseases. For the womb, when it is displaced from its natural position, whether forward or back, causes diseases. When the neck of the womb has been moved back and does not bring its opening towards or touch the lips of the vagina, the problem is minor. But if the womb falls forward and brings its opening towards the lips, it, first of all, causes pain when it makes contact, and then because the womb is cut off and obstructed by the contact of its neck with the lips of the vagina, there is no so-called menstrual flow. This flow, if retained, causes swelling and pain. If the womb descends and is diverted so that it approaches the groin, it causes pain. If it ascends and diverted and cut off, it causes illness through its compression. When a woman is ill because of this problem, she has pains in her thighs and her head. When the womb is distended and swollen, there is no flow, and it becomes filled up. When it is filled, it touches the thighs. When the womb is filled with moisture and distended, there is no flow, and it causes pain in both the thighs and the groin, something like balls roll through the stomach, and cause pain in the head, first in one part, and then in all of it, as the disease develops'.

All physicians did not subscribe to the notion that the womb can move around, so that second-century CE authors such as Soranus denounced the theory that the womb moves around due to different fragrant and bad odours, and Galen also insisted on its immobility while ascribing its symptoms to those elements contained in the uterus (see also Adair 1995–1996:153–163; Faraone 2011:1–32). Divergent opinions notwithstanding, the womb featured prominently in ancient discourse.

Such understandings of the womb cannot be separated from associated perceptions about conception and embryology. At the time, preformationism and double seed theories vied for prominence, holding in the one case that the father's semen contained everything needed for the creation of the living being (e.g. Plato), and in the other, the notion prevailed that an embryo is formed from the mixture of two seeds, one each from the father and the mother (the Hippocratic school and Galen). Aristotle rejected both these theories, making a distinction between the father's role as formal and efficient cause and the mother's role as material cause. Although the woman is not superfluous to the procreative process in Aristotle's opinion, the male role remained the vital part because form and purpose determine the result more than the matter it is made of (Grahn-Wilder 2018:35–38).

It bears reminding that not all wombs, like people, were considered equal in the hierarchical, androcentric context of the first century CE. The only similarity between the wombs of slaves, free women, elite women and other possible groups and configurations was that they all were socially constituted and inscribed with differentiated access and status associations, and thus constituted different 'discourses of motherhood' (Kartzow 2011:122–123). How the importance of the womb reached beyond procreative matters and endured for many centuries, is illustrated in the aetiology of hysteria which until the late 19th-century trauma was believed to be feminine. Hysteria was considered physiological, and as the name suggests, mostly connected to

women, and thought to be treated or resolved through performing a hysterectomy.[100] Such notions about the womb, reproduction and essentially human life, mark out the setting within which the womb-rhetoric of the NT, and for our purposes, of the Pauline letters has to be understood.

The womb in the Bible

Before we focus on Paul, another literary glance towards the past is in order, because not only ancient authors but also biblical authors often used womb terminology. In fact, the Hebrew word for womb [*reḥem*] is together with the word for heart, the two most often mentioned internal human body parts in the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament (HB/OT) (Schroer & Staubli 2001:72). The etymology of the Hebrew words for a woman [נְקֵבָה] and a man [זָכָר] in the prophetic books of the HB/OT suggest an orifice-bearer and therefore the receptivity and penetrability of women, and conversely associates remembrance and perpetuation and therefore virility and dominance with men.[101] As Mathias (2004:24–5) explains, the central orifice of a woman is portrayed as the womb, רֶחֶם [*reḥem*] or sometimes רַחַם [*raham*], which is also the site of compassion, רָחַם [*rāḥam*, to have mercy] or רַחֲמִים [*raḥamim*, compassion or sympathy]. It means that (Mathias 2004):

> [*T*]he female body is constituted as violable and penetrable, rooted in narratives that continuously reinforce male virility/dominance and

100. It was only after the work of the French neurologist Jean Martin Charcot that hysteria came to be understood as psychological, and traumatic experiences to be understood across a wider scope (Ringer & Brandell 2012:1). Is the focus on trauma and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) that came about especially after the last 80 years of armed conflict such as World War 2, the Vietnam War and the Gulf War and which shifted the focus of trauma much more to men, an indication of a more balanced approach to gender and trauma, or simply the reinforcement of gendered trauma? However, cf. Clark for the US context where statistics show 7% of the population suffer from PTSD, with a three times higher incidence among women (Clark 2016:232).

101. The Hebrew, נָקַב means to pierce; זָכַר means to remember.

> female passivity/subjugation, especially through legal material which enforces boundaries and sexual dominance by men over women. (pp. 24–25)

Two other words used for the womb in the HB/OT are בֶּטֶן [*beten*], which can also have the more general meaning of 'belly' or 'stomach', as well as מֵעִים [*me'im*].

In the NT, the womb is mentioned by name less frequently. Often, the same word can mean stomach or belly as well, but further notions related to the womb and reproduction are not uncommon. Three words were used for the womb in the NT, again, even if not used exclusively for this purpose (except in one case, μήτρα). The most prevalent Greek word for womb, κοιλία, appears 22 times in the NT. Apart from the Pauline letters' use of the word, it appears most often in the NT Gospels, in Matthew 12:40, 15:17, 19:12; Mark 7:19; Luke 1:15, 41, 42, 44, 2:21, 11:27, 23:29; John 3:4, 7:38–13 times in total; only two other books in the NT, Acts (3:2, 14:8) and Revelation (10:9, 10), use the word κοιλία. A second word used, among others, for womb was γαστήρ, and is found in Matthew 1:18, 23, 24:19; Mark 13:17; Luke 1:31, 21:23; 1 Thessalonians 5:3; Titus 1:12; Revelation 12:2. A third word used for womb, μήτρα, is used only twice, in Luke 2:23 and in Romans 4:19.

The NT also uses other terms that are related to the womb. Closely related are the various terms for 'birthing', such as τίκτω, which is used 18 times in the NT (Mt 1:21, 23, 25, 2:2; Lk 1:31, 57, 2:6, 7, 11; Jn 16:21; Gl 4:27; Heb 6:7; Ja 1:15; Rv 12:2, 4 [X2], 5, 13) and ἀποκυέω 'bringing forth', used twice only (Ja 1:15, 18).[102] Other related terms include those for motherhood, breast milk and nursing. Mothers are ubiquitous in the NT, and the birth accounts of John and Jesus propels Elizabeth and Mary to the foreground in the Gospels. They are joined by many other mothers, including male mothers such as Jesus and Paul (Gl 4:19–20).

102. At times, birthing language is used with God as the subject (Ja 1:18 βουληθείς ἀπεκύησεν ἡμᾶς λόγῳ ἀληθείας εἰς τὸ εἶναι ἡμᾶς ἀπαρχήν τινα τῶν αὐτοῦ κτισμάτων. Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures (Revised Standard Version [RSV]).

Maternal language was dependent on ancient gender constructions and how early followers of Jesus reworked them. Suffused with theological meaning, the NT also shapes mothers physiologically, anatomically and socially as female bodies through the prevailing notions of the ancient world in which the Jesus movement was born (Myers 2017).[103] Breast milk and nursing features in various places in the NT (1 Th 2:7; 1 Cor 3:1–3; Heb 5:12–14; Pt 1 2:2–3). In 1 Corinthians 3:2 [γάλα ὑμᾶς ἐπότισα, οὐ βρῶμα·οὔπω γὰρ ἐδύνασθε], Paul berates the immaturity of the Corinthian community, being fed on milk like immature children not yet capable of digesting solid food. The immaturity associated with milk and children is also apparent in Hebrews 5:12–13 [πᾶς γὰρ ὁ μετέχων γάλακτος ἄπειρος λόγου δικαιοσύνης, νήπιος γάρ ἐστιν], where milk is seen as infants' food and contrasted with the word of righteousness. A lack of spiritual maturity is expressed through the imagery of infancy. Such usage stands in stark contrast to 1 Peter 2:2, where milk is regarded as pure and spiritual [τὸ λογικὸν ἄδολον].[104] A reference to nursing, or at least the person of the nurse (1 Th 2:7), is linked to the nurturing and upbringing of children. In addition to invoking substances used for nurturing children, imagery connected to the lives of children includes those people involved with rearing children, namely, fathers (1 Th 2:11; 1 Cor 4:14–21),[105] mothers (Gl 4:19;

103. But motherhood was not simply a revered state for the ancients. As Myers (2017) goes on to explain, 'in a context that aligned perfection with "masculinity", motherhood was the ideal goal for women – a justification for deficient, female existence. [...] Identifying themselves as members of God's household, ancient Christians utilized motherhood as a theological category and a contested ideal for women disciples'.

104. Again, in http://www.asor.org/anetoday/2018/07/Blessed-Among-Women, Myers (2017:n.p.) writes about the ambivalence of motherhood and nursing: 'By reminding their audiences that they have been formed from the same "milk" provided by their teachers, these communities are shaped to reflect their teacher as well as the one who inseminated him, causing him to metaphorically bear and lactate (cf. Gl 4:19–21). Rather than turning to actual maternal bodies, these New Testament writings demonstrate a shift towards male bodies metaphorically overtaking the role of actual mothers. Inseminated by the heavenly Father's word, these new mothers convey eternal, rather than mortal, life'.

105. According to Larson (2004:96), 'in view of the role of the Roman *paterfamilias* as an archetype of powerful masculinity, it is notable that Paul repeatedly describes himself as a father and his congregation as children'.

1 Cor 3:2; 2 Cor 6:11–12; 2 Cor 12:14–15),[106] nurses [τροφὸς, Th 1 2:7] and guardians [παιδαγωγός, 1 Cor 4:15; Gl 3:24, 25].

The womb in the Pauline letters

Some of the examples above already point to the significance of the womb and related terminology in Paul's argumentation. Notwithstanding the centrality of his kinship imagery and his frequent use of body language, uterine rhetoric is another significant, related discursive marker in the Pauline letters – more so than in the rest of the NT. It is interesting that of all the epistolary material in the NT, including the pseudo-epistles like Hebrews, it is only Paul who used κοιλία and μήτρα. Only the latter word also appears, once, in the deutero-Pauline letters. Our investigation of Pauline uterine discourse starts with the three words for the womb in the NT, and then expands beyond these single signifiers.

Κοιλία [womb, belly, stomach]; γαστήρ [womb, belly]; μήτρα [womb]

Various NT documents and the Pauline letters used three words to express or convey the meaning of womb – albeit it may not be the only meaning expressed by these words. Paul used κοιλία five times in his letters, in Galatians 1:15, Philippians 3:19, 1 Corinthians 6:13 (2X) and Romans 16:18. While κοιλία is hardly a high-frequency word in the NT, its presence in the Pauline materials should not be underestimated. Paul used κοιλία in important ways in significant segments of his arguments. Of the five occurrences of κοιλία in the Pauline letters, it is only in Galatians 1:15 that it means the womb; twice in 1 Corinthians 6:13 it refers to the stomach in relation to food, and like Philemon 3:19 (where the stomach becomes people's god) and Romans 16:18 (where people are

106. For 2 Corinthians 12:14, see Harrison's argument (2013:399 –425).

enslaved to the stomach), used to express basic desires, with an element of vilification. In 1 Thessalonians 5:3 Paul also used the term γαστήρ (ὥσπερ ἡ ὠδὶν τῇ ἐν γαστρὶ ἐχούσῃ as travail [comes] upon a woman with child), a word that also occurs in the deutero-Pauline Titus 1:12.[107] In still another instance, in Romans 4:19, Paul also used the alternative μήτρα [womb].[108]

The word 'womb' often disappears in Bible translations, when expressions are understood as metaphorical and especially when translations pursue dynamic equivalency. However, the crucial – if conventional (read, Jewish) – role Paul assigned to the womb is clear in ascribing it the locus of God's association with him, being called in the womb (Gl 1:15).[109] In all likelihood, Paul's reference to being called in the womb recalls the servant of Yahweh terminology (Is 49:1, 5; cf. Jr 1:5).[110] Aligning himself with the servant who embodied the covenant for Israel and became a light for the nations (Is 42:6; 49:5–7), Paul answered God's call from the womb to lead others and Gentiles in particular to faithfulness to God.

107. In Titus 1:12 γαστέρες ἀργαί as reference to the people of Crete is often translated as 'lazy gluttons' (e.g. RSV). Elsewhere in the NT, γαστήρ is used also in Matthew 1:18, 23, 24:19; Mark 13:17; Luke 1:31, 21:23; Rev 12:2.

108. The second occurrence of μήτρα is in Luke 2:23: in the claim that πᾶν ἄρσεν διανοῖγον μήτραν ἅγιον τῷ κυρίῳ κληθήσεται (Every male that opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord; see Ex 13:2), the opening of a womb by a male refers to the birth of a boy child and is probably analogous to πρωτότοκος (see Lk 2:7). Interestingly, notwithstanding its use in the Pauline letters, Collins (2008) does not include womb as a term in the index of his book on the power of images in Paul.

109. Similar claims are found elsewhere, too, in contemporary literature, such as in *Wisdom of Solomon* 7:1 'I also am mortal, like all men, a descendant of the first-formed child of earth; and in the womb of a mother I was moulded into flesh'.

110. In the HB/OT, Israel also is described as being formed by YHWH (Is 27:11, 43:1, 7, 21, 44:21, 45:11) from the womb (Is 44:2, 24, 46:3, 48:8). God's formative role in giving shape to human life in the womb was for the prophets related to God's foreknowledge and control over human destiny (see Mitchell 2012:609).

The mothering Paul

Paul's use of uterine logic extends beyond direct references to the womb. So, for example, in Galatians 4:19, Paul portrays himself as mother to the Galatians, but implies the womb in his claim that he experienced birth pains in their becoming who they should be in Christ (τέκνα μου, οὓς πάλιν ὠδίνω μέχρις οὗ μορφωθῇ Χριστὸς ἐν ὑμῖν [My little children, with whom I am again in travail until Christ be formed in you!]). Elsewhere, Paul also picked up on the HB/OT's tradition of lamenting, which is not mere sightless groaning, such as when in Romans 8:22 he described himself as suffering birth pains together with the community [συνωδίνω], in their longing for Christ's parousia. On the one hand, Paul's rhetoric aligns with the mothering role that he ascribed to the created cosmos [πᾶσα ἡ κτίσις συστενάζει καὶ συνωδίνει Romans 8:22]. On the other hand, and as Gaventa (2012) states:

> Here [*Rm 8:22*] Paul draws on a convention of the Hebrew Bible in which birth pains serve as a metaphor for the period of strife that ushers in a new age (see, e.g., Is 13:8; Jr 4:31). Variations on this metaphor appears in other early Christian writers as well (Mk 13:8; Jn 16:21; Rv 12:2). (p. 553)[111]

Paul's description of the whole of creation undergoing the pain of childbirth is unparalleled in the Bible. The metaphor of birth pains is well-attested in the Bible, and generally used to describe the imminent expectation of judgement (e.g. Ps 48:6; Is 13:8, 21:3, 26:17–18, 37:3, 42:14; Jr 4:31, 6:24, 8:21, 13:21, 22:23, 30:6, 50:43; Hs 13:13; Mi 4:9–10; 1 Th 5:3). It refers in positive sense to the birth of Israel (Is 66:7–8), signifying divine eschatological intervention in judgement or salvation.[112] The suffering of the pains of childbirth recalls the ongoing curse placed on women owing to Adam's sin,

111. See also Gaventa (2007) for a longer discussion on the motherhood role Paul ascribes to himself, and its theological implications.

112. Romans 8 can be read as an intertextual echo of Isaiah 24, where the mourning motif prevails but which transforms in Romans 8 so that the birth pangs imagery becomes the prime focus for a situation infused with hope and renewal. Intertextually, the groaning aspect is refurbished by the expectation of the rebirth of creation.

but will result in the 're-birth' of the created order centred in Jesus Christ as the firstborn. The pain of childbirth is productive; it is 'a metaphor of hope – travail, the agony that leads to a new birth' (Jewett 2006:517). An extension of the mothering role Paul ascribed to himself is found in his role of nursing a community like a mother would nurse an infant. In 1 Corinthians 3:2, Paul furthered the metaphor, to refer to himself as a nursing mother (γάλα ὑμᾶς ἐπότισα, οὐ βρῶμα I fed you with milk, not solid food), who nourished the believers with milk, as a mother does with nurslings.[113] Paul, however, was not only aware of the productive, life-giving and nurturing womb but also of the unproductive and misbehaving womb.

Unproductive and misbehaving wombs: Paulus abortivus

Akin to other first-century authors, Paul did not accord the womb a constructive role. As much as Paul's preference for the celibate life (1 Cor 7) did not mean that he ignored the womb, celibacy did not pre-empt the problematic womb. For Paul and others in his world, as exemplified in numerous biblical accounts, the unproductive womb was considered problematic for various reasons. In a world where reproduction was vital and therefore highly rated, problems with and concerns about the infertile womb were pronounced.[114] In the Pauline literature, the infertile womb requires divine intervention. In Galatians 4:27 he unleashed the words from Isaiah 54:1 (στεῖρα ἡ οὐ τίκτουσα … ἡ οὐκ ὠδίνουσα [barren one who does not bear … you who are not in travail]) onto the contrast he made between the current Jerusalem and the Jerusalem above. In a convoluted allegory, he contrasted the free Sarah and the enslaved Hagar as the women of Abraham, aligning the former with freedom in Christ and the latter with

113. For the later Pauline tradition, see Timothy 1 2:18 on salvation through childbirth; see, for example, Kartzow (2011, 2012), Solevåg (2013).

114. 'In the case of the womb, then, the biblical analogies suggest that in fact it is the closed womb that is usual, and the opened womb that is unusual' (Moss & Baden 2015:57).

enslavement through the Law. The deciding factor is the promise, and as the progeny of Abraham through Isaac, all believers in Christ then become children of the promise (ἐπαγγελίας τέκνα, Gl 4:28) (see Punt 2006:87–100).

However, the sharpest indication of the problematic womb in the Pauline letters is probably Paul's reference to himself as an abortion. Bible translations typically soften Paul's reference to himself as a miscarriage or abortion, when he depicts himself as ἔκτρωμα in 1 Corinthians 15:8 (ἔσχατον δὲ πάντων ὡσπερεὶ τῷ ἐκτρώματι ὤφθη κἀμοί [Last of all, he appeared also to me, a miscarriage]).[115] Whether or not his reference to himself as an abortion is part of the Pauline self-referential discourse on weakness remains a question.[116] In fact, Paul's claim to be ἔκτρωμα could be another reverse claim clothed in subversive subservience, akin to claims regarding his weakness through which he derives power or his ignorance through which he claims knowledge (e.g. 2 Cor 10–13), to mention two instances of a wider range of seemingly self-deprecatory remarks.[117] If one reads Paul's letters within the echo

115. So, for example, the RSV, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), English Standard Version (ESV), New American Standard Bible (NASB) translate ἔκτρωμα as 'untimely born', the Lexham English Bible as 'one born at the wrong time', the NIV and Holman Christian Standard Bible as 'one abnormally born', the King James Version and Authorized Version as 'one born out of due time' and the New Living Translation 'born at the wrong time'.

116. Paul's self-reference in 1 Corinthians 15:8 fits the first of Wills' nine theorems about the construction of the Other applicable to the Bible and elsewhere, namely, (1) construction of self through Others; (2) construction of Others through self; (3) Others as similar to self; (4) Others' seductive power; (5) distorting Others; (6) constructing internal Others; (7) reassignment of ambiguous groups; (8) reassignment of origins of practices; and (9) constructing eternal Others (Wills 2008:12–14; 217–218).

117. Other such self-deprecatory claims include those pertaining to his speech (e.g. 1 Cor 1:17, 10:10; 2 Cor 11:6) and physical composure (if the 'thorn in the flesh' does refer to a psychical ailment, of course, 2 Cor 12:7 –9); see also Collins (2008:180–182); Nickelsburg (1986:2005). The *Acts of Paul and Thecla* (chapter 1) portrays Paul as 'bald headed, bowlegged, strongly built, a man small in size, with meeting eyebrows, with a rather large nose' whose physiognomics may resonate differently in our day and age than was the case in ancient times. The *Acts of Paul and Thecla*'s further elaboration of Paul as 'full of grace, for at times he looked like a man and at times he had the face of an angel' confirms his positive evaluation. Ancient physiognomic thinking made strong connections between a person's outward appearance and that person's inner disposition, see, for example, Malina and Neyrey (1996:100–152).

chamber of first-century imperial discourse, his use of ἔκτρωμα could constitute a reverse claim to the effect of invoking the notion often found among Empire's powerful about being born at the opportune moment.[118]

Should ἔκτρωμα play in on the rhetoric of the opportune moment, the ambiguity of the phrase would allow the deprecatory interpretation, which prepares the ground to be adopted, as Paul accounts in Galatians 1.[119] Alternatively, a reverse claim for Paul being born at the opportune moment invokes the imperial claim in this regard, signalling power and authority becoming to Paul – flowing from wombly actions as much as from cosmological alignment, and underscored by divine design. Patronal patterns of power often emerge in the midst of Paul's claims of disinvestment of self by means of which he claimed back control (cf. Polaski 1999:104–123). Paul's discourse on weakness cannot, in any case, be read as a simple theological argument because it forms a vital part of Paul's challenge to the societal conventions and imperialist setting of his day.[120]

Discursive uterine strategies in Paul

Notwithstanding the womb's significance in Pauline rhetoric, it is inappropriate to overemphasise its reproductive role when

118. Although room does not allow for exploring the Roman imperial context further, more recently scholars have interpreted notions that are part of Pauline uterine discourse such as adoption (Lewis 2016) and pre-birth divine election (Jung 2018) with reference to this very context; see also Punt (2015).

119. Although here Paul's metaphors crisscross, with his argument that God has set him apart to proclaim the gospel of Christ when he was still 'in my mother's womb' (ἐκ κοιλίας μητρός μου often translated, 'before I was born', [Gl 1:15]). See also the longer discussion in Nickelsburg (1986:198–205), who also makes connections between 1 Corinthians 15:8 and Galatians 1:15, applying the deficient and embryonic notions suggested by the term, to Paul's ministry. See also Collins (2008:121–122).

120. Some scholars appear to take Pauline pronouncements on face value rather than to account for their rhetoric, and may so miss out the power claims involved in Paul's references to his weakness (e.g. Mayordomo Marín 2006:9–10).

contemplating its place and function in the discursive strategies of Paul's letters. As Moss and Baden (2015:170) put it, 'Even when the birth of the Christ child is set to one side, it is not "normal" parenting but adoption that becomes the focal metaphor of Paul's message'.[121] For starters, the Pauline letters' emphasis on Jesus as Lord far outweighs, by a factor of 10, his few references to Jesus as a son. And indeed (Moss & Baden 2015):

> If biological parenting and adoptive parenting must be weighed in a theological balance, we cannot forget that the God of Christian soteriology is the deity that sacrifices his biological child for his adopted children. (pp. 170, 278 n. 50)

However, even if the productive womb is not the key to Pauline discourse, a number of salient points regarding Paul's discursive use of the womb have emerged and can be considered briefly.

One, for Paul, the womb was the locus of his authorisation. In Galatians 1:15, Paul claims that God is the one who has 'appointed me' or 'set me apart' (ὁ ἀφορίσας με; see also Rm 1:1) in (literally, 'out of', ἐκ) 'my mother's womb' (ἐκ κοιλίας μητρός μου).[122] It is unlikely that Paul's reference to κοιλία in this verse accords any particular potency to either Paul or (his mother's) womb. However, it is significant that Paul used the reference of his divine, *in utero* call, as opposed to a divine encounter on the Damascus road as Acts constructed it, as substantiation for his authority as an apostle. In fact, Paul ascribes authority to his wombly authorisation to such an extent that he did not consider it necessary to first consult the leadership of the very group he had been persecuting: εὐθέως οὐ προσανεθέμην σαρκὶ καὶ αἵματι οὐδὲ ἀνῆλθον εἰς Ἱεροσόλυμα πρὸς τοὺς πρὸ ἐμοῦ ἀποστόλους (Gl 1:16–17; [I did not immediately confer

121. Adoption is an important notion in the Pauline letters, and related to womb discourse through connections with lineage, kinship, heirs and so on; it is not discussed here. For excellent studies on adoption in the Roman era, see, for example, Lindsay (2009); for Paul, see, for example, Lewis (2016).

122. Jung's (2018) proposal that Paul in this phrase alluded 'to his birth as a Roman citizen, which is later followed by his calling to be an apostle to the Gentiles', relies too heavily on the Acts of the Apostles.

with flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me]).[123] From the earliest point in Paul's ministry, then, the womb is implicated in power, but not only in or associated with an authorising role – it, more often than not, found itself on the receiving end of power.

Two, the womb, ever in danger of being unruly, apparently needed to be regulated and therefore required control. For ancient authors, as also for Paul, control over the womb, also on the literary level was of paramount importance. Not unlike the narratives and settings of the Hebrew Bible, so too in the NT and the Pauline materials the womb was not only an important marker of the broader discourse but also a means for and measure of control. Because ancient authors were by and large male, their concern with control over womb illustrates their social, masculine concerns more than their insight into uterine physiology, or its social value, for that matter. The way in which the womb was constructed as vital for human life in general, but even more so for their progeny along with weighty socio-economic concerns such as kinship and inheritance and so forth, provides mostly a glimpse into the minds of ancient men.[124]

123. The RSV leaves εὐθέως (immediately) untranslated – on the one hand, it weakens Paul's argument since 'immediately' would signal that consultation with the leaders was not the first thing he felt compelled to do. On the other hand, it strengthens the general claim that Paul did not, *at all*, consult with the leaders – but the latter does not fit Paul's argument in Galatians 2 on how he consulted with the leadership in Jerusalem at length, and reached a compromised agreement.

124. Slaughter (2011:67–68) explains how their understanding of conception, reveals masculine concerns: 'In Greece, where women were not even considered parents but only vessels of the man's child, they were feared because men ascribed the power of conception to woman's choice. In Rome where women were honoured as mothers, they were not believed to have control over conception. The old adage that you only fear what you cannot understand is apropos here – the greater the knowledge, the lesser the fear. The Hippocratics, who scarcely looked at their female patients and never interviewed them, had little knowledge of actual internal anatomy and physiology and this resulted in a good deal of fear towards women, who were seen as virtually an alien species, inhabited by a roaming animal. Through Soranus' better understanding of female anatomy and the increased dependence on the patient's own testimony, this fear was turned into an attitude resembling respect and collaboration'.

Indeed, the womb was not only biologically connected but also metaphorically used in its alignment with the propagation of human life and used to imply both the beginning of life and its reforming, remaking or renewal. The womb was not without a cause and did not exist simply in and of itself; rather, the womb was defined in terms of its productivity and functionality. At the same time, and while the womb implied new life, it always came at a cost, involving birth pains – a notion which Paul most likely borrowed from the HB/OT and refurbished for his Christological, apocalyptic visions for the world. Even though these were negative, and in ancient times considerably more life-threatening experiences, the birth pains of the womb were deemed to render good, new or positive consequences.[125]

Three, in his assumption of the fatherhood of various communities he addressed in his letters, the exnomination of his impregnating role regarding the communities he addressed should not be overlooked. Wombs in antiquity were in two ways not autonomous or independent. Firstly, the function and fruit of wombs were firmly regulated by the powerful in society who were distinctly male; and secondly, to ensure productivity, wombs require male intervention, even if popular perception did not necessarily perceive of this similarly to modern people.[126] Paul did not shy away from invoking parental, and explicitly also that of the male father, imagery, which probably served different purposes, among which was that of authority and control.[127]

125. In the long run, a suffering self-discourse would develop in early Christianity; see, for example, Perkins (1995).

126. As confirmed by a range of contemporary medical authors, men were often seen to be solely responsible for conception and that women merely provided a conducive environment for the child to grow; ironically, women were nevertheless primarily (if not exclusively) held accountable if conception or pregnancy did not result from copulation.

127. The problematic nature of the womb in patriarchal context becomes clear in Revelation 17: 'Creation lies only in the hands of the one seated on the throne, with life-giving water flowing from it. Therefore, the whore's body presents a very real threat in the literal narrative of the book of Revelation; unbridled procreation with a woman who is penetrated by everyone, rather than controlled creation from the divine' (Fletcher 2014:163).

Linking up with the second consideration above about control over the womb, the unstated agency was masculinity that exercised control and authority, with men as fathers claiming children, and the apostle Paul claiming his masculine right to fatherhood – at times in conjunction with God – over the communities he initiated. Unlike maternity that became self-evident in pregnancy and childbirth, paternity was not associated with such physicalities. Fathers were accorded a male, creative role aligned with rationality and power. Paternity was a choice. Men could decide whether or not to accept a paternal role.[128]

Four, the links between the womb, faith and the divine, or at least, appeals to the divine, are strong. Reproduction was not only culturally defined – which it certainly was – but also deemed connected to the divine in one way or another (Felder 2018:vii). As God transformed the sterility of Sarah, so too would God transform the sterility of Christ on the cross, bringing the dead to life through the child in Sarah's womb and the resurrection of Christ. Elsewhere, Paul also ascribes exactly this life-giving, generative power to God (Rm 4:17)[129] (White 1999:171, 200–201). It is in the interrelationship between the womb and the divine that adoption features (again), suggesting itself as both a sign of the empty womb but also control over, or even beyond, wombs. Even if in the biblical tradition, the process of the shaping of a child in the womb remains mysterious (e.g. Ec 11:5; 2 Macc 7:22), biblical authors granted God an active, formative role in the process (e.g. Ps 139:13). Tension remains, though, between the womb and faith, if not the womb and the divine. In Romans 4:19, the focus is on the contrast between Abraham's faith (μὴ ἀσθενήσας

128. As Harlow (1998:160–161) confirms, 'The Roman *paterfamilias* had, in theory, the right of life and death over those in his power, and this began with the choice of whether to accept or refuse a child, whether to recognise his own parenthood in society'. See also Punt (2014:303–323).

129. Romans 4:17 καθὼς γέγραπται ὅτι πατέρα πολλῶν ἐθνῶν τέθεικά σε, κατέναντι οὗ ἐπίστευσεν θεοῦ τοῦ ζῳοποιοῦντος τοὺς νεκροὺς καὶ καλοῦντος τὰ μὴ ὄντα ὡς ὄντα [as it is written, 'I have made you the father of many nations' – in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist] (RSV).

τῇ πίστει, [he did not weaken in faith]) and Sarah's womb (τὴν νέκρωσιν τῆς μήτρας Σάρρας, [the barrenness of Sarah's womb]).[130]

Conclusion

As this brief investigation shows, the womb and related notions are important markers in Pauline discourse. The uterine discourse of the Pauline letters, more than the rest of the NT, mirrors the importance of womb-related rhetoric in the first century CE. Although Paul's deployment of womb-rhetoric hardly touches on the person of Jesus, the implications of the conviction that Jesus was conceived apart from sex (Moss & Baden 2015):

> [*R*]aise tangled issues for modern Christians who live in an age in which conception can take place without sex, women can serve as surrogates to those who are procreatively challenged, and reproduction can be divorced from 'traditional family' units. (p. 170)

Pauline uterine discourse, rather, points to the significance of the womb, conception and propagation of human life in terms of not only physiological and biological concerns, but also their discursive presence in the complex configurations of human life, past and present.

130. Moss and Baden (2015:191) provides a brief summary of how sex, marriage and procreation sit together in Pauline thinking: 'Procreation is not in and of itself important enough to require engaging in sexual intercourse. [...] Paul will go on, in the remainder of his epistles, to focus on the concrete and tightly knit family of his community. They are, in his words, one body. [...] Paul advocates proposes a model of family and union with God that exists outside of the structures of biological procreation. [...] [A] strong counterbalance to the master narrative of infertility. [...] Paul systematically works to sever sex, marriage, and procreation from one another. In doing so he allows for distinctive valuations of each'.

Chapter 9

An attempt to liberate the womb from *divine* overburdening – In conversation with Mary and Elizabeth (Luke 1:5–45)

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Introduction

In October 1998, 20 years ago, while I was at Petra College busy with my diploma in children's ministry, I wrote the following poem[131]:

131. Unfortunately, this poem was written down on a piece of paper that got lost. However, I recall the essence of the poem and try to construct it as best as I possibly can. I hope that the 1998 author will allow me some creative freedom.

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God thinks and a child is born…

It is silent, it is night, there is a desire…

A face, a smile, hands and feet

Everything perfect and all so pure

Holding her close, while touching her face

Love unconditional and eternal

A tear role down God's cheek

She leaves his arms and a child is born

The essence of the poem is that the fertilisation process, the fusion of gametes to initiate the development of a new individual organism, originates with the Hebrew deity,[132] a transcendental thought *instance* that precedes the fertilisation process. The idea was to express the conception in thought (*divine* conception) as the purest *state* and *form* of the living organism. I wanted to verbalise how closely related the act of fertilisation, and the *divine* thought process were, and by implication how *sacred* the instance of conception is. It made perfectly good sense then to conceive of such an idea while being exposed to texts such as Psalm 139:13 כִּי־אַתָּה קָנִיתָ כִלְיֹתָי תְּסֻכֵּנִי בְּבֶטֶן [because he created

132. The Hebrew deity in this study refers to the monotheistic, creator deity of ancient Israel, second-temple Judaism, and early Christianity. The epithet 'Hebrew' refers to the language of the Hebrew-speaking people who conceptualised a monotheistic deity in the Hebrew frame of reference. It is the monotheistic deity of the Old and New Testament texts.

my kidney and weaved me in the womb of my mother].[133] The kidney symbolises the innermost and secret part of a human being.[134] The idea that a deity is so intimately involved during conception, though, has the potential to place a heavy burden on the womb. On the one hand, the idea that a transcendental being, the *divine*, is intimately involved with the womb must be overwhelming. The notion that a mortal subject is to nurture a *divine* thought in one's womb is a major responsibility and is often experienced as a burden.[135] If things turn out the way they are expected to, the birth of a healthy child, for example, then makes it so much easier to acknowledge, accept and embrace a deity as the giver of life. On the other hand, the notion that the *divine* is the giver of life has a negative impact on those who cannot, do not, want to conceive a child, or for those who experienced a 'miscarriage', a 'stillbirth' and 'a child born with a rare disease', to mention but a few. Coming to terms with accounting and answering for death, disease, illness, suffering and pain in the womb, the cradle of life, would naturally be burdensome. To be confronted with the existential matters of life and death, when

133. The observation by Smith (2002) that the principles that inform the teachings of the church, which condemn both contraception and those of 'modern reproductive technologies that help the infertile bear children' are not the same, is but one example of how *divine* involvement with the womb and the process of reproduction is misinterpreted and misguided by the church (in her case the Catholic church in particular). The remarks of Singer (1999:169), 'If the fetus does not have the same claim to life as a person, it appears that the newborn baby does not either, and the life of a newborn baby is of less value to it than the life of a pig, a dog, or a chimpanzee is the nonhuman animal', amplify the extreme opposite of *divine* involvement in the womb.

134. Hollady and Köhler (2000:159).

135. This statement is guilty of generalisation. This statement is purely based on two types of observations. Firstly, pregnancy in everyday reality, which demands a major sense of responsibility, while posing all kinds of challenges; hence, regular visits to a gynaecologist and regular sonars are commonplace. Secondly, in faith communities, there are certain moral–ethical expectations (over and above medical expectations) on what to do and what not to do while 'being' pregnant. I am not suggesting that acknowledging the idea that a deity is involved in the conception of life in a womb would necessarily result in a 'feeling' of being burdened. I am saying that nurturing a life is burdensome, and nurturing a life 'given' by a deity even more so.

cradling and nurturing a child, demands reflection of a theological nature. In light of the latter, to take a stance not to have children will result in raised eyebrows for 'hindering' 'God's gracious gift of life' or 'his blessing through giving life'. The implications of these existential experiences could perpetuate the notion that the *divine* is less imminent where a womb is *non-functional* or where death is the outcome where life is expected. Thus, the *involvement* and/or the *absence* of the *divine* at conception has the potential to overburden the womb and those cradling the womb. The question I am asking is whether it is fair to burden the womb with divinity, either as *being* present or *absent*. In 1998, I was a 23-year-old guy with a passion for children and obviously no experience in things such as 'conception', 'fertilisation' and 'womb', let alone their divinisation. That being said, I had to express what I felt and thought at that point in time. Today, almost to the month, 20 years have passed, calling for a renewed reflection and re-evaluation of my poem and the underlying theology. As part of the re-evaluation process, I would like to invite and engage conversation partners, the first of whom is my wife, my most direct access to a womb of existential value. The second and third are Mary and Elizabeth, respectively, or at least in Luke's version of the two most important *mothers* in early Christianity. I sincerely hope that these reflections can contribute to liberating the womb from *divine* overburdening, and with that advance a conversation on reproductive health.

The aim is to address the issue of *divine* overburdening by first taking a critical stance towards the poem I wrote 20 years ago. The idea is to conceptualise a new poem, as part of the conclusion of this study. Secondly, I will address the issue of *divine* conception with a critical theological reading of Luke 1:5–45. I will pay close attention to Elizabeth and Mary, and how the roles of their wombs are portrayed within the narrative. Thirdly, I will discuss how *wombing* affects *being* and vice versa*.* This will be followed by some concluding remarks. The first issue that should be addressed is *divine* conception.

■ *Divine* conception[136]

It is not all clear whether the conception of John the Baptist is a *divine* one or not. What seems to be clear from Luke 1:7 and Luke 1:13a is that Zechariah and Elizabeth wanted a child and that numerous attempts made to get Elizabeth pregnant did not bear any fruit (cf. Lk 1:7, 18). The fact that they prayed about it was the presumed reason why the Hebrew deity intervened (cf. Lk 1:13b), but there was a 'hidden' theological agenda.[137] This agenda was John the Baptist, the prophet who will prepare the way for the eternal King, and the author needed a womb from which this prophet could be born. The womb of a barren, vulnerable, desperate woman presented an ideal opportunity to inseminate the Lukan theology. The angel reveals to Zechariah that his wife, Elizabeth, will bear his son (Lk 1:13c). This declaration can be interpreted in primarily two ways. On the one hand, their *natural* attempts paid off and Elizabeth's egg was fertilised by Zechariah's sperm, but they were not aware of this because of the numerous failed attempts. On the other hand, if it was biologically impossible for Zechariah and Elizabeth to conceive a child, the *divine* had to intervene. This intervention meant that some unconventional tweaking had to be done to make the womb fertile. It is, however, impossible to determine whether the *divine* intervention meant

136. I acknowledge that the 'foretelling' (angelic oracle) of John's and Jesus' birth is a narrative technique by which the author connects John and Jesus as the main characters with the *divine*. I am, therefore, not ignorant of the fact that this is a first-century Mediterranean narrative being told to first-century Mediterranean readers. Rowe (2006) alludes to something like this in pointing out that the use of the term κύριος in the narrative is a way for Luke to determine the narrative identity of God and Jesus (the earthy and resurrected one) and with that the connection between them, 27. I would want to add that the use of this narrative technique in Luke 1:5–45 assists with determining the relationship between John, Jesus, Elizabeth, Mary and the Hebrew deity.

137. The 'hidden' agenda was that the author needed a womb from where a prophet can be born to prepare the way for Jesus. The womb of a barren woman presented an ideal opportunity to divinise the womb.

overriding any biological defect (subtle intervention),[138] or whether a single-cell embryo (zygote)[139] was 'produced' by the *divine* and placed in the womb. What can be said is that, καὶ πνεύματος ἁγίου πλησθήσεται ἔτι ἐκ κοιλίας μητρὸς αὐτοῦ, [he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even before he is out of his mother's womb] (Lk 1:15c).[140] This idea suggests that before he (John the Baptist) 'became' a child, a human being, he was filled with πνεύματος ἁγίου [Holy Spirit] and by implication the spirit of the Hebrew deity. The fulfilment by the Holy Spirit 'before' exiting the womb [κοιλία], implies at the very least that the *divine* intervened with the foetus. It is important for the author to state that John the Baptist was filled with the Holy Spirit 'before' he came out of the womb. This is to establish the interaction between the Hebrew deity and Elizabeth's womb. The phrase ἔσται γὰρ μέγας ἐνώπιον τοῦ κυρίου [he will be great before the Lord] (Lk 1:15a) further highlights the notion that this was not simply an answer to a prayer, to 'rescue' a woman from public disgrace.

The conception of John the Baptist stems from the sperm of a priest from the priestly order of Abijah and an egg from a descendant of Aaron (cf. Lk 1:5).[141] They will conceive a child that will be great before *Kyrios* and prepare the way for the eternal king. What happened days after Zechariah's encounter is uncertain, but according to the narrative, Elizabeth conceived and remained in seclusion (Lk 1:24). The presumed reason for her seclusion was because of the notion that κύριος ἐν ἡμέραις αἷς ἐπεῖδεν ἀφελεῖν ὄνειδός μου ἐν ἀνθρώποις [in those days, *Kyrios* looked upon me and destroyed my disgrace among people] (Lk 1:25b).

138. Given the socio-cultural constructs of the time, the defect had to be with the female reproduction system, not the male sperm.

139. See https://www.ucsfhealth.org/education/conception_how_it_works/.

140. Interestingly, codex Washingtonian (W), as well as all Latin and Syriac versions, read ενκοιλια.

141. Bovon (1989:52) comments that the priestly order of Abijah is ranked eighth and is not one of the more prominent orders. The priestly heritage of Elizabeth proves that her Israel heritage is legitimate.

Elizabeth respectfully retreated in silence, most probably to acknowledge what *Kyrios* had done for her. Before the day of conception, Elizabeth had no honour, only shame. She was wrongfully disgraced by a society that honoured women whose wombs could produce offspring. The only thing that mattered for Elizabeth was to lift her head again and to acquire honour as someone with a womb capable of reproducing.[142] She was unaware of what transpired in the temple. She was unmindful that her womb was destined for things *divine*. She was oblivious to the fact that there was a theological intent with her conception [συλλαμβάνω] and that it would have significant implications. What encouraged the divinisation of Elizabeth's womb was the fact that she was barren [στεῖρα]. One can argue that the intention of the conception was not to relieve Elizabeth of the social burden of not being able to produce children, but her 'being barren' created a fertile opportunity for the author to introduce his theological programme.

The *divine* intervention did not end there; the angel Gabriel was also sent to Nazareth in Galilee. The circumstances were equally 'ideal' for some form of *divine* intervention. It is stated that Mary was a young woman [παρθένος], engaged to Joseph. The extent of the *divine* intervention with the womb hinges on how one interprets the term παρθένος.[143] There are two important observations to make. A generally accepted meaning of παρθένος is a young girl who is of marriageable age or unmarried,[144] and Mary being engaged to Joseph corroborates the fact that Mary is at an appropriate age to get married. The question of virginity in

142. For an explanation of the honour–shame system, see Neyrey (2008:86; cf. Malina 1993:28–62).

143. Bovon (1989:72) remarks that, as a young unmarried girl, Mary had no moral or mystical value in official Judaism.

144. Arndt et al. (1979) provided examples for when the word means 'virgin', and also when men have no intercourse with woman, 'chaste man', 627; For Liddell et al. (1996:1339), the meanings vary from 'maiden, girl', 'unmarried woman, not virgins', 'an unmarried man' and 'maiden'.

the biological sense of the word is not necessarily the obvious idea communicated by παρθένος, although it can be implied.[145] Mary is assured that ὁ κύριος μετὰ σοῦ [the *Kyrios* is with you] (Lk 1:28b), and that εὗρες γὰρ χάριν παρὰ τῷ θεῷ [you found favour before *Theos*] (Lk 1:30). The use of the terms κύριος and θεός highlights the idea that the monotheistic, supreme deity of Israel is present. The notion of '*Kyrios* being with Mary' and that she 'finds favour before *Theos*' are different ways of expressing the Hebrew deity's intention to engage Mary's womb. This is explicitly revealed in verse 31, καὶ ἰδοὺ συλλήμψῃ ἐν γαστρὶ καὶ τέξῃ υἱὸν [and now, you will conceive in your womb (γαστήρ) and give birth to a son].[146] Mary was seemingly perplexed, understandably so, by these utterances. The reason was, according to her, ἄνδρα οὐ γινώσκω [I do not know a man] (Lk 1:34b).[147] One possible interpretation is that she is not yet married and, therefore, has not had any sexual intercourse with a man. If this is taken as plausible, the Holy Spirit's role during conception is significant and deserves a more detailed analysis.[148]

Luke 1:35

- καὶ ἀποκριθεὶς ὁ ἄγγελος εἶπεν αὐτῇ·[and the angel answered and said to her] (this was after she made the statement that she does not know a man)
- πνεῦμα ἅγιον ἐπελεύσεται ἐπὶσὲ [the Holy Spirit will come upon you]

145. Cf. Marshall (1978:64).

146. Cf. Isaiah 7:14 (LXX), ἰδοὺ ἡ παρθένος ἐνγαστρὶ ἕξ ει καὶ τέξεται υἱόν, καὶ καλέσεις τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ Εμμανουηλ [Behold, a young woman will conceive in her womb and give birth to a son, and he will be called Immanuel].

147. According to Marshall (1978:64), ἀνήρ is used specifically for husband, but in this case, it is used for 'man'.

148. Marshall (1978:70–71) asserts that the Holy Spirit is equated with the power of God in poetic parallelism.

- καὶ δύναμις ὑψίστου ἐπισκιάσει σοι· [the power of the most High will overshadow you]
- διὸ καὶ τὸ γεννώμενον ἅγιον κληθήσεται υἱὸς θεοῦ [therefore, you will become the parent of a holy one, who will be called the son of God].

The opinion held here is that the Holy Spirit 'sanctified' Mary's body in preparation for *divine* 'contact' with the womb and that the 'coming upon' of the Holy Spirit and the 'overshadowing of the power' might refer to the same substance, but they are two separate events serving different purposes.[149] After the Holy Spirit 'came upon' her, she also experienced the δύναμιςὑψίστου [the power of the most High].[150] At this point, the involvement of the most High sounds somewhat intrusive. For the Holy Spirit to 'come upon you' is one thing, but also to experience the 'power' of the most High 'overshadowing you' in relation to conception borders on 'forcing' oneself onto someone. As if that was not enough for Mary to deal with, going through puberty, discovering that her body, and more specifically her womb, follows a regular cycle in preparation for reproduction, while being engaged to Joseph, the Holy Spirit too 'comes upon' her. This must have added to the 'normal' anxiety, confusion and possibly fear she experienced.[151] We should be reminded that in Mary's case this was not a matter of being infertile and, therefore, being shamed. She was young, engaged and about to be married, and now she will conceive the child of the Hebrew deity, the κύριος and θεός. As Mary was a young Jewish girl, engaged to another man, it is clear that no Jewish man would dare to overstep any such boundary;

149. Contra Marshall (1978:70–71), Bovon (1989:77) is of the opinion that verse 35 is not about the two natures of Jesus, nor about the two Christological dimensions, it is rather about the true nature of the Messiah and his kingdom.

150. The Hebrew deity presenting himself through the Holy Spirit and with power as the one offering *divine* sperm is an obstacle for the potential in monotheism to allow for female images of the *divine*; cf. Biezeveld (1998:184–185), that monotheism offers room for female images of the *divine*.

151. A good example is the fear of Zechariah when the angel appeared to him, and he was a grown man doing priestly duties in the temple (cf. Lk 1:13b).

so what gives the 'most High' the right to engage Mary so intimately, disrespecting her own personal space and the 'sanctity' of her body and womb?[152] Was the conception and birth of the 'saviour of the world' and 'eternal King' more important than the sanctity of a 13-year-old Jewish girl?

One cannot help but raise the question of whether there was consent on Mary's part, or is one to accept that consent is not required when a deity decides to intimately engage a human subject?[153] From a first-century Graeco-Roman[154] point of view, consent was a 'non-issue' and so too was 'rape'.[155] *Divine* interaction with a human subject aside, at the very least this was

152. Perkins (2009:237, 238) remarks that the human body is not *a* body. Its boundaries do not hold. She refers to the work of Kristeva when she says, 'for if the body is not solid, if it is, in fact, "cesspool" that Kristeva calls the corpse, this inherent fluidity, this leakage challenges the very notion of a "body" as solid, self-identical, whole, bounded, as this and not that, as here and not there'.

153. In her book, *Virgin Mother Goddesses of Antiquity*, Rigoglioso (2010) investigates various Greek goddesses, who became 'mothers' after sexual interaction with a deity. She reminds the reader that in the Greek tradition, Athena was the goddess who famously held the epithet *Parthenos*. She (Rigoglioso 2010:23) writes, 'these clues (from Orphic and Hesiodictheogonies) include her depiction as the creatrix who held the "seed" of – and preceded – the Orphic god Phanes, her identification with Phanes as hermaphroditic creator, the presence of her name in a Hesiodic catalogue of holy virgins who had the task of birthing and rearing the children of gods on earth [...]'. Artemis too was a Greek goddess who possessed the title *Parthenos.* 'In her most primitive aspect she was considered simultaneously a Mistress of the Wild Animals, a goddess of fertility and nature, and a *Parthenos*' (Rigoglioso 2010:51).

154. First-century Graeco-Roman here also means first-century Mediterranean. Both terms imply early Christianity, Second-Temple Judaism, Hellenistic Judaism and the first-century Hellenistic context, among other categories and descriptions. Many scholars have dealt with defining such a context, for example, Esler (2000); see in particular 'The Mediterranean context of Early Christianity' (Esler 2000:3–25); 'Graeco-Roman Philosophy and Religion' (Esler 2000:53–79). The work of Klauck (2000) deserves mention. Malina (1996:38) makes the 'modern' reader aware that first-century Mediterranean people were unaware of the 'personal', 'individualistic' and 'self-concerned' focus.

155. Hoke (2018:43–67) argues that in the case of Mary submitting before *Kyrios* as a slave (cf. Lk 1:38), 'Mary's portrayal as the Lord's slave means that her master-God has full access and rights over her body, which extended fully into the domain of sex in the Mediterranean world'.

considered a blessing.[156] It is however reasonable, as a postmodern reader, to characterise the Holy Spirit 'coming upon' Mary and the power of the most High 'overshadowing her' as highly inappropriate behaviour which borders on rape.[157] Not only is Mary burdened with this so-called *divine* conception, but from this, she will 'become' the mother of a holy one, someone who will be called the son of God. She will have to nurture the 'saviour of the world' and 'eternal King' in her womb and with her breasts. One would have expected the theology of the Lukan narrative to portray the Hebrew deity as a less stereotypical male, as constructed and defined at that time.[158] The theology of the Lukan narrative should have depicted the Hebrew deity as an entity who reveals a better understanding and respect for the complexity of the *female* body and its reproduction system – a theology that allows the Hebrew deity to 'become' a midwife for Mary.[159] The 'overpowering' of Mary perpetuates male dominance and makes the Hebrew deity an accomplice. Mary is overburdened by *divine* sperm, *divine* birth and *divine* nurturing. Why could the theology not allow Mary to be the mother of a son, and the Hebrew deity her midwife? After the angelic oracle, the foretelling

156. Thecla's decision to follow Paul and cut her ties with family and her fiancé leads to her being condemned to be burnt alive (in Iconium). On a different occasion, when she fights off a prominent citizen who sexually harasses her, she is condemned to be thrown before wild animals (in Antioch); see Misset-van de Weg (1998:235). The Acts of Thecla, also known as the Acts of Paul and Thecla, is a New Testament Apocryphal writing, which was written in the second century and can be accessed here: http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/actspaul.html.

157. The allegations that the Most High 'forced' himself onto Mary can without any difficulty be refuted if one argues that Luke 1:38 shows consent, even willingness, to be a servant of *Kyrios*. Misset-van de Weg (1998:236–238) opens a new perspective when she explains that Thecla (in Acts of Thecla) too was a παρθένος, soon to be married, but after listening to Paul's speech, she desires a life of chastity, to the dismay of her family. In Thecla's case, chastity is a virtue that will be blessed and is pleasing to God.

158. Stewart (2016:91–102) gives a helpful overview of what one can define as 'stereotypical'.

159. Contra to the idea of overburdening, one cannot ignore that Rigoglioso (2010:1) provides compelling evidence that early ancient Mediterranean cults were based in matriarchal ethos. With the author of Luke-Acts' knowledge of the Graeco-Roman religion, depicting Mary as a *divine* mother is contextually accurate and plays into the religious framework of the time.

of the birth of John the Baptist and Jesus came to pass; Elizabeth conceived and so did Mary, after which Mary paid her a visit. At this point in the narrative, both Elizabeth and Mary carry with them wombs that are nurturing *divine* significance. Their 'being' has 'become' their 'wombing'.

Reducing 'being' to 'wombing'

A visit by Mary to Elizabeth reveals that their 'being' has been reduced to 'wombing'. What transpired in their respective wombs will determine the course of future actions. This is aptly illustrated in Luke 1:41, when Mary greeted Elizabeth, the child in her womb leapt. The *divine* wombs are so powerful that even Elizabeth is 'filled with the Holy Spirit' when her 'child leaped in her womb' (Patriarch Ministries n.d.:n.p.). They are both blessed because of the fruit of their respective wombs (cf. Lk 1:42).[160] The foetuses they carry 'become' the 'dominating' force. It is no secret that Elizabeth, as a barren woman, had little societal value. The fact that she has conceived a child, irrespective of *divine* intervention or not, restored her honour and value in society. When she gave birth to John, her neighbours and relatives heard that *Kyrios* had shown mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her (Lk 1:58). So 'having' a womb without producing an offspring is socio-culturally unacceptable.

The socially constructed process of conception, namely manly sperm (the carrier of life) fertilised and nurtured in the womb, was not possible in the case of Zechariah and Elizabeth. This was not a 'sperm' issue; it could never be, but rather a 'womb' issue. Zechariah was not barren; as a man, he was obviously constructed by society as having sperm, which possesses the potential of life. Elizabeth's womb, the container cradling the sperm, had to be the culprit. It was not a matter of being sinful, unrighteous or

160. Kozlowski (2017:339) asserts that Luke 1:42 refers to Judith 13:18. Both Mary and Judith were blessed.

immoral, and being without children was simply what they 'deserved'. They were both righteous before *Theos,* living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of *Kyrios* (Lk 1:6). To address the barrenness of the womb, they apparently consulted *Theos*, as deduced from Luke 1:13. As righteous people living blamelessly, both of them from a priestly bloodline, the expected thing to do was to consult the Hebrew deity, as they did. One would further assume that they prayed for Elizabeth's womb to 'become' a fertile space for the sperm to be nurtured. The Hebrew deity does indeed come to the rescue, but seemingly not for the sake of 'restoring' Elizabeth's honour – this just happened to be the off-spin of making the womb fertile for conception to take place. The ultimate theological objective was to conceive someone who will be 'great' in the eyes of *Kyrios* (cf. Lk 1:15), a prophet with the spirit and power of Elijah going before him (cf. Lk 1:17). The aim was to use Elizabeth's *divinely* tweaked reproduction system to conceive and produce someone who will prepare the people for *Kyrios* (cf. Lk 1:17). It is not by accident that Zechariah and Elizabeth were 'chosen' to conceive such a child. The theological intent becomes apparent with the realisation that Zechariah and Elizabeth, representing authoritative priestly bloodlines, conceiving a child filled with the Holy Spirit in the womb, were led by the spirit and power of one of the most important prophets of Israel, Elijah. Elizabeth's womb had become the fertile ground for the Lukan theological programme to germinate. It is not about Elizabeth being rescued from social shame for being barren, but her priestly womb conceiving a prophet like no other.

The same theological programme included the young 13-year-old, engaged Mary. The difference in Mary's case was that she was not from priestly or royal descent. She had never been married, was engaged, and had never had sexual intercourse with any man. She was, in fact, a Jewish woman from an insignificant rural town, Nazareth, in Galilee. At this juncture, it will be helpful to briefly describe the Lukan theological programme in general. The theological agenda of Luke-Acts is to narrate the establishment,

development and expansion of an 'alternative' kingdom characterised as 'universal' and 'eternal'.[161] For this to be achieved, the author had to account for Judean tradition (the history of Israel and its religion), the Graeco-Roman religions (Greek and Roman deities and religions), as well as the spirituality brought about by the Jesus movement (ministry, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus), and he had to find a common denominator to connect them in the opening verses of his narrative (e.g. Lk 1:5–45). The theology is multidimensional; it attests to various locations (symbolic in meaning), Jerusalem, Nazareth and the desert. There are two alternative locations, one of which is the desert and the other the womb. The womb will produce the main characters, and the common denominator of all this is the Holy Spirit representing the *divine* dimension.

The Judean tradition was firmly rooted in the priestly order, the prophets and Davidic kingship. The author went back into history and masterfully accounts for the birth of John the Baptist and Jesus. These distinct birth accounts introduce suspense with the introduction of Zechariah and Elizabeth by explicitly mentioning their priestly heritage. The suspense is increased with the realisation that they reside in Jerusalem (the city of David) as opposed to Jesus, who is from Nazareth.[162] Jerusalem represents everything Judean, Nazareth the identity of Jesus, and the desert the alternative. The question is, how does the author connect the dots? How does he create an alternative universal *divine* kingdom? What he did was to start with a priestly womb in Jerusalem which will conceive John the Baptist (prophet), then move onto the womb in Nazareth, which will conceive Jesus (the eternal King), and have them meet in the desert with the common denominator,

161. Cf. Udo Schnelle (2007:439–444); cf. Ferdinand Hahn (2011:227).

162. According to Schnelle (2007:432), the theme in Luke is the *verbreitung des Evangeliums in der Welt mit seinen religiösen, ökonomischen und politshcne Rahmenbedingungen*. The expanding of the Gospel from the heart of Judaism was made possible by the birth of a prophet in Jerusalem (both parents from priestly decent), and the birth of a king in Nazareth who met in the desert from where it expanded.

of course, being the Holy Spirit. It is, therefore, plausible to define the kernel of Lukan theology as a spiritual womb theology. The deployment of Elizabeth and Mary, therefore, has two purposes. The first is to achieve the authoritative legitimacy of John the Baptist as a prophet for the 'eternal King'; the author explicitly declares the priestly bloodline of both parents and allows the angel to state that the power and the spirit of Elijah will go before him. It was not a necessity to 'sanctify' Elizabeth and, by implication, her womb (her womb was already contaminated by human sperm in any case); her priestly heritage in Jerusalem was adequate as sanctification. The only requirement was to sanctify the embryo by filling it with the Holy Spirit, hence, partial divinisation. The second purpose, Mary, as a παρθένος [virgin], allowed for ideal circumstances for *divine* conception, for the *divine* sperm to fertilise a human egg. This was necessary for Mary to give birth to the 'Son of the Most High', 'the throne of his ancestor David', 'who will reign over the house of Jacob forever', 'whose kingdom will not come to an end' and 'who will be called the son of God' (Lk 1:28–33). By the 'partial' divinisation of Elizabeth's womb and the *divine* conception in Mary's womb, the author established the 'new' alternative kingdom on the three pillars of Judaism, namely, priests, prophets, kings, as well as the Holy Spirit as the 'God' dimension. The two from priestly blood gave birth to the prophet John the Baptist, while Mary gave birth to the king of kings. 'Being' was more important in the case of Elizabeth, but not so in the case of Mary. In Mary's case, her 'being' meant very little[163] but her womb meant everything, while in Elizabeth's case, her being was something significant, making her womb useful. A contaminated priestly womb can give birth to a prophet (given *divine* intervention), who will prepare the way for the king of all kings, but a 'virgin' womb is the ideal space to grow a *divine* foetus, which will give birth to the eternal King, the son of God. In all fairness to the author of the Lukan narrative, the

163. Who Mary was and where she was from was not at all important. What mattered in her case was the fact that she had a womb, and that her womb nurtured a *divine* being.

womb is the ideal place to 'conceive' an alternative, spirit-filled, universal kingdom, given the socio-cultural circumstances of the time. His theology demanded an authoritative prophet and a *divine* king, and with the two characters, John and Jesus, he achieved it. The womb produced someone great in the sight of *Kyrios*, and another called the son of God; for this to be the case, *divine* intervention is inevitable and necessary. The implication, however, is that the womb and those 'carrying' the womb, in this case Elizabeth and Mary, are overburdened with divinity on more than one level. Ironically 'being' a woman was already a challenging matter, let alone a woman with a *divinely* contaminated womb.

I would, at this point, like to list three points of criticism against the author's theological programme:

1. 'reducing' the role, function and value of Elizabeth and Mary to their respective wombs perpetuates the stereotypical male-dominated society of the time[164]
2. the *divine* conception tapped into a Graeco-Roman religious frame of reference without sufficient reinterpretation to avoid the Hebrew deity's actions appearing stereotypically *godly*
3. the explicit repetitive theological nature of Luke 1:5–45 leads to the characters Elizabeth and Mary to be flat and static.

This is because they are reduced to their wombs while being overshadowed and overpowered by the Holy Spirit. Their wombs, like so many others', are not perfect and certainly not *divine*; they were merely overburdened by *divine* intervention. But can the idea of an imperfect womb contribute to the liberation of the womb from *divine* overburdening?

164. Thurer (1994) remarks, interestingly so, that during the Stone Age there is little evidence of male-domination. On the contrary, much evidence suggests life was fairly equal between the sexes; 'Motherhood remained mother-defined', (Thurer 1994:10). She (Thurer 1994:13) further remarks that the discovery of agriculture served to reinforce the power of the Great Mother.

The imperfection of the womb

In 1998, the term 'womb' was a word that I had not really encountered yet, and, therefore, there was no desire to formulate any ideas about it. One of the Scriptures that we extensively dealt with during my training as a children's 'minister' at Petra College was Psalm 139, particularly verse 13. The translation of the Hebrew script reads, 'because you created my innermost parts, you weaved me together in the womb of my mother'. The result of this was that my first thoughts on the womb were theological in nature, and more specifically *divine*. Years went by, and with the birth of our daughter in 2011, the term obviously became more prominent, although it remained an enigma to me. I knew that the womb was absolutely vital for nurturing the foetus, and the lives of all three our children; hence, I considered it to be one of the most sacred spaces known to human beings. The 'womb' was no longer a *foreign* term; it became personal as a result of my understanding of its crucial importance in cultivating the lives that are dear to me. In fact, I almost personified the womb to such an extent that I conceptualised it as *being part* of my wife's body, but 'sacredly' *separate*. It is almost as if the *sacredness* of the womb *space* superseded the *body* carrying the womb. To be honest, thinking back, I never visualised the umbilical cord as something that is *connected* to a *human* body. Rather, it was a symbol of life itself, a wormhole if you will, a passage from the *profane* to the *divine*. The origin of these ideas was initiated by Psalm 139:13 and kept intact with the birth of our children. The events that transpired on 27 May 2015 had a major impact on my point of view. A day the umbilical cord became severed from its *divine* connection, and the womb became a space of despair...

Our first son, Peter Theunis Nagel Junior, was born on 28 May 2014. Incidentally, he was born on the same day as my father, Peter Theunis Nagel Senior. It was obviously a meaningful birth, particularly so because my father had passed on five years before this. With his birth, we were again reminded of the cycle of life, death and birth. In March 2015, our son started to get light

seizures, which we, including his paediatrician, diagnosed as 'breath-holding spells'. His condition worsened, and after a major seizure on Saturday, 23 May 2015, while in the intensive care unit, he was declared brain dead on 27 May, one day before his first birthday. He was diagnosed with hypoparathyroidism, which meant that either he was born without parathyroid glands or they were dysfunctional. The function of these glands is, among others, to produce a hormone that regulates the calcium in brain activity. Needless to say, as parents, we were devastated; as a theologian, I started reflecting on the *divine*, and while doing so I was transported back to 1998 and, more specifically, to the content of Psalm 139:13. I started to ask myself difficult questions. How is it possible that a *sacred*, *divine* space, the womb, can produce a life with such a rare and devastating disease as hypoparathyroidism? How could the womb allow such a disease to be nurtured in such a *sacred* space? What went wrong? How was it possible for a *divine* thought (seen within the context of the poem I wrote) to be messed up so badly? Was it a case of a failed journey from *divine* thought to *natural* biological conception? These and other questions forced me into a mental journey back to the time of the biological conception of my three children, or at least to what I consider the potential conditions and circumstances for conception. Frankly speaking, I was transported back to the time of ejaculation and transportation of sperm through the environment of the female vagina and cervix, along the fallopian tubes to the ampullary isthmic junction. During these intimate, vulnerable and euphoric moments from which both our daughter and second son were presumably conceived, I mentally engaged the *divine* in acknowledgement as the creator of life and by implication the womb as a *sacred* space. In that moment, I felt the need to involve the *divine* in an attempt to sanctify the process of conception. However, the split-second acknowledgement was absent from the moment of ejaculation and transportation of sperm which lead to the fertilisation of the egg when Peter Theunis Nagel Junior was conceived. Theoretically and theologically speaking, I mentally involved a deity during sexual intercourse, which led to the conception of both our

daughter and second son but did not do so during the conception of Peter Junior. The respective outcomes of these conceptions differ in that two healthy children were born, and one passed away as a result of hypoparathyroidism. One could argue *divinising*[165] a profane biological process such as ejaculation and transportation of sperm can potentially lead to opposing outcomes of healthy life and death, respectively. Some would argue that it is preposterous to even consider the idea that any mental process of a mere mortal can evoke the *divine* and, by so doing, determine the outcome of a biological and natural process. But if one considers such an idea within the context of the poem written in 1998, the theological basis determined by Psalm 139:13, and the fact that these acknowledgements were present (March 2011 and February 2016) and absent (September 2013) during these biological processes, the concept does become reasonable and fair.

How can my understanding and reflection on the 'sacredness' and imperfection of the womb contribute to its liberation? For my reflections to make a contribution to ..., I have to show and prove that there is a reasonable and meaningful connection between my wife's womb (my only 'access' to the womb) and the wombs of Elizabeth and Mary. My initial response is that I have no right or authority whatsoever to speak intelligibly of the womb. The only way to justify my attempt is that my sperm entered my wife's womb, and three children were conceived. This, however, does not give me any right to evaluate the womb, but it does at least allow me an opportunity to reflect on the womb while conversing with my wife, Elizabeth and Mary.[166] There are two things that my wife, Elizabeth and Mary have in common: all three have a womb, and all of them shared the experience of conceiving, nurturing and giving birth to a child from the womb. Both my

165. Mentally acknowledging a deity which is defined as a 'giver of life'.

166. Dinkler (2013:50–51) remarks that narrative beginnings (such as Lk 1:5–45) can be seen as an open door through which the reader enters the world represented by the text, a willingness to engage with the narrative.

wife and Elizabeth were 'actively' involved in the process of *natural* conception, but Mary was not. There is no indication how old Elizabeth was, but she was certainly much older than Mary, and my wife was 30 when she had her first child. A significant difference is that my wife was exposed exclusively to the *natural* process of conception – whereas both Elizabeth and Mary experienced *divine* intervention, wholly or partially. It is true that my wife prayed to the God of the Bible that the pregnancy and birth would go according to plan and that our children would be healthy. There is, however, no correlation between her prayers and the outcome of the pregnancies and birth; at least there is no evidence of such an instance. Another distinction is that in my wife's case, three *normal* children were born, as opposed to John the Baptist, the one who would prepare the way for the saviour of the world, and Jesus, the saviour and eternal King.

The question is whether they have any desire or need for their wombs to be liberated from *divine* overburdening. In the case of my wife, she has already made a conscious decision after the birth and death of Peter Jnr not to pray to the God of the Bible. For her, it will have no effect on the *natural* processes of conception, pregnancy or birth. She has accepted and embraced the *natural* processes of conception and birth, and by so doing liberated herself in part from *divine* overburdening. But what if your child is conceived owing to explicit *divine* intervention? How does one relate to the womb knowing that the foetus is filled with the Holy Spirit? What impact does it have on the function and role of the umbilical cord, when the *divine* decided to 'hand-pick' the foetus to be a prophet for his 'chosen' people? Frankly speaking, it is impossible to determine how Elizabeth thought and felt about *divine* intervention. She was only too grateful to have conceived a child, and through that the disgrace of being barren was lifted (cf. Lk 1:25). Elizabeth's problem was solved by the *divine* intervention to ensure that she conceives a child. It would have been irrelevant for her that her son would become 'John the Baptist', a prophet living in the desert, preaching the establishment of the new kingdom through the coming of Jesus

of Nazareth. John the Baptist was clearly not part of mainstream Judaism, and it would have posed its own challenges, but this would not have been an issue that would nurture the desire to liberate her womb. In fact, she would have embraced her womb after *divine* intervention. According to the socio-cultural construct of first-century Graeco-Roman society, a womb was there for the sake of reproduction, and through *divine* intervention that is exactly what her womb did.

Mary's situation is slightly different and more complex than Elizabeth's. According to the narrative, she had no exposure to *natural* processes of 'manly' semen entering her womb and fertilising an egg produced by her ovaries. If there is anyone's womb who deserves liberation from *divine* overburdening, it is Mary's. How does one justify a deity 'impregnating' a 13-year-old girl to give birth to the eternal King? Socially and culturally speaking, Mary was at an appropriate age for engagement, to get married and to produce offspring. Her 'readiness' is culturally determined and should be problematised. The aim here, however, is not to criticise the customs of Judaism in first-century Graeco-Roman society, but rather to problematise the involvement of the *divine* during conception and the fact that there is no clear distinction between *human* and *divine* behaviour. I have already briefly sketched a plausible theological agenda for the Lukan narrative. This agenda considered within its sociocultural frame of reference is reasonable and even acceptable. The impact it might have had on Mary is what is at stake here. The ignorance on the part of the author of what the engagement meant and entailed for a young Jewish girl is obvious. This alone is unfortunate, considering that the author intended to introduce, establish and develop an alternative universal kingdom for humankind. The young woman was not *seen*; she was not recognised for who she is, but only what her womb could be. The yoke became heavier with the power of the 'Most High' overshadowing her; she *lost* her virginity to a *God* – a burden no one can even begin to comprehend. She had to give birth to a *divine* being, whom she most probably only loved as her son.

Did it ever occur to the author what Mary must have gone through to be impregnated by the Hebrew deity, to nurture that divine embryo in her womb for nine months, and to nourish him for another two years after birth, just for him to 'become' and be 'called' the son of God? How did Mary respond? She subdued herself before *Kyrios*as ἡδούληκυρίου [a slave for the Lord] (Lk 1:38). Is it fair, reasonable and just to sacrifice the liberation and flourishing of a mother for the sake of the salvation of mankind?

■ Conclusion

The desire and need to liberate the womb from *divine* overburdening is probably a postmodern issue. The confusion, division, pain, loss, rejection, lack of empathy and understanding, to mention but a few, caused by debates on abortion, infertility, miscarriage, stillbirth, adoption and sexuality strengthen the impetus for liberation. Reproductive health in the holistic sense of the word will be challenging enough without *divine* liberation of the womb. Liberation will not take place if 'God-talk' dominates the conversations, discussions and debates on the womb. The divinisation of 'being' and 'wombing' by explicit theological and dogmatic rhetorical extravagance ironically hampers life from flourishing, for wombs to be, and to be silent. In conclusion, a poem I wrote in 1998 demands a rewrite in an attempt to liberate the womb from *divine* overburdening:

A Woman and her Womb

Pain, discomfort, barren, infertile, nothingness, deformed, disease, death

A womb is a curse and womanhood a burden

Weaving in the womb is the blanket covering the dead

The blood is the wine dripping from the lips of the scoffer

Flourishing the myth of reproduction

Ovaries the waving arms of the beggars

My womb, my burden, it silent it is night…

Part Three

Ethical reflections

Chapter 10

Whose womb is it anyway?

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Introduction

For centuries, women's bodies, specifically their wombs, have been used solely for procreation; this chapter discusses the possibility of an artificial womb freeing women from their reproductive biology and the tyranny of childbirth through an alternative option.

In the 21st century, biomedical research has paved the way for human beings to experience their bodily matter in new ways. Biotechnology has provided the possibility for an artificial womb challenging our understanding of what it means to be born. What was previously thought to be impossible has now led to several new opportunities and ways to experience life.

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If these biotechnologies yield positive results, the maternal body of a woman can be freed from reproductive responsibilities, or it could lead to diminished social and political status for women. Instead of the reproductive process exclusively resting on a woman, an artificial womb allows the possibility for anyone, regardless of gender, to make reproductive decisions without the need for a woman. This allows men and homosexual couples to have a child without the need of a womb.

Our cultural and consumerist attitude regarding children has resulted in several discussions on abortion and debates on childlessness, adoption and infertility. Many of these discussions remove the human authority of a woman and speak about the maternal body as a matter and not as a creation of God. Ethically and morally, as a society, we are creating new and innovative ways to feed into our consumeristic attitudes of instant gratification.

An artificial womb could allow us to reshape the ethical landscape in the way we address the maternal body and reproductive life. Through the centuries, the maternal body has been perceived as being a God-given creation for childbearing, which in turn has been interpreted as the 'main' value of women. The success of an artificial womb could lead to the further ethical devaluing of women's social, economic and political status within society and the devaluation of reproductive life. In light of the possibility of an artificial womb, this chapter will discuss womanhood,[167] the possible ethical devaluation of reproductive life, the possible shift in political and social power between woman and men, and the possible consequences of the advancement of the maternal body.

167. What it means to be a woman, the essence of womanhood.

Artificial womb, what it means and how it works

Our understanding of motherhood, reproduction and fertility is rapidly changing thanks to technological advancement. In 2016, partial ectogenesis became a reality through the growth of a premature lamb in a BioBag. These biomedical advancements in reproductive technology have made the possibility of ectogenesis[168] a reality and less a figment of imagination (Cannold 1995:47).

Biomedical scientists are taking all the necessary steps to ensure the successful development of an artificial womb, in spite of the various obstacles they face, such as producing a surviving animal or human from an embryo within an artificial womb (Schultz 2009:878). For an artificial womb to yield the desired result, it requires several components that offer a safe environment which mimics a natural human or animal womb (Schultz 2009:878). An artificial womb should be able to house a foetus or embryo, surround it with amniotic fluid, be able to provide the proper amount of oxygen to the foetus, as well as regulate hormones and nutrients (Schultz 2009:878).

The main focus and concern of scientists is to save premature babies and prolong the survival of embryos outside a womb. Such research contributes to future experiments and reproductive research on an artificial womb (Schultz 2009:878).

An artificial womb environment is created as a space to hold the embryo during pregnancy. This environment is developed to supply nutrients, oxygen, regulated blood and hormones to an incubated foetus inside an artificial womb while disposing waste and protecting the foetus in amniotic fluid (Tumanishvili & Poli 2017:15). This would require an artificial placenta to facilitate the essential exchange between foetal circulation and the systematic maternal flow that would replace it. An artificial

168. The gestation of a human being outside of the female human body (Cannold 2006:47).

womb needs several different components and elements to achieve the goal of being a safe environment and shell to house an embryo (Tumanishvili & Poli 2017:15). Realistically and medically, ectogenesis[169] is already a reality and the time period in which the foetus has to be inside the female womb for a successful birth is becoming smaller and smaller (Tumanishvili & Poli 2017:15). Dr Alan Flake's research suggests that it is possible to support and sustain extreme premature cases, reducing the mortality rate of preemies and diseases through recreating a normal human gestation system and conditions (Dvorsky 2016).

The procedure of freeing a foetus from a natural uterus through the help of an artificial womb could be regarded as a way to decrease and limit gender inequalities. Thanks to ectogenesis, women can have the possibility and the choice of avoiding the biological burden of pregnancy as well as the health complications, work implications and pain (Tumanishvili & Poli 2017:16).

■ The pregnant female body and what it means

Within the 21st century's cultural and social climate, it has become clear that there is no natural perception of the body. The body, especially the female body, is not free from social dimensions (Teman 2009:78).

According to Notman's (2008:573) research, the female genitals, besides being physical components to the body, also have a core role in defining femininity and gender identification (Notman 2008:573). The role of the body is more than often limited to the genitals. According to Silverman (1981), the female body and genitals reflect emotional and cognitive development for women (Silverman 1981). This information

169. The development of embryos in an artificial way outside of the uterus.

and understanding of what it means to be female is given to women in an emotional context at a young age, influencing feelings about their bodies and their feminine selves (Notman 2008:577). How women understand their body, especially their reproductive anatomy, influence how an artificial womb would be perceived by women. Experiencing pregnancy and bearing children has, for centuries, been a unique experience meant exclusively for women. The possibility of an artificial womb changes the landscape of childbearing and redefines the 'nature' of pregnancy and its significance.

From a social, ethical and medical perspective, there has been a failure in addressing the nature of pregnancy and the health consequences it poses. In this chapter, I will be highlighting the risk involved in pregnancy and childbirth and the opportunity an artificial womb holds for women, if they choose it as a means for reproduction, without endangering their physical and mental health, as well as risking their economic and social integrity based on preference and choice in the pregnancy procedure and childbirth experience (Smajdor 2012:340). The effects of pregnancy and childbirth on women's health are reason enough for women to want to be relieved from the pregnancy procedure based on health complications that could arise, including possible death, especially as 15% of women can develop life-threatening issues during labour (Smajdor 2012:340).

Many women experience health complications, such as exhaustion, bowel difficulties, back pain and urinary incontinence, extending beyond six months after childbirth. For this and several other reasons, 'natural' birth should only be considered by women once they have received all the information and understand the risk (Smajdor 2012:340). To truly understand the pressure and trauma the female body goes through during pregnancy, researchers have tested the theory and discovered that some women opt for a caesarean section surgery instead of natural birth, owing to the complications that can arise during the time of birth and the trauma and tension this can cause to a woman's

physical and mental health and the effects on their emotional well-being (Smajdor 2012:340).

According to Smajdor (2012:340), more and more women choosing the option of caesarean section surgery, in spite of knowing the risk involved, depicts the fear among women of having complications during 'natural' childbirth.

Firestone says that 'pregnancy is barbaric', but thanks to modern medicine constantly evolving, developing and moving forward, the outcomes of childbirth and pregnancy have improved, but it cannot change the fact that these procedures still pose a risk for women that extends far beyond the normal day-to-day life (Smajdor 2012:340). The health risk and consequences of childbirth infiltrate into women's ability to function effectively as a mother, guardian and responsible member of society. The consequences of childbirth influence women's careers and 'may keep women out of work or [...] restrict their employment options', weakening women's financial stability and status (Smajdor 2012:340). Another consequence of childbirth and labour is the trauma and tension the female anatomy goes through in bearing another life within their own bodies. Many women have to change their diet, their lifestyle and appetite to ensure the health and well-being of the foetus (Smajdor 2007:340).

In addition, women make these changes for the well-being of their child, but women's rights to make a decision and have a voice about 'medical care are at risk of being [dominated] in favor of the [interest] of the unborn child' (Smajdor 2012:341). This becomes ethically problematic as the bodily integrity of women gets ignored, while some men take for granted the medical setting and measures of the pregnancy experience. Many pregnant women still get sterilised without their permission or knowledge in medical settings and undergo forced caesareans and abortions, which just emphasises how the female body gets treated as an afterthought and not a priority (Smajdor 2007:341).

The contributions and concerns of an artificial womb

There are logical and justifiable reasons as to why an artificial womb will be beneficial for women if they choose to use it. The artificial womb as an alternative and possibility is a choice; this reproductive technology allows couples and women to have more options in how they would like to procreate and experience childbearing. Many might not find the artificial womb as desirable and might choose not to use one; this form of reproduction does pose ethical concerns which will be discussed later within the chapter.

Owing to premature babies being born and they spending 'less time in a woman's womb, the question of [how long] and [why] an embryo "should" be' staying inside of a woman's womb cannot be answered with ease (nine months, six months or five days?) (Simonstein & Mashiacheizenberg 2009:88). The technological reproductive advancement is the possible solution to avoid the use of a surrogate. For those wanting a baby but not being able to procreate owing to circumstances, an artificial womb could be a safe alternative; for example, homosexual couples who desire to have children (Simonstein & Mashiacheizenberg 2009:88).

This reproductive option might also be a blessing for women who might need to make use of fertility treatments such as IVF. This can save women pain, time, depression and frustration, especially as there is the possibility of the embryo failing to implant when using such fertility services and treatments (Simonstein & Mashiacheizenberg 2009:88). In general, the use of an artificial womb will minimise the risk and damage to a woman's health during her pregnancy, and lessen or even avoid long- and short-term effects of pregnancy, such as bladder dropping,[170]

170. Bladder dropping is when the vaginal wall, which supports the bladder, can possibly cave in causing the bladder to drop into the vagina owing to the stress childbirth places on the vaginal wall (Piedmonth Healthcare n.d.)

stress incontinence,[171] rectocele,[172] weight gain, the risk of breast cancer and hormonal imbalance. However, without proper medical care, the childbirth procedure can lead to death. As this is not understood nor considered as an illness but rather a 'natural' reproductive procedure, the deadly consequences have in the past been primarily viewed as the woman's fate and in hindsight taken for granted (Simonstein & Mashiacheizenberg 2009:88). Dickens and Fathalla say that 'maternity is not a disease' (Cook, Dickens & Fathalla 2004:14); instead, it is primarily understood as 'an essential function that women fulfill for the survival of our human race' (Simonstein & Mashiacheizenberg 2009:88). Is there a possibility that women can move away from the 'essential' and move closer to the moral imperative regarding the female body, would the possibility of an artificial womb be the solution for women?

Firestone suggests that an artificial womb could lead to achieving equality for women. Through ectogenesis, women now have the choice not to step away from their careers or to slow down with work because of pregnancy (Simonstein & Mashiacheizenberg 2009:88). Although, in general, gender equality stems from gender-related issues and childcare and not entirely from the pregnancy experience, the oppression in relation to reproduction and childbirth is rooted in the ideology that women and not men bear children and, therefore, should slow down with regard to their careers, stay at home and focus on the well-being of the child (Simonstein & Mashiacheizenberg 2009:88). In addition, having the 'option to choose to bear [a] child or not in order to become a parent' has exceptional value and creates hope for couples who are experiencing infertility problems and women who are for a range of reasons without a womb (Simonstein & Mashiacheizenberg 2009:88).

171. Stress incontinence occurs when the vaginal wall collapses, and this causes leakage (Piedmonth Healthcare n.d.).

172. During childbirth, it is possible that the rectovaginal septum is torn (Piedmonth Healthcare n.d.).

Reproductive life, ethics and the technological implications

The progressive development of reproductive technology and the invention of an artificial womb have led to possible new ethical dilemmas. Reproductive technology bridges the gap which would help infants to develop outside the womb from the earliest of 22–28 weeks, the middle of the second trimester, which, in essence, is unproblematic. Further development of new reproductive interventions brings up the question of parental decision-making and consent, trying to balance the consequences of the benefits of new technology and the burden of future ethical situations (Eppinette n.d.).

Eppinette points to the artificial womb as a significant step in reproductive technology, but one that is not widely supported. The proposed changes of the gestational[173] and pregnancy system, possibly for the better, are believed by some to intensify the commodification of human life, arguing that it 'matters how children are born' (Eppinette n.d.).

Researchers have already been keeping embryos alive in a petri dish for longer lengths, as from 2016 this has extended to 13 days. According to articles published in *Nature*,[174] the process of culturing human embryos for more than two weeks had to be stopped owing to the internationally agreed 14-day limit on human embryonic research (Dvorsky 2016). There are, however, no reasons to believe that embryos cannot be kept longer in a petri dish. Some ethicists suggest that the development of an artificial womb and new progressive reproductive technology will move human beings away from using women as surrogates, altering the dialogue around abortion (Eppinette n.d.). In retrospect, an artificial womb will introduce new modified ways of bringing children to life and change the ideology of reproductive life.

173. Time period during the carrying of an embryo or foetus.

174. *Nature: International Journal of Science*.

Extracorporeal[175] gestational systems and genetic modification of embryos will redefine reproductive life with the manufacturing of children and the possibility of designer babies (Eppinette n.d.).

When considering all of the positives and negatives in relation to reproductive life, when moving forward, what is needed is to take a step back and fully evaluate and understand the purpose of human life and reproductive life; theologically, the idea of a child is understood as a gift from God, one that should be cherished instead of designed and manufactured according to parental desires. When taking a step back, the questioning of functionality and the purpose for human bodies and children stimulate questions around the significance of the female womb and life in general; according to Jennifer Lahl[176], 'a mother's womb is not an arbitrary place, without importance' (Eppinette n.d.).

Primarily speaking, growing up as children, morals and ethics is understood to be measured as the difference between right or wrong based on the consequences of action, but what does it mean to be human and how does an artificial womb challenge this concept and our own humanity (Eppinette n.d.)? The advancement of reproductive technology has redefined the landscape of reproductive consumerism, which entails the purchasing of sperm, eggs, surrogacy and embryos (Mundy & Mamo 2008:9).

Ethical questions have been raised regarding all these different modes of artificial reproduction and how this may alter and challenge the primary ideology of family[177] (Mundy & Mamo 2008:9).

175. Occurring outside of the body.

176. President of the Centre for Bioethics and Culture

177. Family ideology is conceptualised as beliefs that support 'a particular "family form" [which is why] the concept of family is rarely regarded as problematic in itself' (Bernardes 1985:1).

Some feminists are investigating the consequences of reproductive technologies being available 'for sale and "this encouraging" the commodification of reproduction and motherhood' (Gimenez 1991:334–350). Technological advancement is being ethically criticised for using the value system of body parts relevant to the reproductive process, especially as it can be sold which leads to the possibility of children becoming products whose qualities can be chosen.

These technological advancements give parents the option to purchase children by means of surrogacy and reproductive processes, which to some extent exercises control over child quality.

The option of sex without birth was made possible through contraceptives, and now medical advancements are closing the gap and presenting new approaches to reproductive life without sex which includes an artificial womb, artificial insemination, surrogate embryo transfer and vitro fertilisation (Macklin 1991:5). This has given rise to an important ethical theme for feminist researchers, the impact of women's experience of pregnancy (Macklin 1991:338).

Through the use of prenatal diagnoses, mothers now know whether or not they are carrying a foetus with genetic defects, can choose a healthy child and even the desired sex of the foetus (Macklin 1991:338). Even with all these reproductive technological advancements, some women and parents prefer not to know the sex or all the available details about their foetus. Once the use of this reproductive technology becomes medically and socially acceptable, the privilege to know or not to know, to make use of this technology or not to, might be non-existent in the near future and the choice may no longer be there (Rothman 1984:23–33, 1987:3–9). These technological advancements are opening and closing the doors as they improve, while at the same time, decreasing the choices for women and challenging the dynamic relationship between parents and children (Rothman 1984:23–33, 1987:3–9).

Many socialist feminists effectively challenge and examine the theme of commodification with regard to reproductive life and the escalation of service and class in relation to women who have the capital to purchase the incubation service and other reproductive services (Curtis 1995:166).

The range and complexity of concerns from feminists challenge these new reproductive services and technology. Their concerns vary, as there are vital ethical questions such as women's right to control, which is a grounded, socially defined need (Curtis 1995:166). The reason why control is emphasised as a theme by feminist's scholars is to move away from the assumption that the reproductive anatomy of women should be controlled. Many radical feminists that focus on biological differences between sexes in relation to reproductive life problematise the difference for women, which is far more profound and closely connected with nature compared to men (Curtis 1995:166).

The ethical and theological concerns are that the humanness should be closely linked to life-giving forces and life on earth. Any form of reproductive life outside of human nature denies the importance of nature's interconnection with human consciousness and further devalues the uniqueness of women's reproductive anatomy (Curtis 1995:166).

Not only are radical feminists concerned about the interconnection of nature and the female reproductive body, but there is a push back against the efforts of men trying to control women and also the reproductive life through reproductive technology and services in an effort to sustain and continue to perpetuate patriarchy within society (Curtis 1995:167). This is also a way to sustain biological paternity; many of the reproductive technological advancements are another form of control and way for male-directed medical science to dominate women and form part of the forces of life (Curtis 1995:167).

The need within this chapter and within most feminist spaces is making sure women exercise their exclusive control over their

own bodies and reproductive life and decide whether to reproduce or not; however, it is a necessity and not an option. The idea behind reproductive technology is to create new options and help improve reproductive life, assist with infertility and enhance women's pregnancy experience. The questions being raised by ethicist and feminist scholars are, 'do these technologies enhance women's control over their bodies or do they serve other's effort to control women?'

Kimberly Curtis (1995) asks:

> Do they serve to further entrench the ideology of motherhood or do they expand a woman's liberty by expanding her choices?
>
> Do these technologies represent humanistic efforts to relieve a tragic condition or are women the victims of [*scientists*] who […] exploit women as [*lab rats for*] knowledge? (p. 167)

A homosexual couple can procreate in the absence of a heterosexual relationship – does this perpetuate a masculine–feminine sphere? Or are there racial and class differences that cause a problem in the use of infertility services that obscure the patriarchal discourse? These are the types of questions that feminists are concerned about in relation to control over the female reproductive anatomy. They are critical, especially in our current sociological climate, where there are constant pressures on women to be a mother to their biological child, a climate that continues to sustain and perpetuate an ideology of motherhood and infertility as a stigma only associated with women (Curtis 1995:168).

This stigmatisation and ideology of motherhood have continued to have power owing to hegemonic moral imperatives, limiting women and sustaining control through women's subordinate status in marriage, social life, politics and economics (Curtis 1995:168). This emphasises the necessity of an ethical framework regarding reproductive technology and the artificial womb, one that highlights women's needs, voice and capacity of control over their own bodies and reproductive life (Curtis 1995:168).

However, another possibility to take into consideration is the fact that women do not always have to gestate or give birth to be able to mother biological children. Women who do not wish to experience pregnancy and bear children but do want their biological child now have options because of technological advancement. Smajdor (2007:341) argues that this just 'reframes the problem in a narrow context', as it creates new possible ethical and legal problems.

Power, men and the female voice

Although many feminists have been united in the support of reproductive technological advancement, which provides women with more control over their own fertility and reproductive anatomy, there are still concerns and debates among feminists about how the reproductive technological services empower women, especially in inducing pregnancy through the use of IVF, ectogenesis and embryo modification and transfer (Murphy 1989:66). Though many feminists agree on the freedom for both, fertility and infertility control, some feminists are divided regarding reproductive technology that aims to assist women who are experiencing infertility (Murphy 1989:66).

Many feminists argue that the right for fertility control seems to have little countering effect on infertility techniques, but considering the large effect reproductive technology will have on women and the rapid effect on infertility, it is becoming essential that feminists and women develop a coherent argument and stance on the position, by either making a political differentiation between fertility and infertility research or supporting both fertility and infertility research (Murphy 1989:66). Central to this chapter and feminists' argument is the evaluation of women's relation to pregnancy and the artificial womb, the possibility of replacing pregnancy with alternative reproductive means, which is why the debate regarding infertility is so essential (Murphy 1989:67).

The artificial womb can change the discussion and debates on surrogacy and abortion. With the development of an artificial womb, the need for a medical case of surrogacy can possibly eliminate the need for a surrogate mother, and ectogenesis will be preferred (Tumanishvili & Poli 2017:16). The reason for this is the strictly controlled environment and nature of an artificial womb, eliminating the high health risk for women and reducing the cost of pain and long-term medical issues and avoiding custody battles, which could arise when making use of a surrogate mother (Tumanishvili & Poli 2017:16).

In her book, *The Moral Imperative for Ectogenesis*, Smajdor (2007:339) expands on Firestone's argument about the 'unjust burden women face in reproductive procedure', focussing on the ethical points and legal procedures, claiming that these procedures are obstructed by technological development instead of technical problems. Within the book, we see that the process of reproductive technological advancement is not isolated to helping infertility procedures and services but that this has bigger implications for women, as once developed it can possibly influence and reinforce the oppression of women on an international scale (Rowland 1985:539). The idea of control and reproductive technology is a double-edged sword. As many Western women consider and see it as a right to have the necessary control over their infertility, this can lead to complications, as seen by Australian Aboriginal women. An increase in women's choice and control has led to genocide, while within India these services and technologies have changed the sex ratio dramatically and could endanger women as a group (Rowland 1985:539).

Like women, many men have the desire to be able to experience pregnancy; some men acknowledge that they would like to gestate and give birth, and lacking the capacity to do this owing to their own reproductive shortage and personal resource holding is disappointing (Smajdor 2007:341). These men would, in fact, have a prima facie right to restitution and, just like women, they

would have to rely on resources and aspects that help to 'advance their cause beyond a mere prima facie right'; this would be the same for men within this situation as women (Smajdor 2007:341).

With the development of an artificial womb, these men can now 'procreate' and have children without the need of the female reproductive anatomy, which essentially redefines procreation without sex and creates the need to reframe legal custody over children and embryos.

Conclusion

How should ethicists respond to the artificial womb and women's moral theological framework on fertility and motherhood? How does one address the change that is occurring and if there is a need for change, who is creating the space for change and doing the changing?

There is no doubt that changes, and ethical guidance in this change, are primarily needed owing to the 'irrelevance of moral theory to women's moral needs' as argued by Leslie Cannold (1995:57). If we follow the logic that moral theory is institutionalised to encourage people to think clearly about ethical situations and to make ethical decisions, then it becomes imperative that women should be speaking the same language regarding fertility (Cannold 1995:57).

It is important to realise in this research that even though women have different opinions on their bodies and the artificial womb, the tone of these discussions has a moral ring, and women's voices, opinions and views on the artificial womb need to be part of the conversation and be respected. Whether women choose to make use of an artificial womb or not, the female voice, reproductive anatomy and body is not just a vessel; the reproductive experience and birthing nature cannot just be replaced by an artificial womb that mimics a natural womb. Our bodies, theologically, ethically and sexually are interconnected and created for more than the mere purpose of procreation.

Nelson (1979:15) says that 'the style of our Christian belief will be influenced by the way in which we experienced ourselves and others sexually'. Nelson also makes the statement that sexual theology and body theology are seen as equal (Nelson 1979:20). Sigurdson (2015:41) focusses on the body in another way and says that, 'it matters on how we speak of the body', and that we should do it in a manner of 'conceiving our embodiment with practical implications'. For Sigurdson, the body is more than just a solid foundation; instead, the body can be viewed 'as an enigmatic dimension of ourselves that constantly faces the invisible and transcendent' (Sigurdson 2015:41).

In conclusion, an artificial womb has the potential to make beneficial contributions towards society and women; this can offer hope for better health care for women and redefine and slowly diminish inequality within gender forms, and the debate is only getting started. How we choose to be part of this reproductive progress and discussion is essential.

Chapter 11

Revisiting traditional male initiation in South Africa: A global bioethical perspective on reproductive health and culture practices

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Introduction: The cultural tradition

The theme of traditional human initiation and circumcision in South Africa receives widespread attention because of the deaths of a large number of Xhosa boys and young men in the

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Eastern Cape (Ngcukana 2018; Phoka 2018). Sons and young men are isolated for a period and are among others circumcised as an initiation practice with the purpose of introducing them to and preparing them for the responsibilities of adult life. After the initiation process, the son and the young man are regarded as an adult man, and only then is he entrusted with family and community responsibilities. Receiving the sign of circumcision 'symbolizes the individual's permanent inclusion in a distinct tribal community' (Dekkers 2016). A boy who does not undergo this circumcision is regarded as a child for the rest of his life, and therefore, this cultural practice is regarded as indispensable, holy and compulsory (Mhlahlo 2009:94). Traditional male initiation and circumcision practice is, however, not limited to the Xhosa community of the Eastern Cape, but is also found in the Free State, Limpopo, Mpumalanga and Gauteng among the Basotho, Tsonga, Ndebele, Pedi and Venda communities (Behrens 2014; Phoka 2018).

This cultural practice is not without serious health consequences. Every year, when thousands of sons and young men attend the initiation schools, a large number of them are hospitalised with serious health problems such as pneumonia, meningitis, septicaemia, gangrene, dehydration, hunger, genital mutilation and amputation of the penis, all of which lead to the death of many young people (Behrens 2014; Phoka 2018). It is a matter of concern that genital mutilation and amputation of the penis in many instances have a detrimental effect on the current and future reproductive health of many people. Possible reasons for the serious health risks could be illegal initiation schools, traditional practitioners with no training, the use of instruments that are not sterile, poor or no post-operative care, limited or no access to water and food and serious assault on some young men. The whole initiation process takes place in secret, and an uninitiated person is not allowed during the process, which makes supervision by public health inspectors almost impossible (Behrens 2014; Phoka 2018). The task of supervision is further

complicated by the unwillingness of parents to reveal the identity of illegal practitioners (Ngcukana 2018).

From 1995 to 2005, more or less 5813 hospitalisations, 281 penis amputations and 342 deaths were reported in the Eastern Cape alone, which means an annual average of 528.5 hospitalisations, 25.5 amputations and 31 deaths. Although general health guidelines (*Norms and Standards for Environmental Health*, Chapter 1, Section 6) and provincial legislation (*Eastern Cape Customary Male Initiation Practice Act*) are in place to regulate the practice, the application of these measures has not even been nearly effective, and wounding and deaths still occur regularly (Phoka 2018). Indeed, deaths during the initiation process are reported countrywide every year (Ngcukana 2018). Recently, a national law on this issue, namely the *Customary Initiation Bill* (Minister of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs 2018), was introduced before parliament, but it has not been finally approved. According to Behrens (2014:n.p.), this situation 'creates a moral dilemma: on the one hand', and communities have the right to exercise cultural practices; on the other hand, the human has the right not to be wounded. In his evaluation of the cultural practice of male circumcision and initiation, Behrens' point of view is that cultural diversity and practice have to be respected and accepted because it is part of the human identity, but he is also convinced that another bioethical principle has more weight, namely the right not to be wounded (harmed). Behrens (2014) describes this right as follows:

> The right to participate in cultural practices should be protected. However, it is a limited right, and does not entail a right to activities that cause serious and avoidable harms. (n.p.)

This statement is also supported by Phoka in a recent study (Phoka 2018). Behrens grounds his opinion on human intuition, the philosophy of C. Taylor and W. Kymlicha, as well as the South African Bill of Rights, which states cultural practices 'may not be exercised in a manner inconsistent with any provision of the Bill

of Rights' (Ch. 2, par. 31); Phoka gives no grounding for his supposition. A preliminary reading of the guiding principles of the recent *Customary Initiation Bill* (Minister of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs 2018) reveals no mention of paragraph 31 (Ch. 2) of the South African Bill of Rights.

The tension between the right to cultural practices and the right not to be harmed gives rise to the research question of whether Behrens and Phoka's intuition – or philosophical grounding – and the Constitution is in line with global bioethical principles in this regard; can respect for cultural diversity be acknowledged on the one hand, but restricted on the other hand? Are cultural rights 'weaker rights'? Answering the last question also appears to be important in the South African context because some traditional leaders question the view of cultural rights being weaker rights and deem cultural rights to bear more weight. Makinana and Ngcukana (2018) report the following reaction of Nkosi Mwelo Nonkonyana, chairperson of the Eastern Cape traditional leaders, to the *Customary Initiation Bill*:

> We are fundamentally opposed to this bill. We see the trend with some of the people in government, which seeks to regulate custom. Custom belongs to us as traditional communities [...]. (n.p.)

In addition, uninitiated health inspectors are prevented from inspecting initiation schools or are under pressure not to reveal the true situation at these locations, which means that cultural values are regarded as the stronger values in practice. Because of their deep respect for cultural values, police do not investigate violence towards young men during the initiation process (Phoka 2018). The global community, by name Mathooko and Kipkemboi (2014), two African researchers working for UNESCO, reasons that there is a general lack of a universal bioethical grounding of local legislation in Africa, together with the fact that universal values do not figure prominently in the bioethical discourse. They therefore recommend saying, 'what needs to be put in place is education, legal framework, and contextualization of international normative instruments such as the Universal Declaration on [Bioethics] and Human Rights among others'

(Mathooko & Kipkemboi 2014:253–268). It appears as if the issue addressed by the research question has not yet received attention from a global perspective in the bioethical debate in South Africa.

This study, therefore, has a dual aim. On the one hand, the aim is to determine whether the South African bill of human rights and the bioethical discourse reflected in the arguments of Behrens and Phoka regarding the male initiation process and circumcision comply with global bioethical guidelines. On the other hand, it wants to determine whether the statements of Nkosi Mwelo Nonkonyana and the practice to prevent health inspectors from investigating and reporting the facts at initiation schools have the ethical support of a global community.

In addressing these questions, the emphasis will be on the Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights (UDBHR) of UNESCO (see UNESCO 2006). The UDBHR was universally accepted by all member states in 2005 (IBC 2008; Ten Have & Jean 2009). That means, in the history of global bioethics, the 'declaration with its 15 bioethical [and human rights] principles was the first and only bioethical text to which almost [all states] in the world, [also] SA, committed themselves'; it still has that status (Rheeder 2017:22; UNESCO 2005). It is extremely noteworthy 'that all the member states of UNESCO were able to agree [with each other] on […] the principles in the declaration, [which marked] a special accomplishment for universal bioethics' (Rheeder 2017:22). The acceptance also suggests, however, that the instrument does not merely have symbolic value for studies, but that they are intended and accepted as principles with moral authority and as duties that should be taken seriously into consideration (Ten Have 2011b; Wilhelm-Solomon 2016). The 'fact that the bioethical principles and norms are presented in terms of human rights strengthens the [high] moral [demand and weight] of the declaration' (Kirby 2009; Rheeder 2017:22; Ten Have 2016). The specific global principle relevant to the research question is found in Article 12 of the UDBHR. It has the heading '[r]espect for cultural diversity and pluralism' (UNESCO 2006).

Article 12 will now be broadly analysed, mainly using the UNESCO commentators and literature with the aim of construing a 'UNESCO perspective' that could confirm the central theoretical statement of this study, namely that the supposition of Behrens and Phako is supported by global bioethics and therefore has to be seriously considered and instructed in South Africa. Methodologically, attention will be given to the following two matters in the statement of Behrens, namely first, the status, and second, the order of respect for culture. For a theological perspective on Article 12 of the UDBHR, see the article of Rheeder (2017).

Global perspective

Status of culture diversity

Article 12 of the UDBHR is formulated as follows (UNESCO 2006):

> The importance of cultural diversity and pluralism should be given due regard. However, such considerations are not to be invoked to infringe upon human dignity, human rights and fundamental freedoms, nor upon the principles set out in this Declaration, nor to limit their scope. (n.p.)

The UDBHR presents the concepts of '*cultural diversity* and *pluralism* in [...] Article 12' (Alvarez 2016; Rheeder 2017:3). Rheeder (2017) also asks:

> What is the meaning of [*the concepts*] *culture*, *cultural diversity* and *pluralism* in the Declaration? 'Despite a very general understanding of the concept of "culture," it remains ambiguous and often means different things to different people', is the [*view*] of Macklin (2014) in her [*interpretation*] of Article 12. (p. 3)

In their clarification of *culture* and *cultural diversity*, the *Bioethics Core Curriculum 1* of UNESCO, Revel (a UNESCO commentator) and the UNESCO *Casebook for Judges* uses the 'definition as formulated in the *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity* of UNESCO (hereafter UDCD)' (Revel 2009; Rheeder 2017:3; UNESCO 2008; UNESCO Chair in Bioethics HAIFA 2016). In the

Foreword and in Article 1 of the UDCD, *culture* and *cultural diversity* are defined together as follows (UNESCO 2002):

> Culture should be regarded as the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, and it encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs [...]. Culture takes diverse forms across time and space. This diversity is embodied in the uniqueness and plurality of the identities of the groups and societies making up humankind. (n.p.)

Although the UDBHR (Rheeder 2017:3) itself does not explain the concepts in Article 12, 'there is an indication that the above-mentioned [definition] of cultural diversity [(of the UDCD)] is broadly [echoed] in the UDBHR when the following argument in the *Foreword* is considered' (UNESCO 2006):

> Bearing in mind that cultural diversity, as a source of exchange, innovation and creativity, is necessary to humankind and, in this sense, is the common heritage of humanity, but emphasizing that it may not be invoked at the expense of human rights and fundamental freedoms....Also bearing in mind that a person's identity includes biological, psychological, social, cultural and spiritual dimensions. (n.p.)

Rheeder (2017) then asks:

> [*What is*] the [*meaning*] of *pluralism*? In this regard, one can refer to Article 2 of the UDCD (UNESCO 2002), which [*declares*], '[...] cultural pluralism gives policy expression to the reality of cultural diversity'. *Pluralism* can be [*understood*] as the acknowledgement and acceptance of cultural diversity in several areas of existence such as politics, science, medicine, medical practices, religion and philosophy (Macklin 2014; UNESCO Chair in Bioethics HAIFA 2016). In the light of the above definition of pluralism by UNESCO [*(UDCD)*], Revel (2009) [*comes to the conclusion,*] 'Pluralism is itself a value, a guarantee of coexistence and mutual understanding', and therefore it has to be respected according to Article 12. (p. 203)

It is unmistakable that Article 12 acknowledges cultural diversity (also male initiation and circumcision culture practices) as a value, as something of great 'importance' (see Art. 12) and therefore the instruction that it should be respected or 'given due regard' (Chuwa 2014; Rheeder 2017:3).

The above discussion suggests the following question: why is culture 'important'? *First*, there are a human rights viewpoint and *second*, a functional viewpoint presented as reasons for the injunction to give due regard to cultural practices. With regard to the human rights viewpoint, the *Bioethics Core Curriculum 1* of UNESCO states that Article 12 is associated as follows (Rheeder 2017):

> As a theoretical and practical continuation of Articles 3 and 10, and to be continued in discussion of Articles 13, 14, and 15 (UNESCO 2008). This means that this global principle [*(Art. 12) relates*] to human dignity, equality and non-discrimination. [*Firstly*], the UDBHR [*unites*] human dignity with the norm of respect for cultural diversity, which is confirmed by Article 2(c), which states one of the aims of the Declaration is 'to provide a universal framework of principles', with the specific purpose 'to promote respect for human dignity' [*(UNESCO 2006, Revel 2009). The*] recognition and [*effecting*] of respect for cultural diversity gives [*articulation*] to human dignity and where this principle is respected, people are treated with human dignity (Chuwa 2014). [*Secondly*,] it is clear that respect for cultural diversity is the logical [*consequence*] of the [*acknowledgement*] of the [*principle*] of equality of all people as expressed in Article 10 of the UDBHR [*(UNESCO 2006)*]. Respect for [*all cultures*] is important, because it gives expression to the principle of equality [*of all cultures. Thirdly,*] Article 11 of the UDBHR has to be regarded as a further grounding of Article 12 [*(UNESCO 2006, Chuwa 2014)*]. This principle [*confirms*] that discrimination should not take place against any individual or group, which means that no individual or group may be excluded or given preference in the context of bioethics. Article 11 does not refer directly to culture, but Article 14 [*(of the UDBHR)*] states clearly that no discrimination should take place against a human being on the grounds of religion, which implies that there may be no [*prejudice*] against [*any*] identity [*or*] culture ([*UNESCO 2006;*] Rivard 2009).

From a *functional* viewpoint, the following arguments could be considered (Rheeder 2017):

> *Firstly*, as has been clearly shown in the above quotation from the *Foreword* of the [*UDBHR,*] respect of cultural diversity is important because as a source of 'exchange, innovation and creativity' it is advantageous to humanity. [*In addition,*] cultural diversity [*designates*] 'the common heritage of humanity', which means all

> culture has to be regarded as the property of humanity (UNESCO Chair in Bioethics HAIFA 2016). It means that culture [*should*] not be acknowledged as the exclusive property of a specific group, but has to serve as a source of exchange, innovation and creativity that can be used to the advantage of humanity. *Secondly*, respect for cultural diversity is important for the peaceful [*cohabitation*] of plural [*identities*]. (pp. 3–4)

Article 2 of the UDCD states the following (UNESCO 2002, in Rheeder 2017):

> In our increasingly diverse societies, it is essential to ensure harmonious interaction among people and groups with plural, varied and dynamic cultural identities as well as their willingness to live together. Policies for the inclusion and participation of all citizens are guarantees of social cohesion, the vitality of civil society and peace. Because cultural diversity forms part of human identity and [*existence and*] because it is a global benefit, it has to be taken into account, according to Article 12; [*besides,*] without [*high regard*] for cultural diversity, peace [*in the community*] would not be possible. (pp. 3, 5)

From the understanding of cultural diversity mentioned above, it can be inferred that bioethics, as accepted by the global community, will value and therefore allow male traditional initiation practice (and circumcision) as followed in South Africa as a way of life, a value system and tradition because it forms part of the identity of a social group or community. It can be concluded that the global community regards male traditional initiation practice and circumcision as an important value that has to be acknowledged and allowed.

The ordering of culture

However, 'different from the other articles in the Declaration, Article 12 has a built-in limitation' (Rheeder 2017:4). This then is the sole article within the UDBHR 'that states a restriction. It is therefore considered as the weakest article in the Declaration as it requires a hierarchical application of Article 12' (Rheeder 2017:4; Ten Have and Gordijn 2014). This hierarchical understanding

'underline[s] the fact that human dignity, human rights and fundamental freedoms are prioritised with regard to cultural diversity in Article 12' (Rheeder 2017:4; see also Articles 18, 21 and 24 of the UDBHR). According to Rheeder (2017), Article 12 formulates the viewpoint as follows:

> However, such [*cultural diversity*] considerations are not to be invoked to infringe upon human dignity, human rights and fundamental freedoms, nor upon the principles set out in this Declaration, nor to limit their scope. (This idea is also repeated in the *Foreword* of the UDBHR and Article 4 of the UDCD.) It means that arguments and practices in the context of health can only be [*grounded*] on cultural diversity [*and practices*] if they are in agreement with the other principles in the UDBHR and human rights. (IBC 2013:17; Ten Have 2016:104)
>
> Why did [*the global community*] find it necessary to prioritise human rights, fundamental freedoms and the principles of the UDBHR [*by formulating*] the restriction of cultural activities as ethical guidelines? The basic motivation for the fundamental restriction is found in Article 14 of the UDBHR, which states that 'the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health is one of the fundamental rights of every human being'. In practice, it is clear that some cultural practices cannot contribute to this ideal; on the contrary, it is known that some human [*cultural*] actions [*and practices*] [...] do not benefit the health of individuals [*in general or reproductive health in particular because it causes*] serious harm to health. (p. 4)

Ten Have (2016:203), one of the UNESCO intellects behind the development of the UDBHR, describes the situation as follows:

> Appeals to cultural diversity and accusations of bioethical imperialism are less convincing with growing evidence and awareness of harmful effects. Health is a common value; in this frame there are no benefits, only harms. (p. 203)

This is also true of cultural practices that harm reproductive health.

Macklin, a UNESCO commentator, explains the restriction principle by using the example of enforced marriages of under-age girls as a cultural practice (Macklin 2014), but the same arguments are also *mutatis mutandis* valid for male initiation cultural practices and their implications for the reproductive health of young men (Dekkers 2016). The following universal

principles of the UDBHR are considered as carrying much more weight than cultural values. *Firstly*, 'Article 4 ("Benefit and harm") states that health benefits have to be [maximised] and all harm to health minimalized' (Rheeder 2017:4; UNESCO 2006, 2008). From the discussion mentioned above, it is clear that in many instances, male initiation practices are not beneficial to the health of boys and critically harm their ability to have a normal reproductive life. *Secondly* (Rheeder 2017):

> [*A*]rticle 7 ('Persons without the capacity to consent') states that children must participate in the decision-making process in [*cultural practices*] that poses possible serious medical implications. The explicit statement in Article 7 that children have to give consent or may refuse or withdraw consent to participate in [*medical and cultural practices*] implies that children have to give consent or may refuse or withdraw consent to [*cultural practices that might be detrimental to their health*]. (p. 4)

In many cases, male initiation practices and circumcision are compulsory, which means that the right to consent or refusal is not actually an option for the children involved. In many instances, families are silent about the participation of their boys in these initiation rituals. *Thirdly* (Rheeder 2017:4), 'according to Article 8' ('Respect for human vulnerability and personal integrity'), 'vulnerable people have a right to protection against harm'. In general, children are viewed as a vulnerable population, which needs special protection by domestic law and, more importantly, the application of the relevant domestic law. It is very interesting that a preliminary reading the proposed *Customary Initiation Bill* does not take the global bioethical principle of vulnerability in consideration or see young male children as a vulnerable population.

If a cultural practice does not incorporate these 'stronger' principles, there are only two possibilities, namely a total ban of the practice or the modification of the cultural practice so that it could comply with the universal standards mentioned above.

According to Rheeder (2017):

> The above answer that [*prioritisation*] has been necessary because some cultural practices harm people and do not promote their

> health does not solve the question of [*equal treatment*]. Equality of all people implies that cultural [*activities*] have equal value and application. The question is if [*ordering or limitation*] could [*now*] mean that specific cultural moral values, for example 'Western principles' (such as [*contained in*] Articles 4, 7, 8 [*or*] 14), are seen as [*higher values*] and are now [*forced upon*] other cultural groups, in that way [*undermining local*] cultural practices and values (Ten Have 2016). [*Many people feel that that*] bioethical colonising or moral imperialism would be at the bottom of the debate because [*prioritisation*] amounts to domination of the powerful? (Ten Have [*2011a, 2016*]). (p. 4)

An answer from the global community and UNESCO can be summed up as follows (Rheeder 2017):

> In the *first place*, while it is true that respect for cultural diversity gives expression to the principle of [*impartiality*] and therefore has to be held in high regard, the paradox is exactly that if cultural diversity is not [*impeded*] or subjected to other shared values, cultural [*traditions*] are not only harmful to people [*(in these case very harmful to reproductive ability) but it also indirectly supports*] global unequal treatment as it works with double standards. (pp. 4–5)

An example is male circumcision that is performed worldwide with almost no serious consequences. Why do young men in South Africa have to be maimed and even die when young people in other countries experience no harmful consequences? (Dekkers 2016). In the *second place*, 'the [praxis] to restrict some rights in certain circumstances and to prioritise [the right] to health is not a strange idea and is applied worldwide' (Rheeder 2017:5). This argument is especially accentuated by scholars from Africa working in the field of global bioethics (Chuwa 2014). In the *third place* (Rheeder 2017):

> [*I*]t is put forward that the [*criticism of inequality*] above does not take into [*consideration*] that the [*judgement*] of prioritising certain values in Article 12 was not enforced, but were [*willingly*] received and [*consented to*] by means of negotiation and consensus (Chuwa 2014). As a legal standard [*approved by*] the United Nations, [*the UDBHR*] represent the hard-won [*agreement*] of the [*global population*], not the cultural imperialism of any particular region or

> set of traditions (Revel [*2019*]). For this reason, [*the prioritisation*] of global principles as opposed to cultural diversity cannot be seen as a superior moral judgement of cultural practices, but it is based on [*a global agreement*] to the shared value that everyone has a right to health (Ten Have 2016). (p. 5)

In the *fourth place*, Ten Have (2016, in Rheeder 2017:5), in his ground-breaking book, *Introduction to Global Bioethics*, gives a powerful introduction to the relationship between UNESCO, the UDBHR and global bioethics, remarks, 'Taking moral diversity seriously is inescapable but human existence is not just determined by controversies, disagreements and diversity'. The world, in all its complexity and strife (Rheeder 2017):

> [*C*]an develop and share a common [*imagination*] and [*related*] ideals, as well as normative practices. A very good example is the universal recognition that human dignity [*and value*] is a characteristic of all humanity. (p. 166)

To sum up: it is clear that UNESCO regards cultural diversity in the UDBHR to be of utmost importance and as a human right, but that the global community is nevertheless convinced that cultural practices have relative value.

Conclusion

In the light of the arguments mentioned above, the conclusion can be made that the statement of Behrens and Phoka, which is grounded in the South African bill of human rights, is supported by UNESCO in Article 12 of the UDBHR. It implies that there is a strong universal bioethical grounding for the point of departure that universal values have more weight than the cultural practice of human initiation and circumcision; therefore, the statement of Nkosi Mwelo Nonkonyana has to be queried. In the light of continuing reports on the wounding of a large number of sons and young men during the male initiation process and circumcision, it can be stated that the practice does not currently comply with the universal values of Articles 4, 7, 8 and 14 of the UDBHR and has dire consequences for the reproductive health of many boys

in South Africa. Because the global community in Article 12 is of the opinion that cultural practices are important and therefore have to be respected, it would be irresponsible to prohibit the cultural initiation process and circumcision, as it would certainly contribute to further strife in society. A better option would be that this cultural practice would be adapted in such a way that the participants are not wounded and have no dire implications for the reproductive health of the young men. This adaptation should not change the essence of the cultural practice, but it has to be made quite safe with proper health care instructions.

Chapter 12

Reflections on the Malawian church's role in maternal health

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Introduction

Maternal health is a global public health issue. It is also a gender, development, theological and human rights issue that affects women (mostly those from the Global South), who often die of preventable and treatable complications during pregnancy or childbirth. Studies (see Alkema et al. 2016:467) indicate that maternal mortality in sub-Saharan Africa is statistically high with a Maternal Mortality Ratio (MMR) of 546

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per 100 000 live births compared with North America and Europe with an MMR of 6 per 100 000 and Asia 140 per 100 000 live births. Despite these seemingly shocking statistics, the global MMR declined from 385 per 100 000 live births in 1990 to 216 per 100 000 live births in 2015. Malawi, in particular, has a high MMR compared with other Southern African countries with an MMR at 510 per 100 000 live births (Gender Links 2015:220). Other countries in the South African Development Community (SADC) region have a much lower MMR. For example, Mozambique has 480 per 100 000; Zambia 280 per 100 000; Zimbabwe 470 per 100 000; Botswana 170 per 100 000 and South Africa 140 per 100 000.

This chapter discusses maternal health – its definition, its linkages to context and culture and its positioning as an issue at the intersection of gender and health. It also discusses the role of FBOs and in particular, the role the church can play in collaboration with government and NGOs in addressing this challenge.

Maternal health

Maternal health refers to the health and well-being of women during pregnancy, childbirth and the postpartum period. The post-partum period comprises the 42 days after childbirth (WHO 2014:4). According to the WHO, safe pregnancy, childbirth and motherhood are basic human rights. Jones (2007) states that:

> Pregnancy is neither a disease nor an illness. Yet every minute of every day, a woman dies as an indirect result of being pregnant. What should be a positive, defining moment in a woman's life is often a time of profound fear, intense suffering, and untimely death. (p. ii)

The term 'safe motherhood' is used interchangeably with maternal health. Safe motherhood refers to the provision of adequate care that all women need to be safe and healthy during pregnancy, childbirth and postpartum period. Maternal heath has four components, namely, family planning, antenatal care, delivery

care and post-natal care.[178] All these components are crucial in achieving maternal health and reducing maternal mortality.

According to the WHO (2014:4), women die because of complications that develop during pregnancy and after childbirth. Most of these complications are preventable and treatable if women seek medical attention in good time. The major complications that account for nearly 75% of all maternal deaths are 'severe bleeding (mostly bleeding after childbirth); infections (usually after childbirth); high blood pressure during pregnancy and complications during delivery and unsafe abortions' (Family Care International 2005). In addition, women suffer from disabilities and other illnesses, including fever and post-partum depression. Disabilities that result from maternal complications are, for instance, obstetric fistula and uterine prolapsed.[179] Obstetric fistula is caused by the delay in seeking medical attention because of sociocultural reasons and is common among poor rural women. However, other factors such as poverty, lack of good nutrition and lack of right information, distance to health centres, inadequate services and harmful cultural practices contribute to maternal deaths (Chirowa et al. 2013:5).

In this regard, it is remarkable that there is a link between maternal deaths and the low status accorded to women in society and their lack of decision-making ability and economic power (Family Care International 2005:7). According to WHO (2015), maternal mortality is one of the indicators of the disparity that exists between poor and rich countries; more women die during pregnancy and childbirth in the poorest countries than in the rich countries. Within countries, women who are poor with little or no education and living in rural areas suffer disproportionately compared with women who are educated, wealthy and living in urban areas (WHO 2015).

178. See http://www.safemotherhood.org

179. Obstetric fistula refers to holes in the birth canal caused by prolonged or obstructed labour while uterine prolapse is the falling or sliding of the uterus from its normal position in the pelvic cavity into the vaginal canal (Safe Motherhood Review 2005:62). This results in women being stigmatised in their communities because they cannot control the flow of urine and sometimes even faeces. It is a disability caused by childbirth.

The global initiatives on maternal health

The challenges associated with maternal health contribute to the slower pace of development in the developing countries and have constituted a development concern since the mid-1980s. At the end of the UN Decade for Women (1976–1985) in 1985, recommendations were made about women's health and the prevention of maternal deaths. As a result, global initiatives were launched to reduce maternal mortality in developing countries (Family Care International 2007). In 1987, the Safe Motherhood Initiative was launched in Nairobi, Kenya. The launch of this initiative was an effort towards raising awareness about maternal mortality. In other words, according to a Safe Motherhood Initiative's report (cf. Family Care International 2005), launching this initiative was:

> [*A*]n international effort to bring awareness of the scope and dimension of maternal mortality and galvanise the commitment of among governments, donors, UN agencies and other relevant stakeholders to take steps to address this public health tragedy. (n.p.)

The Safe Motherhood Initiative aims at reducing maternal deaths and ill-health in developing countries. It also urged for concerted action by governments and funding agencies in order to prevent women from dying during pregnancy and childbirth.

Subsequently, in 1994, the ICPD held in Cairo, Egypt, was instrumental in bringing an increased focus on improving women's reproductive health. The conference was also instrumental in highlighting women empowerment in the population policy (Chirowa et al. 2013:2; Patton 2002:18). This was followed by the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 in Beijing, China; it also emphasised women empowerment and advocated for women's reproductive health rights as human rights. According to Chirowa et al. (2013:2), it was at this Beijing Conference that 'it became clear that inequalities and inadequate expenditure on women's health needs hindered development'. The Cairo Programme of Action and the Beijing Platform for Action were

linked up with a focus on reproductive health rights, population policy and women empowerment (Patton 2002:19). Consequently, the governments, NGOs and funding agencies were urged to provide user-centred services, improving the quality of care and 'the principle of informed free choice as an essential to the long-term success of family planning' (Patton 2002:19).

In the year 2000, the Millenium Development Goals (MDGs) were adopted by the United Nations Millennium Assembly with specific goals that aimed at reducing extreme poverty and promoting human development. The fifth MDG focussed on maternal health with a target of reducing MMR by 75% by 2015. This implied that UN agencies, namely, WHO, UNFPA, United Nations Women's Organisation (UNWomen) and the World Bank, would prioritise issues of maternal health in matters of funding and development. In 2015 the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) superseded the MDGs and set targets of reducing the maternal mortality rate to less than 70 per 100 000 live births by 2030.

Factors that lead to maternal deaths and disabilities

There are socio-cultural, economic, religious and political factors that contribute to maternal deaths and disabilities. These factors include child marriages, teenage pregnancies, unmet need for modern family planning methods and frequent pregnancies. Most of the factors are perpetuated by cultural and traditional beliefs. These include the belief that regards children as wealth and the more children a woman bears, the wealthier the family is. As women have to give birth to more children, they give birth more often and without proper spacing. These frequent pregnancies and with little or no spacing put women's lives at risk. The tradition of having a lot of children is even reinforced by the cultural hermeneutics of interpreting the Bible (Kanyoro 2002:10). Indeed, Kanyoro (2002:10) argues that the culture of the reader in Africa influences how one reads and interprets biblical texts.

The historical facts about the text are important in the understanding of a text. Hence, the interpretation of scriptures such as Genesis 1:28, which says 'be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it', is used to make women believe that they are supposed to give birth to more children. Nevertheless, there are women who are even encouraged by this passage to bear children. As noted by Phiri (2002:20), therefore, both 'African culture and the Bible take a central position in shaping the lives of African women'.

Another sociocultural factor is the preference of a male child over a female child in most patrilineal cultures. This puts women at risk if they are only bearing female children. Women will bear children until they give birth to a male because the husband and the extended family want a male child. According to Nasimiyu-Wasike (1992:104), a woman who gives birth to female children only is held in low esteem. The whole blame for failing to bear sons is levelled at her head, and the society regards her as a failure. In addition, shame and guilt are heaped upon her. The husband of the woman who bears female children only is often advised to marry another wife or more wives who will bear a male child. This is because a male child is regarded as the rightful heir to the father and the one who would inherit all of the family's property. He is also said to be the one to perpetuate the family name. A female child cannot be an heir because she will leave the house and the community once she is married.[180]

In addition, the education levels of women are critical to maternal health because studies show that maternal mortality is higher among women who are illiterate or have lower levels of education than it is among women who have better education. Women who have a better education make more informed choices concerning their reproductive health and are able to contribute to the education of their own children (Momsen 2010:50).

180. Although female children are valued among the Ngoni/Tumbuka in Northern Malawi for bringing in cattle through *lobola* when they are married off, it is the male children who are valued more because they are the ones that will continue the name of their fathers.

However, gender inequality in the communities denies women equal access to education and disempower women in decision-making. Consequently, most women in such communities are regarded as inferior to men. As a result, such women cannot make their own decisions with regard to their reproductive health and sometimes cannot even seek medical attention even when they are in labour (Katenga-Kaunda 2010:24).

Furthermore, family planning – one of the four components of maternal health – 'allows individuals and couples to anticipate and attain their desired number of children as well as the spacing and timing of their births' (United Nations Population Fund 2017). Family planning methods include the use of modern contraceptives and traditional methods of preventing pregnancy (Maliwichi-Nyirenda & Maliwichi 2010:235). However, the use of modern contraceptives has implications of accessibility, availability and side effects (Gueye et al. 2015:191). One of the challenges to family planning methods is the view that regards it as women's issues because women are the ones who get pregnant and give birth, resulting in low male involvement in issues pertaining to family planning. Nevertheless, men need to be involved together with their wives on issues of family planning. They need to discuss and decide together on a family planning method appropriate for them. In addition, in most communities, there are myths and misconceptions associated with the modern family planning methods, and this contributes to the low usage of the modern family planning methods (Adelekan, Omoregie & Edoni 2014:1; Kassa et al. 2014:7). This results in frequent pregnancies and childbirth that put women at risk of maternal complications. Family planning helps to save the lives of women and children by preventing unintended pregnancies and unsafe abortions. It helps women to have a good interval between each pregnancy (Jackson et al. 2011:134).

Besides, patriarchal systems that regard women as inferior to men deny women equal access to education and do not allow them to make decisions on their own even when they need to seek medical attention. The political factors include the health

delivery systems, distances to the health facilities and civil strife in some countries, and these are more prevalent where there is no political will to address issues of maternal health (Family Care International 2005:11; Widmer et al. 2011:219).

The political will to address the health of its citizens by any government is crucial in addressing issues of maternal health. Governments can promote maternal health through improving infrastructure such as roads and health facilities; improve on health delivery services by empowering and motivating health workers to work even in remote areas; and empower the communities to take an active role in issues of maternal health. For example, in Malawi, the political will through the Presidential Initiative on Safe Motherhood under the Office of President and Cabinet has assisted in reducing MMR (Gender Links 2015:221).

Maternal health as a gender and development issue

The term 'gender' identifies the roles of both women and men in society (Moser 1993:3) while 'development' refers to changing of people's perceptions by involving both individuals and groups to bring change in motivations and behaviour towards each other and their environment within a society (Burkey 1993:48). This explains why any development initiative affects the lives of both women and men in different ways as they have different positions within a society (Haddad 2010:121). Gender and Development (GAD) is a development framework that regards issues of both women and men as equally critical to development (Haddad 2010:121). Furthermore, gender equality ensures that the experiences and concerns of both men and women are considered in the designing, implementing, monitoring and evaluating of all projects (Momsen 2010:15). In addition, gender mainstreaming is another tool of development that advocates for the involvement of men and women from initial stages of development up to the evaluation of the project (Momsen 2010:15). Any development

practice or project should be participatory, people-centred and inclusive for it to be sustainable. Governments, funding agencies, NGOs and FBOs, including churches, need to prioritise issues of maternal health in their development agenda.

It should, therefore, be noted that maternal health is a GAD issue. It is a GAD issue because the death of women during pregnancy and childbirth affects the development of communities, and surviving children have a high risk of dying before reaching the age of five (Katenga-Kaunda 2010:22). However, women who are healthy and have fewer children contribute to the development of their families and communities. Their children are more likely to get a better education and contribute to the development of their communities.

As a gender issue, maternal health mirrors the inequalities between women and men in the communities and societies in terms of access to education and resources. It also mirrors the disparities between developed countries and those that are underdeveloped or developing, as well as between the educated and uneducated and between urban and rural women. Maternal health shows the subordinate position of women in society, where a boy child is preferred over a girl child, and the girl child can be married off to settle debts parents have.

Mercy Oduyoye's theological perspectives on maternal health

This section analyses Mercy Oduyoye's theological perspective and discusses why her theological perspective is relevant to analysing the issue of maternal health in the African context. Maternal health pertains to the health and well-being of women during pregnancy and childbirth. Oduyoye's theological perspectives look at the life-affirming aspects of the African cultures and resisting those that have life-denying aspects. Within the African women's theology, health is understood in a 'broad context', namely, as 'encompassing the physical, emotional,

psychological and social domains' (Phiri 2006:9). In view of this, maternal health is about safe motherhood – saving the lives of mothers in the process of giving life to newborns in the communities. It is protecting the lives of mothers from death, disabilities and depression that are associated with childbirth.

Nadia Marais (2015:191) observes that 'for Mercy Oduyoye, "health" and "healing" are inseparable from "human well-being and wellness"'. Marais (2015:192) further indicates that Mercy Oduyoye distinguishes between motherhood (which she regards as the biological act of procreation and raising children) and mothering (which she regards as the act of caring for human beings). In this regard, '[m]otherhood is used so as to include the notion of mothering, but mothering does not necessarily presuppose motherhood' as Marais (2015:192) concludes. This explains why Oduyoye (2001:38) argues that mothering is the obligation of all in the community whether they are women or men. It is being concerned with the well-being and the welfare of everyone in the community out of God's compassion (Oduyoye 2001:38).

Consequently, African women's theologies emerge from the experiences of day-to-day life in their communities. This approach emphasises the communal life in Africa where both women and men have an important role to play in building a fair and just society. In this regard, Oduyoye (1996) states the following:

> In the struggle to build and maintain a life-giving and life-enhancing community, African women live by a spirituality of resistance which enables them to transform death into life and to open the way to the reconstruction of a compassionate world. (p. 162)

In the above statement, Oduyoye (1996:162) explains why African women 'live by a spirituality of resistance', which is necessary for the transformation of what is mortal into life-giving opportunity. However, Oduyoye (2008:87) further states that some of the African myths and proverbs deny women a sense of humanity; as a result, women suffer in silence for the benefit of the

whole community. Most of these myths imply that women cannot be trusted and that they behave like children. Such views constrain women from participating in the decision-making of issues that affect their well-being in society. Oduyoye finds that, generally, the folktales are used to reinforce the domination of men over women and perpetuate stereotypical roles of women as mothers, wives and caretakers. Women are regarded as self-sacrificial persons who put first the need of others (Pui-Lan 2004:16).

Oduyoye further argues that African women theologians should express their experiences of the God who sustains them in times of need and who brings victory not as expected. African women theologians attribute all recognition and inclusiveness to God, who has the power to transform human beings and their conditions. Thus, 'they express their experience of God in affirming cultural beliefs and practices, while they feel called by God to denounce and to deconstruct oppressive ones' (Oduyoye 1997:500–501).

For this reason, Oduyoye (2001:38) finds that African women's theologies are 'developing in the context of global challenges and situations in Africa's religio-culture that call for transformation'. This explains why, according to Landman (2007:187), Oduyoye's theology can be described as a theology of narratives and the stories have changed world views on issues of gender, ecumenism and restorative historiography. Mercy Oduyoye's theology of life-affirming and flourishing provides a theoretical framework for analysing maternal health in the theological perspectives.

The role of faith-based organisations in maternal health

Faith-based organisations[181] play a crucial role in the health sector in Africa and Malawi in particular. According to Widmer et al.

181. Faith-based organisations in this context refer to FBOs whose values and beliefs are based on the Christian faith. These can be denominational, interdenominational or para-church organisations.

(2011:219),[182] a study that was conducted in several countries in Africa in 2003–2005 by the Ecumenical Pharmaceutical Network in collaboration with WHO found that faith-based health delivery services contribute to 40% of the health delivery in most African countries – especially in remote rural areas.

In Malawi, the FBOs provide 37% of the health services and the government provides 60%. The remaining percentage is divided between the military and police medical services, including for-profit and non-profit private health sectors (Manafa et al. 2009:2). Through the Christian Health Association of Malawi (CHAM),[183] the churches in Malawi are contributing to the reduction maternal mortality through the services the mission hospital provides to the communities especially in the remote areas where the government is unable to reach such places. The collaboration and networking of the government and the churches through CHAM in the health sector are crucial with regard to sexual and reproductive as well as maternal health. In addition, religious leaders are influential in the communities and societies, and they can, therefore, assist in addressing issues of maternal health in the communities they are serving.

The church's role in promoting maternal health

The church has a mandate to care for the underprivileged and marginalised people in society. Therefore, the church takes a holistic approach in its ministry as it regards a human being as a whole – physical, spiritual, mental, cultural and social aspects

182. 'The World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates that 30–70% of healthcare infrastructure in Africa is run by FBOs with the percentage varying within this range in different countries' (Widmer et al. 2011:219).

183. CHAM is an umbrella body that coordinates the work of the Christian health facilities for both Catholic and Protestant churches. The Episcopal Conference of Malawi and Malawi Council of Churches (MCC) own it. The Catholic dioceses and member churches of MCC who own hospitals are member churches of CHAM.

(August 2010:45; Myers 2011:10). In this regard, the church is well positioned to partner with the government in addressing such contextual challenges. Although the Government of Malawi in cooperation with other NGOs and FBOs has taken steps to promote maternal health, there is still more to be done to address maternal mortality. It is in this context that this chapter seeks to explore the role of the church in the promotion of maternal health.

The Church of Central Africa Presbyterian Synod of Livingstonia

The CCAP is comprised of five synods:

1. Livingstonia Synod in Northern Malawi
2. Nkhoma Synod in Central Malawi
3. Blantyre Synod in Southern Malawi
4. Harare Synod in Zimbabwe
5. Zambia Synod in Zambia.

According to Chilenje (2007), the CCAP General Assembly (formerly called General Synod) was established in 1956.[184]

The CCAP Synod of Livingstonia's (2008) mission statement states that:

> The Synod of Livingstonia exists to spread the Word of God and provide holistic social services to demonstrate the love of Jesus Christ by the empowering of the Holy Spirit in order to glorify God. (p. 34)

184. At its inception, there were only three synods, namely, Livingstonia, Blantyre and Nkhoma. Harare Synod joined in 1965, and in 1984 the Zambia Synod came on board as Chilenje (2007:39–40) accounts. The CCAP General Assembly meets once in four years, and its headquarters is situated in Lilongwe, Malawi. The five synods together have a theological college in Zomba, Malawi, which trains ministers from these synods. The leadership positions of the General Assembly rotate among the five synods and the term of office for the leaders is 4 years.

Its vision reads, 'The Synod of Livingstonia is inspired by a vision of changed lives and transformed communities by the power of God' (CCAP Synod of Livingstonia 2008:4). In order to realise this vision, the Synod takes the holistic approach to transformational development. The Synod's jurisdiction is the northern part of Malawi – although now it is spreading to other parts of Malawi and even beyond.[185]

The Synod has several departments and institutions that help to fulfil its mission holistically. It has various departments and institutions, namely, Church and Society, Development, Education, Health, Early Childhood Development, Livingstonia Synod AIDS Programme (LISAP), Voice of Livingstonia Radio Station, Sunday School, Men's Guild, Literature, Lay Training Centre, Youth and Women's Guild. Furthermore, the Synod also has a higher learning institution, namely the University of Livingstonia. This chapter focuses on the Health Department and the role it plays in the provision of maternal health services in its catchment areas.

The health department

The health department plays an important role in the Synod for it to fulfil its mandate of healing the sick and improving the well-being of communities in general. The mandate of the church is to provide holistic service to the communities that the church is serving. This consists of treating a human being as a total being, that is, holistically – spiritually, physically, emotionally, mentally and relationally. To fulfil this mandate, the Synod of Livingstonia provides health services to some of the communities in which it works through the mission hospitals and health centres.

185. The Synod of Livingstonia is now working and establishing churches in the Central region of Malawi, which previously was the jurisdiction of the Nkhoma Synod. This resulted from the resolution by the CCAP Synod of Livingstonia made in 2005 that there are no borders between the two synods after several decades of border disputes (Abale-Phiri 2011:140). Now Nkhoma Synod is also establishing churches in Northern Malawi previously the jurisdiction of Livingstonia Synod.

The Synod of Livingstonia has three mission hospitals, namely, David Gordon Memorial Hospital in Livingstonia, Ekwendeni Mission Hospital in Ekwendeni and Embangweni Mission Hospital in Embangweni. These hospitals and clinics provide curative, preventive, promotive and rehabilitative services to the communities in their catchment areas.[186] Through the Primary Health Care (PHC) programme, they provide antenatal care to pregnant women and under-five clinics for children.[187] These PHC services are aimed at reducing child and maternal mortality. However, the services are designated in catchment areas only where the hospital and health centres, as well as other areas within the Synod, do not have access to them.

According to the Synod Health Department's (CCAP Synod of Livingstonia n.d.) mission statement, the purpose of the department is 'to provide health care services, promote health and proclaim a Christian witness'. The department coordinates the work of the mission's hospitals and clinics. The department works in collaboration with other FBO healthcare providers through the CHAM. Furthermore, the Synod has a training college –Ekwendeni College of Health Sciences – that trains women and men from different parts of Malawi in Nursing and Midwifery. The training and equipping of nurses further contribute to the country's medical personnel.

■ Health Department's Safe Motherhood and Maternal Health Programme

In addressing the issue of maternal health, apart from the work that the hospitals are doing, the health department is involved in the *Uchembere* Network.[188] This is a project for all the three CCAP

186. See http://www.ccapsolinia.org

187. See http://www.ccapsolinia.org

188. Uchembere is the vernacular for motherhood. It is about motherhood, not mothering. A woman who has a child (children) is called nchembere.

Synods in Malawi in collaboration with some NGOs. The vision of the *Uchembere* Network is encapsulated thus in its national framework – '[w]omen are confident and supported by men, church and community structures to easily access quality and reproductive health services' (National Framework for Implementation 2009–2011:5). The aims and objectives of the National Uchembere Network are as follows:

1. To improve health-seeking behaviour to sexual and reproductive health services.
2. To improve the availability and quality of sexual and reproductive health services.
3. To improve referral systems between the community and the health facilities.
4. To build partnerships and advocate for sexual and reproductive health issues to other stakeholders.

In the first phase, the *Uchembere* Network focussed on implementing programmes that would reduce maternal and child mortality in order to achieve MDGs 4 and 5.[189] The Network is divided into regional networks. The Synod of Livingstonia is involved in the Northern Region *Uchembere* Network where it works through its three hospitals and in collaboration with two NGOs, namely, Community Youth in Development Activities and Plan International. *Uchembere* Network Programme for the Synod is being implemented in Mharaunda under Embangweni Mission Hospital in Mzimba.

However, the Synod regards issues of maternal health as health and women's issues. For this regard, the health department of the Synod, through the hospitals and clinics, tackles maternal health. These services are only available in the areas where the Synod hospitals operate; thus, communities that are not under the mission hospitals' catchment area do not have access to these services.

189. Millennium Development Goals 4 and 5 were to reduce child mortality and improve maternal health, respectively.

Nevertheless, the Synod of Livingstonia as a denomination is also making a significant contribution to the education of girls. It does this by providing secondary school education and providing school fees to the needy girls in the Synod secondary schools through Mamie Martin Fund. The Synod tries to promote the issue of gender equality by giving access to education to girls and women. Thus, the Synod promotes issues of maternal health indirectly through the education of girls and through the projects such as 'Keeping Girls in School' and 'Girls and Boys Empowerment'.[190] However, the Synod through its organisational structure that starts from the grassroots in the Prayer Houses that are present in most communities in Northern Malawi should increase awareness on issues of maternal health by sensitising its members in the congregations. The Synod through its radio station could also disseminate information on issues of maternal health on how to prevent maternal mortality to the masses as radio is proven to be an effective tool to reach the masses.

The Synod of Livingstonia also plays a role through teaching against harmful cultural practices and traditions that are life-denying, and usually these cultural practices put women at risk of life-threatening issues such as maternal deaths (Msiska 1997:45). This is performed through the church's guilds, namely, Women's, Men and the Christian Youth Fellowship in their weekly Bible studies (Quinn 1995:389–390). At the same time, it also encourages life-affirming cultural practices such as community and wholeness. These aspects are important in saving the lives of women and children during pregnancy and childbirth.

■ Conclusion

Maternal health is not only a public health challenge but also a gender, development and theological challenge. It was noted

190. 'Keeping Girls in School' project is being implemented by the Synod's Education Department, and the 'Girls and Boys Empowerment' project is implemented by the LISAP department.

that there are religious, sociocultural, economic and political factors that contribute to maternal health that lead to mortality. Thus, the CCAP Synod of Livingstonia as a denomination is assisting on issues of maternal health, but the Synod needs to do more in addressing maternal health if Malawi should achieve that target of reducing MMR to less than 70 per 100 000 by 2030.

In addition, the church should continue teaching against harmful cultural practices and traditions that deny women and girls their rights and dignity. The church should work towards bringing more awareness on issues of maternal health and ways that could assist to reduce maternal mortality.

Although MMR is still high in Malawi, a collaboration by the churches, FBOs, NGOs and the government in their efforts to reduce it can assist in reducing maternal mortality.

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Chapter 13

A long walk to reproductive freedom: Reconceiving theologies of abortion in South Africa

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Introduction

Annually, one in four pregnancies is terminated worldwide, making abortion[191] a common medical procedure. However, nearly half of these abortions still remain unsafe, and as a result, abortion

191. In this chapter, I use the term 'abortion' deliberately to highlight the current negative moral loading of this practice that is suggested by this term as compared to the more neutral 'termination of pregnancy'.

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is the third leading cause of maternal mortality (Amnesty International 2018). Religious-related abortion stigma still fuels unsafe abortions in many contexts (Amnesty International 2017; Clements 2014). South Africa offers an important case study here with liberal abortion laws in place since 1996, but still experiencing high levels of unsafe abortion. Religious arguments often underpin access to legal loopholes. Problematic terms such as ‘conscientious objection’ can seek to give an aura of morality to a failure to provide services (Stevens & Mudarikwa 2018). This chapter suggests that the intersectional framework of reproductive justice offers new possibilities for theological engagement. It delineates Afro-American Christian medical doctor Willie Parker’s 2017 call for a new theology of abortion and deepens this by drawing on earlier insights from North American feminist theologian Beverley Wildung Harrison. At the heart of this debate, lie complex questions of procreative power as well as unchallenged theological assumptions about the family, women and sexuality that need deconstructing if an ethic of abortion is to be grounded in women’s lived realities.

■ Understanding abortion

Abortion is a common practice in every country, socio-economic class and religious affiliation (Amnesty International 2018). Annually, one in four pregnancies – about 56 million – are deliberately terminated (Guttmacher Institute 2018; WHO 2018). Many who seek abortion services are young women, often already mothers with children. For example, in the USA, 61% of abortion patients are in their 20s, 59% are already mothers, and nearly two-thirds identify with an organised religion (Jerman, Jones & Inda 2016:n.p.). Currently, 88% of abortions take place in the Global South, where access to or control over other family planning services by women is often limited (Guttmacher Institute 2018). Narratives of abortion exceptionalism often also persist. It is frequently removed from family planning discussions to create a problematic new dichotomy where family planning is embraced

as 'good' and normal while abortion is framed as 'bad' and abnormal, except in exceptional circumstances such as rape, incest or threat to life (Catholics for Choice 2014:9).

Abortion is a safe procedure (safer than childbirth) that becomes hazardous when it is restricted legally or socially (Amnesty International 2017:6). However, currently 'only about 55% of all abortions performed each year are safe' (Girard 2018:n.p.), with an estimated 22 million unsafe abortions taking place each year (Amnesty International 2018). Abortion is the third leading cause of maternal deaths worldwide, and complications from risky procedures lead to an estimated 7 million hospitalisations, 5 million largely preventable disabilities and 47 000 maternal deaths every year (UNHCR 2016). According to the Guttmacher Institute, from 2010 to 2014, about 8.3 million abortions were induced in Africa, the large majority of which are still unsafe.[192] In 2014, this led to 16 000 maternal deaths and 1.6 million cases treated for complications because of unsafe abortions (Guttmacher Institute 2016). Fifty-eight million women of reproductive age here have unmet needs for modern contraception, and four in 10 of the 21 million unwanted pregnancies end here in abortion.

The ongoing role of religiously underpinned social norms and beliefs in shaping restrictive abortion laws, abortion-related stigma and socio-moral disgust for those seeking and providing abortions has been acknowledged in many contexts (Chiweshe, Mavuso & Macleod 2017; Clements 2014; Kumar 2018; Pilane 2018). The social perception that abortion is immoral leads to stigma among health care staff, family and the judiciary (Amnesty International 2017). Those seeking or providing abortion services risk discrimination, harassment and isolation, and report abuse and shaming by other healthcare providers (Amnesty International 2017; Chiweshe et al. 2017). Women in many countries, including

192. According to the 2017 'Maputo' Protocol, 6 million unsafe abortions occur across Africa each year and result in deaths of over 20 000 women and girls, many in poor, rural areas (Sex Rights Africa Network 2017:1).

in South Africa, often voluntarily engage in ‘justificatory labour’ around their abortion decision to escape the social label of being a bad mother (Chiweshe & Macleod 2017; Parker 2017). Abortion stigma internalises a ‘bad woman’ myth similarly to how stigma operates around both HIV and AIDS and sexual assault. As Catholic theologian Tina Beattie (2010:55) points out, religious theologies of retribution and punishment often play a role here, with reproductive suffering framed as divine punishment for Eve’s sin, and maternal mortality (especially for ‘sins’ such as abortion) fatalistically accepted.

Finally, despite progress in legal reform on abortion in many countries, some concerning ‘reversals’ are being seen with legal challenges to access to safe abortion care, such as those under the Trump Administration in places such as Ohio, Georgia and Alabama with what have been termed ‘heartbeat bills’. These current-day concerns are fuelled by explicit rhetoric from the religious right around foetal life as a sacred gift from God (Blinder 2019). They have concerning implications for legal, policy and service delivery aspects of abortion care and for global aid, with rules imposed where grant recipients are not allowed to offer abortion services. These perpetuate injustices against those who do not have the resources to access services privately (Parker 2017). Abortion remains politically contentious, deployed by religious fundamentalist organisations such as the Holy See (Beattie 2010, 2014), who lobby governments and the UN while often delivering selective health and education services globally. The rise of religion in sexual politics in Africa has been noted with LGBTIQ+, and abortion issues often held together and framed as an imposed Northern colonial agenda for damaging God’s intended ‘family’ (Kaorma 2016:287–289).

The rise of a reproductive justice framework

Abortion remains ‘one of the most hotly contested topics globally’ (Amnesty International 2018:1). However, the binary underpinnings of pro-life versus pro-choice positions fail to reflect the complex

social realities of many women most vulnerable to unsafe abortion. An alternative trajectory draws on experiences in Ireland and South Africa to situate abortion within a reproductive justice framework. South African scholar Catriona MacLeod (2018) suggests that:

> Drawing on a social justice perspective, a reproductive justice framework moves beyond the reproductive rights approach health agenda [...] While not eschewing reproductive rights, a reproductive justice framework suggests that the rights agenda is insufficiently located within context and frequently fails to embed analyses within the multiple power relations, in particular racialised and socio-economic realities, that structure women's and men's sexual and reproductive lives. (p. 2)

This approach uses an intersectional analysis to link individual and social processes and pays attention to the interaction of inequities around multiple axes of discrimination (Macleod 2018). Concrete histories of oppressions can be taken seriously, with a focus on action that promotes justice and equity and empowers stigmatised and vulnerable people (Macleod 2018:2). It also relinks questions of fertility, population control and sterilisation abuse as related facets, countering abortion exceptionalism by tying it to other reproductive needs. It pays attention to the underlying stigmatising assumptions and power relations that shaped the 19th-century rise of the control of abortion and fertility often tied to wider elite, colonial patterns of controlling women's bodies. A medicalisation of birth processes also took control away from midwives and placed it with male doctors and male lawyers (Macleod 2018).

The abuse of reproductive labour where some women's bodies are expected to produce 9 or 10 children regardless of the toll on their own bodies or their own wishes highlights the urgent need for a new social understanding of reproductive tasks. Compulsory reproduction, often framed in the symbolic service of the nation-state, must be reconceived as a form of bodily slavery, just as compulsory labour is now seen as enslavement. Decolonising reproduction and reclaiming all women's procreative power to say both 'yes' and 'no' to childbearing remains urgent. An intersectional approach also highlights how racial, colonising discourses of white

superiority shaped this rising control of female reproduction, while often hiding behind an abstract moral 'sanctity of life' rhetoric underpinned by religion. At the same time, new technologies are challenging the bio-socio-historical nexus between marriage, sex and reproduction. While some modern methods of family planning have been actively embraced by many faith communities and re-theologised, other methods such as abortion often remain silenced by faith (Beattie 2014; Nogueira-Godsey[193] 2013). A biological determinism still holds sway that confuses possibilities with responsibilities. In societies with conservative sex-ethics, pregnancy and child-rearing can be seen as the 'punishment' for sex outside the social controls of marriage (Le Roux & Palm 2018a). This religious stigma fuels abortions to avoid the shame of pregnancy outside marriage but also perpetuates its unsafety, by constructing abortion itself as an 'evil' act. The sexual abuse of women and girls, often within households, also remains endemic. Any ethical reflection on abortion that does not start with these existing unjust realities can easily fall into an abstract naïve romanticism that contributes to women's deaths.

Abortion in South Africa

South Africa has some of the most progressive abortion legislation in the world, signed by President Mandela in 1996 as part of a raft of laws designed to embody justice and freedom (All Africa 2018):

> The Choice on Termination of Pregnancy Act (Act No. 92 of 1996) places an obligation on the government to provide reproductive health services to all, including safe conditions under which the right of choice can be exercised without fear or harm. (n.p.)

193. Nogueira-Godsey explores the work of Brazilian Catholic feminist-liberation theologian Ivone Gebara in relation to the South African context. Gebara challenged the androcentric bias of liberation theology and its reiteration of gendered dualities. In 1995, she was officially silenced by the Vatican owing to a public interview she gave, claiming that abortion is not necessarily a sin. She was one of the only liberation theologians to do so. (2013:100). Her Catholic claims resonate with those of Harrison in a Protestant context (the focus of this chapter), showing the 'silencing' by faith hierarchies of alternative abortion theologies.

The Act extends to every woman 'the right to choose whether to have an early, safe and legal termination of pregnancy' (Republic of South Africa 1996:1). 'Abortions are legal on request within the first 12 weeks' and at later stages in consultation with the health service provider (Macleod 2019:n.p.). However, 21 years after the Act, 'serious challenges persist regarding its implementation. In a 2017 report, Amnesty International found that [in practice,] less than 7% of the country's 3880 public health facilities perform termination of pregnancy' (All Africa 2018:n.p.). Many clinics have no access to doctors at all (Amnesty International 2017). It is estimated that nearly half of the over 200 000 'abortions that take place in South Africa every year [remain] "illegal"' (All Africa 2018:n.p.), with many being unsafe and leading to long-term health consequences or death.[194] An obscene gap thus remains between legal vision and social realities. Amnesty has charted ongoing barriers to safe abortion access here, highlighting that loopholes such as so-called conscientious objection tied to religious beliefs lead to a lack of accountability to provide as well as significant stigma and discrimination more widely. Instances where doctors refuse to provide prescriptions to nurses by merely claiming 'no, it's against my religion' in settings with little or no access to other doctors are documented (Amnesty International 2017). Although guidelines do exist for the regulation of so-called conscientious objection (a term recently co-opted by the anti-abortion lobby here), they often remain unimplemented (Amnesty International 2017; Stevens & Mudarikwa 2018). This term shrouds a blanket refusal to provide care with an aura of morality in ways that hide the failure to provide legal, life-saving services. Stevens and Mudarikwa (2018) note that some medical students even object to treating women who need life-saving emergency care after incomplete abortions. Others say that their medical training

194. Accurate government statistics on unsafe abortions are hard to find. However, a figure of 220 000 abortions has been quoted in various news articles, including safe and unsafe procedures. Legal (registered) abortions of 110 000 per year in South Africa have been re-enforced by official data.

focuses in practice on how to avoid providing abortion and not on their legal responsibilities to provide (Stevens & Mudarikwa 2018:2).

Religious-related abortion stigma remains a barrier at many levels to practical access despite increasing awareness that safe abortion is a human right (Amnesty International 2017; HEARD 2016). In Feb 2017, as part of the African Union's 2016 campaign to end unsafe abortion, a declaration was issued on access to legal and safe abortion. However, in the same week, the Catholic Parliamentary Liaison Office in Johannesburg, South Africa held an anti-abortion mass to pray for a change of heart on the part of all who disregard the rights of unborn children, stating, 'since 1997, many thousands of unborn children have been killed, their dignity and humanity counting for nothing'.[195] This also shapes new generations. In a South African church youth discussion on sexuality held in 2017 by the author, one teenage girl said, 'but abortion is murder' and a teenage boy said, 'I would never let my girlfriend kill my baby'. At the 3rd Abortion & Reproductive Justice Conference held at Rhodes University, South Africa in July 2018 and attended by the author, protestors outside employed religious justifications with signs held quoting Bible texts and saying 'abortion is evil' while inside, other religious voices called for new theologies. At a policy level, religious attempts to roll back abortion access have been seen in the proposed bill introduced by the African Christian Democratic Party in 2018. Rising public protests by young South African women have also been seen for safer abortion access, claiming #MyBodyMyChoice (Ebrahim 2018).

These above anecdotes reinforce empirical evidence that religion-related abortion stigma remains here with a 'gospel of shame' and misinformation often entrenched (Pilane 2018; Stevens & Mudarikwa 2018). The so-called pregnancy crisis centres are often unregulated fronts for anti-abortion religious

195. Catholic Parliamentary Liaison Office pers. comm., 20 February 2017.

propaganda by healthcare staff in specific relation to motherhood (Jabulile, Du Toit & Macleod 2017). Pilane (2018) describes an encounter between a woman who wants an abortion and her 'neutral' counsellor at a South-African-university-based pregnancy crisis centre here:

> 'God has put something in here', says (the pregnancy crisis counsellor) as she presses on her chest with the palm of her hands. 'It's called a mommy heart, and it says: "I need to love. I need to care. I need to nourish"'. (p. 1)

In the light of religious–secular standoffs, an alternative theology of abortion is urgently needed, situated contextually within historical church struggles for greater justice and freedom that point to new needs around gender and sexuality (Palm 2016, 2018). This recognises the intersectional nature of justice and supports ongoing struggles for holistic human rights for all, as a theological task. Religious disciplines have an important role to play in unlearning harmful theologies here where most still claim strong Christian affiliation, where churches remain a key form of social belonging and where literal interpretations of the Bible have been historically utilised (and challenged) to justify human domination. Complex entanglements of religion and culture exist around abortion, including perceptions of lineage, motherhood and child-rearing and need theological disruption through a liberating process that starts with the lived experiences of women. Christian medical abortion providers have called for theologians to respond to this need and it is to one of these recent calls that we now turn.

■ A call for a new theology of abortion

Afro-American Christian medical doctor Willie Parker (2017:207) has recently called for a new theology of abortion. In his biography *Life Work* (Parker 2017), he charts his own religious upbringing in Alabama, shaped by Pentecostal fundamentalism where abortion was presented as a black and white key moral issue within a sexual ethics container that made strong moral connections between sex,

marriage and reproduction. During the first half of his career as an obstetrician-gynaecologist, he refused to perform abortions as a form of conscientious objection, an argument still used in abortion practice today in South Africa (Stevens & Mudarikwa 2018). However, his experiences as a doctor led him to reject this 'inherited' theology of abortion and to embrace an alternative positive theology of abortion provision. Decades of providing abortion care for hundreds of poor women of colour and listening to their fears and stories, as well as considering his own journey as a person of faith subject to anger, risk and resistance from within his faith community lead him to call for a new theology of abortion, an ethical framework for abortion care and the reclaiming of alternative religious movements in history to counter conservative anti-abortion narratives[196]. On 16 May 2019, the governor of Alabama passed a Bill which, if not struck down as unconstitutional, will criminalise medical providers such as Parker for providing these services even in cases of rape and incest as a felony punishable with a lifelong prison sentence. In doing so, Governor Kay Ivey pointed publicly to the 'deeply held belief that every life is precious and that every life is a sacred gift from God' (Blinder 2019). This religiously infused issue is not abstract, but is a political reality. Below, I draw on three of his insights as of relevance to South Africa.

Firstly, Parker highlights the dangers of a religious framing of pregnancy as a 'miracle', because of direct intervention by God and therefore in a particular and specific way as 'God-ordained'. This can lead to a problematic divinisation of the womb as 'divine property' by drawing on certain poetic genres in sacred texts as medically factual, such as that found in the Bible where the Psalmist claims, 'you knit me together in my mother's womb' (Ps 139:13).[197] Christianity has a chequered history of utilising

196. On 21st March 2019, after this article had been accepted for publication, Dr Willie Parker was accused of historical sexual harassment by Candice Russell. Her account and his response to it can both be found online.

197. All Bible quotations in this chapter are taken from the New International Version of the Bible.

metaphorical analogies in its sacred texts literally to demonise new knowledge, seen for example with both Galileo and Darwin. However, over time, alternative theologies found creative ways to synthesise these conflicting claims. A similar 'literalist' danger can be seen in relation to the ancient biblical 'commands' to be fruitful and multiply (Gn 3) or the direct connection of God's blessing of all life with the procreation of one 'chosen' tribe. Parker points to an urgent need for the desacralisation of procreation. He emphasises the concurrent romantic sacralisation of ideal motherhood by both the political right and the left in his North American context (Parker 2017:178), often underpinned by religion. Parker makes a shift from seeing all 'life' as sacred to seeing procreative choice around new life as 'sacred' and as a God-given part of our responsible freedom as humans. He is then able to see his provision of abortion services to women who are exercising genuine procreative choice as employed in a God-ordained and even 'sacred' task. Tendencies existing in South Africa to sacralise the womb, the foetus and motherhood are documented by Jabulile et al. (2017) in their analysis of health professionals who give pre-abortion counselling in pregnancy crisis centres. Here, where many people still hold to Christian faith, the religious desacralisation of the womb, pregnancy and motherhood remains an urgent task.

Secondly, Parker's work exposed him to an increasing awareness of the damaging effects of abortion-related stigma and its entrenched culture of shame, fuelled by certain hegemonic theologies of abortion. Some abortions were seen as morally 'allowed' (e.g. rape or incest) while others were not. As a result, a guilty/innocent binary developed, where women had to provide *justificatory labour* publicly to persuade the medical system to see them as deserving of an abortion. This narration often distorted the truth of many women's wider aspirations for procreative choices, by positioning this as unacceptable and 'selfish', shaped indirectly by the assumption that all women should want to be mothers all the time. This justificatory labour has been documented in recent empirical research in South Africa

(Chiweshe, Mavuso & Macleod 2017). It potentially highlights deep-rooted social conditioning around being a good mother, framing all decisions in relation to this expected social identity. Abortion stigma has been highlighted as a significant issue in the South African context (Chiweshe & Macleod 2017; Pilane 2018). Liberal laws have not made as much progress in shifting the culture of shame as was expected. Medical practitioners providing abortion care report stigma and shame on a consistent basis, within their churches, hospitals and families (Stevens & Mudarikwa 2018). If access to safe abortion is to accelerate, the underlying religious roots of this socially generated shame will need to be surfaced and critically engaged.

Thirdly, Parker points to his increasing awareness of the strategic rise of an US-based anti-abortion movement in the 1980s in reaction to the liberalisation of abortion laws. He charts the theological emergence of what he terms new medical falsehoods such as the 'life begins at conception' narrative, shaped by a Reaganite politics with a conservative nationalised focus on perpetuating white identity also giving a raced dimension to the struggle to control procreative decisions (Parker 2017:116). While the 1990s saw a rise in religiously fuelled violent demonstrations at abortion clinics to create a politics of fear for providers, by the 21st century, this approach had lost moral sympathy and rethought its terms of engagement. He shows that the Bush era co-opted the language of human rights and justice as well as the claims of black genocide to serve an anti-abortion agenda (Parker 2017:116). This adopted legal strategies by constructing new myths of 'foetal personhood' (Parker 2017:154–158). These have also been effective in South Africa in obstructing access to abortion care in practice, especially for the poor and may reverse gains secured by earlier generations (Parker 2017:102), by creating new logistical roadblocks.

Parker highlights the role of Christianity in many anti-abortion efforts, providing an abstract moral high ground which is rarely

held to account for its death-dealing implications. Religious beliefs often underpin individual and social failures to provide or refer women to abortion services, construct stigma and shame containers, push for legal and policy reversals and other roadblocks. In reaction, those who support access to abortion can avoid any discussion of morality or ethics, relying solely on a seemingly neutral public health, medical or legal discourse. While this is understandable, Parker suggests that it can be a mistake. His call seeks to talk back to religion by re-employing its central ethical categories of justice and life if attitudes are to shift. People within legal, medical and health professions as well as those deciding about and seeking abortions often remain shaped by these beliefs and may need to find ways to re-narrate them. Religion plays an ongoing role in many health and development initiatives especially in resource-limited settings. Engaging critically with the theo-ethical dimensions of abortion, though undoubtedly complex, may remain an important task.

Parker (2017:117) points to two promising avenues to inform this 're-conceiving' of theologies of abortion. The first involves reclaiming alternative religious movements in history that took leading roles in supporting a wide range of family planning shifts in the light of the lived experiences of their congregations. For example, he points to an early clergy alliance with Planned Parenthood and the rise of FBOs such as Catholics for Choice (2014:207–210). This troubles the idea that there is only one religious narrative possible on abortion. The second includes the connection of the issue to a historical intersectional justice paradigm. In response to the use of a 'black genocide' argument by anti-abortion activists in his context, Parker's work instead showed how access to safe abortion was classed and raced in unjust ways. With his commitment to civil rights, honed in the faith struggles of 1960's Alabama, he made links between abortion, slavery and the elite control of some bodies (Parker 2017:33, 81, 107). This transformed his perspective and may have resonance for a justice-based theology of abortion in

South Africa, uniquely shaped by the control of raced, gendered and classed bodies, where the intersectional paradigm of reproductive justice is also being seen (Macleod 2018).

Parker foregrounds 'choice' as a central ethical category also connected to the wider search for reproductive freedom. He refuses to polarise reproductive justice and reproductive rights but holds them together in the material living conditions of the marginalised to embrace a rights-based justice that also pays attention to power relationships. This may be important in South Africa, where a rights-based discourse has been important for abortion politics but can, on its own, fail to resonate in communities where questions of social justice are paramount (Macleod 2019). Parker calls for new theological possibilities to reshape the underlying religious assumptions that unpin much abortion stigma. Beverly Wildung Harrison is one of the few Protestant social ethicists to offer a comprehensive theo-ethical reflection on abortion that uses a liberational feminist lens as its starting point. It is to some of her insights that we now turn.

Reconceiving abortion theology through a liberational lens

Harrison writes in the wake of the legal liberalisation of abortion laws in 1970's North America and the rise of an anti-abortion movement that co-opted select religious narratives to claim moral authority. This has resonance with today's South African context, where a significant gap still exists between legal liberalisation and many religiously informed social norms on abortion. She saw that ethical explorations of abortion were done through either a secular pro-choice lens or a religious pro-life lens and identified a gap to go beyond this binary approach to explore Christian ethics from a feminist moral perspective (Harrison 1983:6). Like Parker today, she saw anti-abortion activists mobilising multiple avenues of resistance. Her approach has been recently explored by Peters as remaining 'remarkably

persuasive today' (Peters 2014:122). Peters notes that it was one of the first feminist books on abortion to take a moral rather than a legal approach to supporting women's rights to decide whether to terminate a pregnancy (Peters 2014:122). It offers possibilities for Christians in South Africa to think differently about abortion.

Harrison's (1983, 1985) liberational methodology, laid out in her 1983 book entitled *Our Right to Choose: Towards a New Ethic of Abortion*, situates abortion within a socio-political context from the start, refusing to tackle it as an abstract moral issue or as a 'silo' act unrelated to the wider circumstances of women's lives which shape many unwanted pregnancies. She adopts a 'hermeneutic of suspicion' that pays close attention to the surrounding gendered power relations in abortion controversies where though women get pregnant, it is often men who primarily interpret and make laws (Harrison 1983:9). This is particularly true in religious communities where male leaders predominate and where inherited misogyny can be unwittingly passed on. Her starting point for theologising is the fact of women's structural social oppression and the core moral claim of feminism that women are rational moral agents who are not to be consigned to the periphery (Peters 2014). Abstract religio-moral claims such as 'abortion is evil' often hide concrete agendas of power and control. She shows how the rise of a 'holy crusade' approach to abortion is relatively recent and part of a religious backlash to the wider feminist movement (Harrison 1983, 1985). She connects sexuality and social policy in ways that resist liberal privatisation of the social desire to control women's bodies. This situates theologies of abortion within the wider 'battle for female personhood, which is still being waged' (Harrison 1983:127). Finally, she makes a prophetic call for immersion in real concrete human suffering as a pre-condition of all theo-ethical reflection, employing a dialectical, reciprocal mode of reasoning that starts with these concrete human dilemmas. Harrison's connection of abortion to other social justice issues prefigures recent work by both MacLeod and Parker on abortion seen through an intersectional reproductive justice lens.

Harrison identifies key wider ethical questions around abortion, which include; where does freedom stop? Does it extend to reproduction? Is there a moral right to procreative choice and, if so, what are its social implications? (Harrison 1983:9). She (Harrison 1983:9) grounds abortion issues in a larger ontological question for women of 'what am I to do about the procreative power that is mine by virtue of being born female?' She notes that abortion is rarely framed like this within Christian ethics and is usually seen instead as a negative and corrective act. Her positive framing starts from the premise that women hold power and are not just passive vessels for male generativity. Abortion then becomes entangled in wider power struggles because behind it lie bigger questions regarding who holds the power to reproduce the species, and this involves control of an important human resource (Harrison 1983:2). Many women in the world still struggle to become the subjects of their own lives, but they increasingly have aspirations towards greater procreative freedom from the 'capriciousness associated with their biological capacity to bear children' (Harrison 1983:2). A theological dilemma (Harrison 1983) then exists regarding:

> [*H*]ow to break the unquestioned equation between divine blessing and procreative power whilst simultaneous increasing our sense of urgency about creating widespread conditions that foster genuine human dignity [...] a challenge and a complicated task morally and theologically [...] we are obligated to make our ethical and religious traditions responsive to the new requirement of the human species and personal well-being. (p. 89)

Her work charts the gradual theological embrace of new reproductive freedoms around family planning and contraception seen in the work of important twentieth-century Protestant theologians such as Karl Barth (in Harrison 1983). Like Parker, she reclaims alternative historical narratives, pointing out that the 'holy crusade' quality of anti-abortion rhetoric around 'abortion is evil' is relatively new but pretends a longer history. Historical condemnations of abortion by religious figures such as Augustine, Aquinas, Luther and Calvin included all forms of contraception, a

fact ignored by many who use their arguments today. Religious arguments on abortion often appeal to underpinning natural law assumptions around the family, the role of women in society, sex, marriage and reproduction. These overlapping assumptions must be engaged and deconstructed if Christian moral teaching on abortion is to be transformed.

For Harrison, the first step in a liberational approach is breaking the silence and taboos around what is going on in practice and only then turning to theological reflection as a second stage. She delineates a four-fold typology of religious approaches to abortion – Fundamentalism, Biblical conservatism, Neo-orthodoxy and Liberalism – but despite their differences she suggests what they all have in common is a failure to take power relations seriously. They all perpetuate a set of underlying shared assumptions about the family.

Harrison shows that religious fundamentalist discourse presents abortion as the ‘lynchpin in a panoply of evils’ (Harrison 1983:60) that threatens the God-ordained, patriarchal family unit, seen as a key strand in God’s plan for salvation. This is often tied to the divinisation of male control, the employment of rigid dualisms and anti-body purity narratives. Women must submit to their nature, while men must rise above it. This theological imagination conjures up images of ‘women’s cosmic rebellion against divinely prescribed theological and moral social orders’ (Harrison 1983:62). Abortion is then seen as an ‘unacceptable act of self-assertion, a renunciation of what women are created for, a blood-related taboo and dangerous power that threatens the sacred system’ (Harrison 1983:60). Theological dualisms and selected biblical texts can link childbearing to salvation for women requiring an ‘ardent obeisance to childbearing, homemaking and husband as the head of the family’ (Harrison 1983:63).

However, she claims that this religious misogyny also lingers in latent ways in the other three theological approaches. While a historical-critical approach is increasingly taken by many scholars

to parts of the Bible, natural law assumptions often remain around procreation and childbearing, leaving ahistorical pronatalist assumptions unchallenged (Harrison 1983:65). In the Victorian era in the West, the family became increasingly romanticised, as the main place where God's love is experienced, sacralising the nuclear family and tied to ancient ideas of primal blessing through progeny. Biological fertility became an unchallenged image for God's direct action in human life and has remained sacralised long after most other human activity has been desacralised. This was exported through colonial ideology and served to reinforce existing cultural expectations around procreation in Africa as feminist theologians here have noted (Oduyuye 1999). Shifts from celibacy to marriage and to imperial models of conquest through rape and forced procreation can be shrouded by expectations of reproductive fruitfulness as the ultimate sign of God's blessing, a disturbing reality satirised in Margaret Atwood's 1985 book *The Handmaid's Tale* and currently undergoing a resurgence in popularity. The family was seen theologically as a divine 'order of creation' (Harrison 1983:73).[198] Finally, Harrison notes that while a liberal approach connects divine and human freedom, it often fails to break with 19th-century romantic views of the family and can ignore the gendered power relations within marriage and sexuality. Harrison insists that this 'passion for the sacredness of human life in its earliest biological stages untouched by realistic compassion for living women continues to pass as Christian piety' (Harrison 1983:83). She argues that it remains problematic across all four theological approaches and requires liberationist critique.

For Harrison, the heart of the issue is the need to reclaim women's procreative power and resist abstract moral narratives regarding the 'sanctity of life' by surfacing underlying assumptions

198. While shifts in the 20th century enabled limited acceptance of what ended up called 'family planning', Grewal and Kaplan (2002) note that a sharp line was then drawn between this 'respectable' behaviour and abortion, leading to the erasure of a moral debate on abortion within this wider context.

about the meaning of human sexuality, the procreative process and gendered relationships (Harrison 1983:57). She shows that God's role in creation and the idea of life as sacred, if seen as abstract Christian concepts, can hide tacit understandings on proper social relations around women, families, procreation and sexuality that need de-construction. She suggests that a liberational ethic of abortion can reconstruct these by drawing on two faith assets. The first involves an increasing recognition of the relational, social nature of human existence and a dynamic socio-historical approach that employs a relational matrix of the world. The second includes an increased commitment by faith communities to struggle against real concrete material suffering and a recognition of human freedom as God-ordained. These can enable theological engagement in various human rights struggles.

Deconstructing procreation, wombs and motherhood

Harrison, similarly to Parker today, points to the urgent need to de-divinise the female womb. She notes that while life is used as a core metaphor in many sacred texts and often described as a gift from God, an interpretive shift is made from wide images of the life of all creation to the narrow deployment of procreation as a central image (despite its Hebrew use as a metaphor). An unqualified sacralisation of procreation was in fact not true of the early church, which for centuries saw celibacy as the highest good. Harrison shows that a resurgence of procreative blessing leads to an 'unqualified theological sacralisation of procreation' (Harrison 1985:117) often tied to patriarchy as a form of social control. Instead she suggests connecting the right to choose to the divine concept of human free will. Her study shows that biblical themes were selectively co-opted to underpin this renewed sacralisation of procreation. The creational blessing to be fruitful and increase in number, and commands to fill the earth (Gn 1:28) were literalised as destiny. Woman's creation was interpreted as 'helper', primarily for the benefit of men, marriage

and procreation. Stories of the 'fall' and its gendered curses were tied using sacred texts both to pain in childbirth and to patriarchal rule (Gn 3:16). Marriage and children replace celibacy as the new norm backed up by ambiguous New Testament verses such as 1 Timothy 2:15 that suggest women will be 'saved through childbearing' (Waters 2004). When wombs are divine property, and subjects of direct divine action, the stage is set for patriarchal control.

Harrison is an early proponent of this need to desacralise motherhood, a theme explored by other feminist scholars over decades (Davin 1978; Llewellyn 2016; Cheruvallil-Contractor & Rye 2016). When divine blessing is tied to biology and religion is used to idealise procreation and the womb, this encourages people to have children, which is relevant when the survival of the species or tribe was seen to be at stake, often the case in ancient times. However, in a context of overpopulation and hugely decreased infant mortality, Harrison insists that our moral decision-making must recalibrate 'because the survival of species is no longer at issue we desperately need to de-sacralise our biological power to reproduce the species' (Harrison 1983:88). This involves rethinking ways in which all women are expected to embrace or desire motherhood rather than seeing this as one choice among others. Female figures have been assessed in relation to ideal motherhood, with solo figures such as the Virgin Mary trumping the diverse female figures hidden in sacred texts. An empirical study by Huang et al. (2016) points to idealising motherhood as a concerning form of 'benevolent sexism' which, alongside 'hostile sexism', shapes anti-abortion attitudes today. Harrison (1983) notes, however, that:

> [*T*]o desacralize procreation does not imply devaluing it or denying the great beauty of childbearing and its intrinsic or social value [...] rather to end the exclusivity and intensity of our reverence for unshaped, undirected processes whilst deepening our celebration of other valuable community-shaping activity. (p. 89)

A corollary of the narrow sacralisation of procreation as specific God-given vocation is that in many strands of religious tradition,

non-procreative sex is still tainted with suspicion with historical religious prohibitions on masturbation, oral sex and the endorsement of child marriage (Le Roux & Palm 2018b). Except for procreation, sex was even seen as murder in some instances, with spiritual excommunication for sterilisation or abortion, seen to separate the two. These attitudes to sexuality can scapegoat women into two 'static' types, namely, saints and sinners – those who have abortions and those who have babies rather than seeing them as often the same women at different points in time (Catholics for Choice 2014:10).

Towards a reconceived theology of abortion in South Africa

Drawing on the religious insights of Parker and Harrison and taking into consideration the framing of abortion through a reproductive justice lens in present-day South Africa, I suggest that feminist-liberational theologians here can help people of faith unlearn three dangerous, often religiously legitimated myths.

The first involves the sacralisation or sanctification of motherhood. Women's capacity to contribute to life in many diverse ways should be celebrated and not reduced to expectations regarding her childbearing capacity. While parenthood can, of course, be celebrated, it needs reclaiming from a patriarchal history that often narrows and idealises women's contribution to this role. Body theologian James Nelson (1992:162) points to the urgent need to distinguish between 'respecting the desire of many women for motherhood on the one hand and promoting an ideology of motherhood as the ultimate goal of all normal women on the other'. Huang et al. (2016:80) note that even today women who decide to (even temporarily) reject this 'sacred role' by choosing to terminate a pregnancy are often met with criticism, highlighting that, 'the abortion debate is, for the general public, partially about the

appropriate roles of women [in society]'. African feminist theologian Mercy Oduyuyo (1999:115) insists that issues of childlessness and fruitfulness are urgent, noting that 'in Africa one is not really a full and faithful person until one has a child' and that Christianity's biblical commands to be fruitful and multiply have reinforced this tendency to judge women.

If this de-sacralising is taken seriously, then possibilities of celebrating abortion as a sacred and life-giving act for women who do not desire motherhood and instead choose other things may emerge. Abortion can, in some instances, be a manifestation of hope for those to whom its availability comes as a relief, offering a sense of new life for their own lives as women. Harrison points out that this hopeful aspiration for procreative choice by women still sweeps the globe today. Those who provide abortion care as people of faith, such as Dr Parker, can take pride in the contribution they make to the lives of many women. The exercise of fertility becomes a possibility (not an enforced responsibility) for women. Religion has shifted its sexual mores over history. It must do so again if the normative hegemony of compulsory motherhood is to be toppled. Women should not have to perform reproduction to be worthy of either full humanity or social citizenship in our world. This remains a critical task of troubling in African contexts. African theologian Mercy Oduyoye (1999:116), herself a childless Ghanaian woman, insists, 'I am not less the image of God because I have not biologically increased and multiplied'. She calls for a theology of procreation 'that embraces many forms of fruitfulness, both biological and beyond' (Oduyoye 1999:119). She resists the sociocultural pressures on African women especially, often exacerbated by religion, to be a 'vehicle for the reincarnation of her ancestors' (Oduyoye 1999:110) in ways that link procreation to immortality. Instead, she claims theologically that the 'fullness of life' can be experienced in many ways.

The second is *the divinisation or sanctification of the womb*. Selected Bible verses that connect childbirth to salvation for women, the pains and risks of childbirth to Eve's disobedience and take the

creational blessing to literally to be fruitful, to have many children and prosper as an unchanging divine command need urgent deconstruction by feminist biblical scholars in Africa. Without this critique, procreation becomes women's biological destiny with death-dealing stigmas maintained around abortion, miscarriage and infertility as a result. Pregnancy framed as a 'miracle' is still treated as a sign of direct divine intervention in natural processes, which places an onus on humans not to tamper with it. For the ethics of abortion to be re-conceived, human interpretative choices with regard to seeing the womb as a sphere for God's direct divine action need reinterpreting. Literal adherence to a divine command to multiply (Gn 1: 28) is literally killing women who dissent from this. A promising contribution in this volume by the South African biblical scholar Peter Nagel[199] (2019:146) points to the 'divine overburdening of the womb' through sacralisation, and the need to liberate the womb from the damaging implications of these theologies of divine conception for the real women concerned if our conversations around reproductive health are to be moved forward.

The third includes *a distorted theology of sexuality as inherently sinful*. A prevalent suspicion remains in much religious discourse that the body, sex and sexuality are dirty, impure and shameful. Body theologians demonstrate how this dualistic understanding of women's bodies, in particular, can underpin ideas that sex is bad, shameful and taboo. Its nexus with divinely sanctified tasks such as marriage and motherhood become the only way to redeem it. Re-theologising sexual pleasure as a God-given gift for all genders is urgently needed (Nelson 1992). A long tradition of sex-negativity which is built into parts of the Christian tradition often underpins discussions on abortion and needs debunking. Sexuality needs to be reimagined in ways that neither shore up a

199. Nagel (2019:154) shows that many current interpretations of biblical stories fuel divine rights over women's wombs that needs disruption where women's 'being' is reduced to their 'wombing' by explicit theological and dogmatic rhetorical extravagance and that 'this ironically hampers life from flourishing, for wombs to be, and to be silent'.

husband's 'right to sex' or the idea that women should know their place in a gendered hierarchy. Unless this happens, reproductive freedom will continue to be seen as threatening a so-called God-ordained marriage, reproduction and sex nexus. South African scholars Le Roux & Palm (2018b) have suggested that a theological rejection of abortion is often a symptom of unquestioned wider social constructs around sex tied to religion. They call for a more fundamental discussion about how religious constructs of sexuality, purity and virginity are formed and perpetuated, and of religious fears of pre-marital sex and pregnancy in relation to religious constructs (Le Roux & Palm 2018b, oral presentation):

> The shame and stigma that religious leaders and communities attach to pre-marital sex and pregnancy outside of marriage, in many cases means that any form of response or engagement with it (such as discussing/providing contraception, or abortion) will be rejected as tainted with the same stigma. (n.p.)

They point to an urgent need for theological discussions about sex and sexuality which do not hide these 'taboo' topics under titles such as 'reproductive health', 'healthy womanhood', 'reproductive rights' or limit contraceptive discussions to specific arenas such as 'family planning' or 'birth spacing' but that explore these issues more openly in relation to people's wider desires to have sex. This goes beyond merely positioning women as mothers and caregivers if a healthy religious engagement around sexuality is to be 'birthed'.

In the light of these three tasks, I suggest that unless women are seen as fully made in the image of God in their own right, not primarily as commodities for marriage, holy baby carriers redeemed through childbearing (1 Tim 2) or mere vehicles for male lineage, theologies around abortion will fail to deconstruct the underlying patriarchal assumptions on which many of their claims still rest.[200] This requires a radical theological reimagining

200. According to Ancient Roman Law, a woman terminating a pregnancy without her husband's consent was exiled. Modern versions of this persist in the form of so-called men's rights activism in recent decades where court cases such as Tremblay (1989) and Honein (2001) have unsuccessfully sought to control a partner's abortion decision.

that goes to the heart of the power-laden images used for the divine in Christian tradition (Palm 2016) and our contemporary contours of sin-talk (Palm 2019). A Trinitarian model reimagined for female reproductive freedom might employ the three facets of an egalitarian *dignity* (all created in the image of God as female as well as male) to resist (not reiterate) social hierarchies of domination, *freedom* as modelled in an incarnational Christology that sides with those bodies currently socially stigmatised, judged and isolated to set them free rather than to punish them, and *justice,* in the work of an empowering spirit that refuses the patriarchal co-optation of holiness to support distorted notions of gendered purity and instead embodies truthful life-giving wisdom. Only in this way can churches model transformational forms of social community that can disrupt rather than re-inscribe reproductive injustices. This will require our theologies to go beyond a narrow reification of a Parent God of compulsory procreation to the mutual embrace of a spirit that nurtures many life-giving possibilities, not only the biological.

■ Conclusion

Harrison and Parker offer resources for 're-conceiving' abortion theology through using liberating feminist hermeneutics building on a reproductive justice paradigm. They refuse to exceptionalise abortion or treat it as a 'silo' issue that is unrelated to the wider continuum of women's hopes of avoiding unwanted pregnancy and other issues of social justice. They situate this moral discussion within the complex contextual dilemmas of the lives of the millions of ordinary women often still forced into finding unsafe ways to terminate their pregnancies.

An intersectional justice lens holds potential for ordinary Christians to reconceive their ethical relationship to abortion, not despite their faith but in deep solidarity with its core liberating principles of justice, freedom and dignity as applied to the arena of reproduction. Harrison argues that this transformation requires a deeper interrogation of the many underlying patriarchal

assumptions and binaries that remain latent in numerous theological models as patterns of benevolent and hostile sexism. These currently lead to unhelpful standoffs between secular and religious claims and liberal and conservative positions on abortion. South African Theologians committed to liberating contextual engagement have urgent tasks to do in public spaces, including academies, churches, FBOs and societies to help break the silence that mitigates against the development of alternative abortion theologies. In the light of the preventable suffering of many vulnerable women, this theological silence becomes complicit and re-inscribes stigma and shame. A reproductive justice framework allied to themes of choice, freedom, rights and autonomy resonates for both Parker and Harrison and goes beyond an individualised, privatised approach to morality that leaves social power structures untouched. A multi-pronged struggle for freedom, dignity and justice, one with which many South Africans are deeply familiar, can nurture theological agency and well-being for women, grounded in concrete struggles over actual bodies. It can help to bring abortion in from the cold, crucified place of shame and unrespectability outside the gates where much religion still insists it belongs. When access to procreative freedom can be publicly recognised by people of faith as a part of a wider theology of life that rejects all narratives of hierarchical domination, including over the bodies of women and girls, then access to medical technologies can be shaped by women's hopes for more procreative self-determination, beyond the moral panics that access to safe provision of abortion signals the end of the 'God-intended' family.

This task involves theologically queering the abortion debate as it currently stands to de- and re-construct underlying religiously legitimated myths and assumptions about patriarchal families, all women as mothers and the narrow divinisation of procreation and the womb. Disrupting religion's dualities, ambivalences and taboos in relation to the body, sex and sexuality has been a hallmark of feminist theology for decades and abortion brings in additional taboos around death. A liberating, incarnational

theology of abortion must stand in solidarity with the thousands of women each year whose damaged bodies bear the scars of our collective failure to speak the truth about what is going on and why. Unsafe abortion is a current practice shaped by deep moral stigmas in which religion frequently remains complicit. Developing alternative moral framings remains an ongoing task for those committed to the feminist reform of religious traditions. It requires a reconstruction of the divine blessing of all women in their own right as agents, a celebratory theology of sexuality and sexual pleasure and a reclaiming of our Eve-figures from distorted, scapegoated theologies of retribution and the grace-less sanctification of compulsory reproduction.

Finally, an intersectional, interdisciplinary lens must also ask deeper questions about the human person. What does it mean for women to have procreative power and to seek to engage with it responsibly? Is there a moral and social imperative for all to procreate? Should biology still be seen as destiny and who decides this? Can our long walk to freedom in South Africa proudly claim to include a substantive realisation of reproductive freedom as former President Mandela believed? Can we reconceive the compulsory colonisation of bodies for reproductive labour to create a new container where women and girls are invited into a wider sense of life's possibilities for themselves, focussed on plural options regarding what they could do rather than one narrow view of what they should do?

Parker, Macleod and Harrison offer some promising contours that contemporary theologians committed to liberational practice on abortion in South Africa may want to develop further. This will require a radical re-envisioning of some basic, much cherished systematic categories of faith such as the reified images of a Virgin Mother and a Father God. Catholic theologian Beattie (2014:2) calls urgently for the church to create safer spaces to talk about the realities of abortion to do justice to its images of the church as maternal by asking 'how about a maternal church in which the shepherds smell of bruised, hurting and dirty women

dying in childbirth?' I suggest, however, that feminist theologians must go far deeper than this to reconceive religion's underlying problematic sacralisation of the maternal and the womb itself. Harrison's theological reminder, relevant to present-day South Africa and beyond, is that women are called to be co-creative historical participants in reproduction and fruitfulness in many diverse forms and not just in the biological arena of life. She (Harrison 1983) insists that:

> [*W*]hether we say yes or no to pregnancy, both may be creative historical actions. The former does not lie outside the cubicle of history in nature nor is the former non-natural. Both count. (p. 103)

Chapter 14

Whose reproductive health matters? A Christian ethical reflection on reproductive technology and exclusion

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Introduction[201]

While some feminist scholars, such as Hilary Rose and Jalna Hammer, view the enlarging control of technology through medical practice as a further way of intrusion on the lives and choices of women, early feminists like Simone de Beauvoir, writing even before the first successful live birth following IVF, welcomed the opportunities brought on by reproductive technologies to free women from the power of reproductive biology. De Beauvoir assumed that with scientific progress, reproduction would be achieved one day by the utilisation of artificial wombs, thereby liberating women from the 'tyranny' of biological reproduction, a prospect that Celia Deane-Drummond (2006:192) now indicates appears to be 'very unlikely to be realised'.

Biotechnological and biomedical advances have made even more choices available when it comes to reproductive health. In this chapter, I am interested especially in the question of whose reproductive health matters, and will look at issues such as the availability and affordability of reproductive technology, as well as the factors that contribute to being included or excluded from technological developments in this regard from a Christian ethical perspective. This will be done by looking at present realities, as well as making tentative comments of what could possibly be expected in the future, based on this reality.

Presently available reproductive technology includes artificial insemination or IVF using one's own gametes; artificial insemination utilising donor sperm; IVF making use of donor ova or sperm; surrogacy; and pre-implantation genetic diagnosis, where a decision is made as to which embryos to implant and which to discard or make available for research. Usually, screening

201. Paper presented at the Reproductive Health Consultation hosted by the Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University, South Africa (30–31 May 2018), with the theme 'Reconceiving Reproductive Health'.

is done for genetic disorders, but embryos can also be screened for sex or any other characteristics for which the genetic makeup is known.

While genetically engineering of human embryos is possible, and has been done, it is not commercially available at present and will not form the focus of this chapter. The donation of sperm and ova for investigation purposes, whether to create embryos for research or otherwise, are also not the focus of this chapter. The emphasis will be on donating ova for reproductive purposes as an example of the excluded becoming part of the system.

The most obvious interpretation of exclusion is the reality that many women are excluded by virtue of not being able to access reproductive technology, such as IVF or donor sperm or ova. In the first part of this contribution, I will look at inequalities of access and affordability, which results in the present context where some people are excluded, but also what this could mean in the future. On the other hand, perhaps a more pressing theological–ethical issue is not simply that there are people, especially women, who are excluded, problematic as this is. In this chapter, I will then also discuss the reality that the women who are excluded often become part of the system, not as beneficiaries, but through being exploited by the processes of reproductive technology. Again, this is true at present, and could also become even more prevalent in the future.

■ Inequality of access to reproductive technology at present

Access to reproductive technology is influenced by a variety of factors. It is financial, as reproductive technology is usually very expensive, but also geographic, influenced by cultural taboos against discussing infertility or reproductive matters, dealing with infertility in traditional ways, and other factors. One of the biggest obstacles in South Africa is the lack of access to financial resources and unequal access to health care. While the access to

health care forms part of a much bigger conversation, the focus in this chapter is on reproductive technology, and the gap between the rich and the poor in South Africa is not discussed at length.[202]

That there remain harsh inequalities in South Africa at present is an undisputed reality. Together with Brazil, South Africa is the country where the biggest gap exists between the rich and the poor in the entire world. The richest 10% of the population received 47.3% of the income in 1993, whereas the poorest 40% of the people had only a 9.1% share. Simultaneously, 71% of the rural population lived on 14% of the land (Barnett & Whiteside 2006:144, 165). The media reports regularly that this gap is still on the rise,[203] and Francis Wilson (2011:2) also indicates the

202. According to Kotzé (2013:115), '[a]t this point it is perhaps important to point out that past and present inequalities are not simply a South African issue, but one that reaches global scales'. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to construct an accurate study of global inequalities, because of the lack of household survey data regarding income that are needed to estimate global inequality (Milanovic 2011:494). However, Milanovic uses social tables from 13th-, 18th- and 19th-century countries to approximate global inequality in the early 19th century. He then presents the evolution of global inequality from the early 19th century to the beginning of the 21st century and uses ZBFL (or Bourguignon-Morrisson) to estimate the years in between. In conclusion, he then applies the concept of the inequality extraction ratio to construct an intra-country framework to the global scale (Milanovic 2011:495).

This leads him to the deduction that what is most remarkable about today's much higher level of estimated global inequalities (which might have just peaked) is that the composition of inequality has changed. Where it used to be driven by class differences within countries, it transformed to being driven by locational income differences, that is to say, by the variations in mean country incomes. While global mean income has also risen, the increase in global inequality was sufficiently strong to make the global inequality extraction ratio decline, even though only very moderately. In addition, it was generally stable in the last 100 years, leading Milanovic to conclude that during the last century, global inequality has increased at about the same rate as the maximum feasible inequality. The implication of this changing composition of global inequality towards 'locationally driven inequality', and a broadly stable inequality extraction ratio is that citizens of rich countries are the main 'inequality extractors' today, rather than individual national elites as used to be the case (Milanovic 2011:504).

203. According to Kotzé (2013:116): 'Already in 2002, Sampie Terreblanche concurred with this observation by referring to the report of Statistics South Africa in 2000. This report declared no less than 41.4% of all South African households to live in poverty, meaning that they lived on an income of between R601 and R1000. He went on to quote various statistics, proving that unemployment has increased in democratic South Africa (2002:383, 407, 412).

income incongruities in South Africa, noting that the vast majority of income is earned by the top 10% of the population, earning more than the income paid to the other 90% combined. When this reality is combined with South Africa's huge levels of unemployment, it is clear that the first democratic government which assumed office in 1994 'has been able to do little to shift the levels of poverty, of unemployment and of inequality which it inherited from the apartheid regime in 1994' (Wilson 2011:2–3).

Access to health care, including reproductive technology, is obviously severely affected by this. As Eberl, Kinney and Williams (2011) note, a libertarian viewpoint postulates:

> [*T*]hat health care services are understood to be essentially conventional economic services that should be distributed, as are other commodities, in the economic marketplace, without excessive government regulation or subsidy. (p. 552)

However, Section 21(1)(a) of the South African Constitution indicates the right of access to health care within available resources. According to the Constitution, access to health care should then be provided to all South Africans.

Access to reproductive technology should also be included, as Robert Klitzman (2016:2) indicates that approximately 10% of the global population are infertile[204] and require medical intervention to conceive. Osato Giwa-Osagie (2002:22), however, notes that in sub-Saharan Africa, it is estimated that between 10% and 25% of adult couples are subfertile. The WHO has also recognised infertility as a disability, noting that access to health care for the

(footnote 203 continues...)

Francis Wilson (2011:1–2) stated that, to put it briefly, we know that although average income places South Africa at the level of an upper-middle-income country in the World Bank tables, poverty is so extensive and prevalent that approximately between 40% and 50% of the population is living in poverty. This contradiction is made possible by the degree of inequality, which is one of the highest in the world when measured in terms of the Gini coefficient. This high degree of inequality even seems to be worsening'.

204. The WHO (n.d.b:n.p.) defines infertility as 'a disease of the reproductive system defined by the failure to achieve a clinical pregnancy after 12 months or more of regular unprotected sexual intercourse'.

treatment of infertility should be seen as falling under the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability (WHO). The definition[205] of health propagated by the WHO is also one that includes reproductive health, along with 'physical, mental and social well-being'[206] and not merely disease being absent.

As Giwa-Osagie (2002:25) notes, infertility results in 'major martial, family and social disruption in Africa'. While these disruptions are not the focus of this chapter, it is clear that infertility should be considered along with other health care concerns and that reproductive technological treatment forms part of the ethical discussion on reproductive health.

However, not only is there a large discrepancy between the need and availability of reproductive technology in sub-Saharan Africa, but access is also 'not ideal and mostly inequitable' (Giwa-Osagie 2002:26). This is also the reality in South Africa. Statistics South Africa (2017:3) report that in 2017, more than 70% of the population indicated that they are dependent on public health care services. Only two government hospitals, Groote Schuur Hospital in Cape Town and Steve Biko Academic Hospital in Pretoria, offer fertility treatment. Through public/private partnerships, Tygerberg Hospital in Bellville and Universitas Hospital in Bloemfontein also offer infertility services. This means only four public hospitals in the country offer reproductive technology treatments. South Africans dependent on public health care would, therefore, either need to live in or

205. According to the WHO (n.d.b:n.p.), '[h]ealth is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity'.

206. Abdallah Daar and Zara Merali (2002) respond to allegations by some that because many developing countries can be said to be overpopulated, overfertility should be given preference in terms of family planning programmes and infertility not addressed. In addition, the argument is also made that because reproductive technology is necessarily expensive, more pressing needs should be given priority. Daar and Merali (2002:15) argue, however, that on analysing 'the suffering that arises from infertility, these criticisms of the use of ART in developing countries can be rebutted'. Some of the results of infertility in sub-Saharan Africa, they indicate, include 'severe economic deprivation, to social isolation, to murder and suicide' (Daar & Merali 2002:15).

travel to the greater Cape Town, Pretoria or Bloemfontein areas in order to gain admittance to public reproductive technology facilities; however, access would not be easy.

The Western Cape Government's website explains that while 'there is no service for infertility at primary health care level', only tertiary hospitals, like Tygerberg and Groote Schuur, offer treatment for fertility issues. However, those wishing to make use of this programme will need a referral, and there will be costs involved (Western Cape Government n.d.). South Africans not partaking in this programme would have to pay a minimum of R7000 per treatment. Carin Huyser and Laura Boyd indicate that assisted reproductive technology procedures in South Africa would cost between R7000 and R14 000 in the public sector and between R25 000 and R50 000 in the private sphere (2012:16). These figures are making use of the patient and their partner's own reproductive material, and not donor ova or sperm, which would add additional costs. When making use of technology such as IVF, in many instances, more than one cycle is necessary, and this can double or even triple these figures.

While South African medical aids are obligated to cover the diagnoses of infertility, very few cover treatments through reproductive technologies, even from the medical aid savings account (Infertility Awareness Association of South Africa n.d.). Given the inequalities of income discussed previously, it is clear that the majority of South Africans are physically unable to afford the costs involved in reproductive technology treatments. Even when reproductive technology treatment is greatly desired, people exclude themselves by virtue of the costs involved. There are, therefore, evidently obvious inequalities in access to reproductive technology, and with this in mind, I now briefly turn to what this could mean in the future. I wish to argue that this is not wild speculation, but very much based on these present inequalities of access and affordability.

Inequality of access to reproductive technology in the future?

'Science fiction is full of examples of hypothetical situations of what could happen' (Kotzé 2013:92), should the issue of unequal access be ignored when it comes to reproductive technology. Furthermore, Kotzé (2013) states:

> One only has to think of the numerous novels and movies that tell of a species divided, where one portion of the human race, the rich and successful, are 'perfected' individuals, while the other, lower classes are made up of those who are 'unperfected'. (p. 92)

On the one hand, one could argue that science fiction has to 'investigate the worst possible outcome; a story where biotechnology is utilised and nothing happens would be neither marketable nor much fun to watch' (Kotzé 2013:92). On the other hand, we could also say that science fiction shows us our biggest fears, especially when it is based on what is already happening. A fairly well-known example of this is (Kotzé 2013):

> The classic science fiction novel, *The Time Machine*, originally published in 1895, tells of a future where the labouring and leisured classes have diverged to the point of becoming separate species, and the former, denied the civilising influences of high culture and education, have [*evolved into*] the beast-like Morlocks (Gavaghan 2007:171–172). (p. 92)

This is perhaps a very extreme example. Much closer to the present unequal access discussed in the previous section is (Kotzé 2013):

> [*The*] 1997 film *Gattaca*, [*where*] the so-called 'valids' are those whose parents have selected the best possible traits by PGD, whilst the 'invalids' are those who were conceived naturally. Although it is illegal to discriminate against someone on the basis of their genes, in practice, it is easy to discover a person's genetic makeup and 'valids' qualify for professional employment whilst the 'invalids' are used for unskilled labour as a result of being viewed as more susceptible to disease and educational disabilities. It is especially interesting that the birth of a child to those couples that opt to have a baby without the intervention of biotechnology is termed a 'faith birth'. (p. 92)

In this film, the protagonist, Vincent, who is an invalid who dreams of becoming an astronaut, makes the statement (Gattaca 1997):

> My father was right. It didn't matter how much I lied on my resume. My real resume was in my cells. Why should anybody invest all that money to train me when there were a thousand other applicants with a far cleaner profile? Of course, it's illegal to discriminate, 'genoism' it's called. But no one takes the law seriously. If you refuse to disclose, they can always take a sample from a door handle or a handshake, even the saliva on your application form. If in doubt, a legal drug test can just as easily become an illegal peek at your future in the company. (n.p.)

Gavaghan (2007:172) sums up the issue at hand by noting that 'the fear is that unequal access to this kind of technology could cause or exacerbate pre-existing divisions'. Maura Ryan (2012:977) indicates that as is the case at present with reproductive technology, high-demand genetic therapies 'are likely to be both very costly and (as *in vitro* fertilisation and other reproductive technologies) available only to those who are willing and able to pay for them'. While this is a serious ethical and theological concern, numerous scholars have discussed the possibility of inequalities of access exacerbating divisions.[207] In the following section, I focus rather on an often neglected issue, namely, that not only are certain people excluded, as previously discussed, but that the excluded often become exploited and part of the system that excludes them as benefactors. This will be done by firstly looking again at the present situation, where the often-dubious practice of egg donation is investigated, and again offering brief remarks of what this might mean in the future.

How the excluded become part of this system at present

Earlier, financial barriers to accessing reproductive technology were mentioned. This can be pertinently illustrated by a particularly disturbing website, which has since proven to be a

207. See, for example, Fukuyama (2002); Sandel (2007); Gavaghan (2007); and Kotzé (2014).

hoax concocted by photographer Ron Harris to direct traffic to his pornographic website. *Ron's Angels* was a website claiming to offer a database of beautiful, remarkable egg donors. The site encouraged the user to 'Enhance your genetic future' and pictures a collection of beautiful women, who are promised to also be 'healthy' and 'intelligent'. Starting prices ranged from $15 000 (£9000) to $150 000. Bids rose by $1000 a time. The price did not include doctors or hospital fees, which could add tens of thousands of pounds. This was justified by Harris himself as a (BioNews 1999):

> [*L*]ogical extension of the Darwinian notion that humans are constantly seeking mates with genetically superior traits in order to produce offspring with evolutionary advantages – especially relevant in our beauty-obsessed culture. (n.p.)

Seeing as not all women are the same, he argued in an interview with the *New York Times*, 'what they are paid for their genetic material "should be a price that floats based on perceived value"' (BioNews 1999).

The question could also be asked as to whether egg donation as such reduces women to their reproductive capabilities? This criticism has been raised by, for example, Gena Corea (1985). This notion, while not the focus of this contribution, is an important aspect to take note of, especially as it pertains to the commodification of people and of reproductive material. A prominent example of this line of thinking can be found in the Feminists International Network of Resistance to Reproductive and Genetic Engineering. Michelle Bercovici, speaking to the American context, indicates that the industry of egg donation is highly unregulated. Bercovici (2008:193) sees in this 'willful [*sic*] ignorance of the health risks and personal costs inherent in the donation process', which displays a vital 'lack of respect for women's health and agency'.

The American Society of Reproductive Medicine (ASRM) places limits on the amount that donors may be monetarily compensated on the principle that this compensation should

only reflect 'the time, inconvenience, and physical and emotional demands and risks associated with egg donation' (Tsuge & Hong 2011:248). However, many advertisements placed especially in newspapers of tertiary education institutions violate these guidelines. The compensation offered by almost a quarter of these advertisements surveyed by a US investigation offer payment in excess of $10 000, despite the guidelines provided by the ASRM (Stein 2011:35; Tsuge & Hong 2011:248). Klitzman also remarks that 'private advertisements' are often placed on *Craigslist*, where individuals appeal directly to potential donors. In addition, egg donation clinics and agencies also advertise on Craiglist, where 81% of agency and 96% of clinic advertisements do not comply with the guidelines of the ASRM (2016:2).

Jason Keehn et al. (2015) collected data of 46 American websites recruiting donors. The lifestyle benefits of compensation are stressed by a number of these sites, with some even describing donation as a 'summer job' or 'fast/easy money' (Heehn et al. 2015:612). More than half of the sites also indicated that compensation increases with each successful donation (Keehn et al. 2015:614). Andrea Stein (2011:35) indicates that young American women who are seen to have 'desirable' traits such as an Ivy League education can be offered up to $100 000 for egg donation.

This cannot take place in South Africa, where a maximum amount of R7000 can be paid to donors to cover reasonable travel expenses to clinics, time taken off from work, and so forth. This is often exploited by agencies who offer R7000 to potential donors across the board and often market to students, providing advice on the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) sections of their websites about how many pairs of shoes they can buy, and that donors should go shopping and 'treat themselves'.

During my time studying at Stellenbosch University, the female restrooms in the Student Centre had numerous adverts from different agencies posted up in stalls, with the compensation listed most prominently. The only requirement

listed was that donors should be 'in good health' and between the ages of 18 and 30.

The flip side of the coin is that these discrepancies in donor compensation in different countries lead to very low availability of donor ova in countries with strict regulations, such as the United Kingdom, and a very high cost for obtaining 'desirable'[208] ova in the USA. As a result, South African fertility clinics are receiving ever more overseas clients, eager to make use of the large donor database at reasonable prices (if you are paying in GBP or USD), and desperate South African women, especially students, consider donating ova an easy way to make some cash. This desperation is visible on both sides – women desperate to provide for their families or look after themselves, selling their genetic material, and people desperate for children willing to pay whatever it takes.

Klitzman records interviews with a number of nurses working at egg donation clinics and donors. These interviews, conducted in the USA, reveal that donors are rarely properly vetted and often lie. Psychological testing is also seldom done, and because clinics do not habitually share information, women frequently donate at different clinics, exceeding the limit on how many times a person may donate their eggs (Klitzman 2016:6–7). While these data are from the USA, when looking at the manner in which egg donation is advertised in South Africa, it is not much of a stretch of the imagination to infer that the circumstances might look fairly similar.

In 2010, the *European Society of Human Reproduction and Embryology* recorded 25 000 instances of IVF making use of donor eggs. Of those 25 000, 50% of people travelled abroad for it. Monique Deveaux (2016:50) also indicates that Europeans make up the largest group of people who travel transnationally for IVF making use of donor eggs. The majority travel to clinics in countries 'with rising unemployment and falling real wages'.

208. The criteria for what makes desirable ova would differ between the individuals seeking to make use of them.

Cyprus has more fertility clinics than any other country globally. Clinics in Cyprus primarily recruit donors from Eastern Europe, especially migrants who are unable to be legally employed. Often, donors are compensated with as little as $500 (Deveaux 2016:51). The financial motivation for egg donation is most prominent when donors are younger, less educated and have a less stable source of income, and repeat donors are almost exclusively driven by financial incentive (Deveaux 2016:51). A similar study in the USA found that 94% of students who had donated eggs indicated 'financial compensation' as the most significant factor that motivated their decision (Kenny & McGowan 2010:464). Deveaux (2016:52) also remarks that donors are often intentionally recruited from vulnerable groups, such as migrants and women in dire economic circumstances, who lack alternative options of generating an income.

The notion of commodification was mentioned earlier. Jean-Francois Collange (2005) notes that:

> [*T*]he human being must be kept out of commerce and out of the play of market forces, if it is not to reduce itself (or be reduced) to nothing but an object, as opposed to being treated as a person. (p. 179)

Now, to consider the other (Collange 2005):

> [*A*]s a thing, and not fundamentally as a person, is to violate the second version of Kant's categorical imperative, which claims one should 'act in such a way that treats humanity in one's person and in all human beings as an end, and never simply as a means'. (pp. 179–180)

For this reason, Deveaux (2016:54) can argue that transnational egg donation often becomes exploitative, and the vulnerability of donors taken advantage of.

Commodification does seem to be an alarming reality when women's ova are viewed 'as a commodity and potential eligibility as a paid donor is measured in terms of certain features' (Deveaux 2016:61), such as test scores and physical beauty. The intention of this contribution, however, is not to reflect on the question of

whether the donation of ova for financial gain and the purchasing of reproductive material by individuals and agencies amount to commodification, but rather to indicate how those that are excluded, women who do not have the financial means to ever make use of this reproductive technology themselves, are used by this system.

Although not the focus of this chapter, I do take note of other ethical issues that are raised by reproductive technology. One of these is the risks that egg donation might pose to donors, on which no long-term data are available. Stein (2011:36) indicates that the effects of fertility medications used in egg donation and other implications, such as repetitive cycles and ovarian needle punctures, warrant 'immediate study and assessment'.

■ Other ethical issues

Jennifer Lahl mentions different aspects that come to the fore in third-party reproductive technology. The lure of compensation to egg donors without an awareness of the risks, what informed consent entails, knowledge of long-term studies, or 'the conflict of interest' of the doctors and clients wanting to make use of the donor's eggs (Lahl 2017:241) has already been alluded to earlier and is the research focus of this chapter.

Other issues could also be mentioned, however, such as the possible psychological grappling over biological identity that children who have no relationship with their biological parent(s), and have no possibility of such a relationship, could experience (Lahl 2017:241).

'Private' egg donation, such as the advertisements on Craigslist mentioned earlier, or even through agencies that offer a lot of information about donors, also pose challenges. Online profiles of donors could be used by children to find their biological mother against her wishes, and this decrease in anonymity could also 'create and shape expectations that children will receive these donors' desired traits' (Klitzman 2016:6).

Pressure on women to donate

Lahl (2017:242) also refers to the tactic of marketing to call donors ‘angels’, who are helping to build a family that would otherwise not have existed. Azumi Tsuge and Hyunsoo Hong (2011:244), considering the ethical issues that came to the fore in terms of voluntary egg donation in the well-publicised scandal around Korean scientist Woo-Suk Hwang,[209] also mention that egg donors in this case were called women with ‘pure and beautiful hearts who can release the pain of others’. In conversations with donors affected by the case, one donor also explicitly stated that her decision to donate was because of how impressed she was with the ‘beautiful people’, as Hwang referred to his egg donors, and their ‘kind actions’ (Tsuge & Hong 2011:244–245).

Another donor in this case recounts that she was called ‘a saint woman’ for donating, and in the aftermath of the scandal, recounted (Tsuge & Hong 2011):

> Now I really get upset whenever I hear the term because I think the word represents people’s typical definition of what women should be [...] I am wondering then what they would call women who do not donate their eggs. To me, respecting egg donors is the same as demanding sacrifice from others, especially from women. (p. 246)

On surveying the websites of egg donation agencies, it was found that medical terminology was rarely used (or is lacking in completeness, correctness and comprehensibility) and that emotional language was preferred in providing information to potential donors, for example, describing the process only as ‘giving the gift of life’ (Keehn et al. 2015:611).

I wish to argue that based on the ethical issues put forward in this contribution, a strong case can be made that those who are

209. Hwang published two papers in *Science* in 2004 and 2005 on human embryonic stem cell with somatic cell nuclear transfer, becoming a leading scientific researcher in this field. However, a scandal erupted when it was found that not only were there numerous and serious violations of medical ethics in the process where human ova for this research was collected, but scientific data were also fabricated and falsified (Tsuge & Hong 2011:241–242).

excluded by the system and lack access to reproductive technology, become its benefactors at present. In the last section of this contribution, I offer some brief remarks on what this might mean in the future.

How the excluded become part of this system in the future

Reflecting on what might occur in the future in terms of the phenomenon where the excluded become part of systems as discussed in the 'Pressure on women to donate' section, is of course mostly hypothetical and should not move into the realm of speculation.

If new reproductive technology does become available, people would sensibly want assurances that its safety has been proven by extensive tests in people like themselves. For example, a healthy woman in her forties would want the assurance that the treatment has been proven safe and effective for healthy women in their forties. Where would these test subjects come from?

In most cases of medical experimentation, people volunteer to take part in studies because they judge the potential benefits to outweigh the risks. A subject suffering from heart disease might well decide to partake in experimental treatment or medication with the expectation that they could very possibly benefit from it (Kotzé 2019:63). With an issue such as fertility treatment, some people might well volunteer, viewing even experimental treatment as a last, desperate attempt to conceive a child, and for some, it might even be their only chance, especially if they are not in a position to access reproductive technology otherwise. But whether the potential benefits would outweigh any potential risks to such an extent that experimental treatment be signed up for, seems perhaps unlikely.

In his discussion of other biotechnological treatments, Nicholas Agar (2014:129) suggests that test subjects for experimental treatment might well be found somewhere else, as 'the relatively

wealthy have always done: they will pay others to do their dirty work for them'. In much the same situation we have at present, where donor gametes are found when there is a shortage in developed nations in the developing world, desperate people might very well willingly sign up for experimentation, regardless of the risks, if it could mean financial security for their families. As noted earlier, while this may be speculation at the moment, this picture of what the future might hold is based firmly on the reality of exclusion and exploitation we already see at present and as such, I wish to argue that it posits serious ethical and theological reflection within the broader context of reconceiving reproductive health.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have attempted to address the question of whose reproductive health matters, looking at issues such as access to reproductive technology in South Africa, including aspects of availability and affordability. What this exclusion might lead to in the future was briefly reflected on. I then investigated the reality that those that are excluded, especially women, often become part of the system, not as beneficiaries, but through being exploited by the processes of reproductive technology. The donation of ova was examined as an example in this regard and, based on this reality, tentative comments made of what could possibly be expected in the future in terms of the exclusion and exploitation of people in terms of reproductive health. Reflecting on reproductive health should also ask the question of whose reproductive health matters to our theological and ethical consideration, and in this chapter, I made the argument that especially those that are excluded not only from accessing reproductive technology, but from reproductive health, be considered as well. The potential of reproductive technology to exacerbate existing divisions between people, but to also lead to new forms of inequality is a serious matter that future reflection on the topic of reproductive health should bear in mind.

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This scholarly book is divided into three sections, drawing on different theological disciplines. Academics within the fields of Systematic Theology, Biblical Studies and Ethics, have contributed their reflections on the theme of reproductive health. Reproductive health matters. While reproduction is fairly often touched upon in theological and Christian ethical discussions, reproductive health is not. Discussion pertaining to reproductive health includes a number of debates about, for instance, abortion and the termination of pregnancy, reproductive loss, childlessness, infertility, stillbirth, miscarriage, and adoption. Additionally, new reproductive possibilities brought on by the development of reproductive technology has brought about the necessity of theological and ethical reflection on, for example, surrogacy, post-menopausal pregnancies, litter births, single mothers or fathers by choice, in vitro fertilisation, and so-called saviour siblings. These new developments compel theologians to reconceive their notions of what reproductive health is or should be. Any theological reflection on reproductive health – including the stuff of deeply divisive church debates, such as the debates on abortion, infertility, miscarriage, stillbirth, adoption, and sexuality – requires a theological grammar that is rooted in a living faith tradition and the lived experiences of believers, particularly women, today. Such rhetoric can and should shape the ways in which we speak (and don't speak) about reproductive health in churches.

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