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RESEARCH ARTICLE



# The disembodiment of birthing and the incapacity to theologically reflect: a perspective from perinatal mental illness in ministry

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## ABSTRACT

This paper offers an autoethnographic account of perinatal mental illness in ministry, exploring how this impacted the ability to theologically reflect. It explores theological reflection as an embodied activity, described in procreative language. In particular, it stresses the prestige theological reflection is given in Baptist ministry as a tool for encountering difficulty, and how the inability to do so in the moment of crisis created a heightened sense of loss.

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## Introduction

To start a paper with an interruption is appropriate on such a topic: it is to offer the disclaimer that I am an expert on perinatal mental illness only by personal experience.<sup>1</sup> I am not a trained psychologist or psychotherapist, I am a Baptist minister and mother who has a diagnosis of perinatal anxiety disorder; this is simply my story.

Or rather, it is fragments of my story, because I have found myself surprised to discover how much I still cannot talk about this. I had thought a theological reflection on my inability to theologically reflect on perinatal mental illness was a clever subversion. It would seem that bodies know better, and in many years of therapy, I simply know now to honour those boundaries of when your mind stops your body speaking or your body stops your mind from thinking. It is a deeply annoying way to prove my own thesis that having a perinatal mental illness has limited my capacity to theologically reflect.

## An account of maternal mental illness in ministry

I first realised there might be 'something wrong with me' when sitting in a room of ministerial mothers. We had all recently had babies and we were there to share our experiences of maternity leave in church ministry so that the practical hardships could be tackled better in the future. Some people told heart wrenching stories of profound discrimination and external challenges, all told stories of necessary vocational reshaping,

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and I was struck that from the ten or so women in the room that I was the only one who had not yet moved jobs since having a baby. As people bonded over shared stories of the challenges of bedtime routines clashing with prayer meetings, breastfeeding in church, and hurriedly hiding the piles of laundry from church people popping in, I too agreed that there were many practical issues for how to minister with the competing demands of an infant child, which I ultimately felt inadequate at tackling. Both navigating the institution of motherhood and mothering are hard and I was reluctant to pathologise my disease with it.

However, this experience made me recognise for the first time that it was not simply an external issue of juggling expectations. Where others expressed frustrations at the 'institution of motherhood' and even the complex plurality of emotions of mothering, as named by Adrienne Rich, I seemed to be the only one who did not love being a mother in any form, or more bluntly, I was the only one who did not love my child itself (Rich 1986). More than that, I started to recognise that the sadness and exhaustion had strayed into something far more unwell. Whilst other mums in ministry hid laundry from their visitors, I would hide knives from myself.

Motherhood had created within me a spiritual crisis and I wanted to know why, returning to the theological reflection that had formed me into a minister. Exhausted, unable to find my own words, and constantly interrupted, I seemed only to find positive constructions around motherhood giving something to our theology and practice of ministry. There was an absence of Christian writing on perinatal mental illness, and I felt the absence of my experience as further shame. I had failed to love my child, and the failure even to theologically reflect on that grief made me feel like a failure as a minister too. My vocational conflict cried out with my baby, and a few months later I too changed roles.

In time I became better, the embodied and hormonal changes balancing themselves back out again, the change of job easing some of the practical pressures and taking me out of the immediacies of pastoral care. I was eventually persuaded into having a second baby, but early in the pregnancy, I found myself panicking if I was near a baby that cried, hastily leaving coffee shops and avoiding queues with prams. I spiraled into a deeply unhappy and unsafe mental space. This time I was braver in asking for help, eventually gaining the psychiatric diagnosis which referred me to the service that I believe saved my life. Over time therapy led me full circle and showed also that the crisis for me was also a spiritual and vocational one, born out of theological ideas around motherhood, embodiment, love, and the church, and so eventually I decided to write the words I needed five years ago.

The NHS website suggests that up to 27% of mothers experience perinatal mental health problems, yet whilst this may be picked up within some pastoral care practice, this is an area which remains largely unexplored theologically. From the stories of the friends and acquaintances I have since made along the way, whose experiences of perinatal mental illness had also included God and raised faith dilemmas. I have become sure that my story does not stand alone, yet the experience of perinatal mental illness is not often told beyond that 'confession' to friends, in pastoral care, or in the doctor's office. There is a pastoral need for this theological work; to take what is silent – or silenced – and to reflect on it as a wider church, to encourage ministers and churches to reflect on this in their care of new mothers, and for women who share similar stories to know

theirs does not exist in isolation. Such a piece of work could critically examine how the church has shaped theological discourse so that it may create a myth of perfect, sacrificial and salvific institution of motherhood and a simplistic version of holy mothering. I had a strong sense that I should write a book, or at least a booklet, to this end. However, I confess I too have not written this work. Seemingly I cannot.

## Theological reflection in baptist ministry

The crisis created by an assumed imperative to theologically reflect, whilst not being able to, is helpfully captured by Jennifer Geddes' description of the conflict within a religious language in times of atrocity. There is a sensed, faith-driven need to talk about what happened, whilst being incapable of doing so adequately (Geddes 2009). This double bind that she describes is then further enhanced by the expectation that Baptist ministers are formed in theological reflection; there is a ministerial imperative to theologically reflect. As Clarke (2021) explains, the use of 'formational' language here is intentional. If it is, as he describes, the work of a Baptist minister to be a 'theologian in residence' for the community they are in, so, I would suggest being a reflective practitioner takes on a 'habitus'. In a foundational essay on Practical Theology, Pattison (1989) teasingly referred to the 'mystic flavour' of theological reflection in pastoral studies courses. He offered this as a critique, yet I would like to suggest this is also an astute observation in another sense: theological reflection is offered as a spiritual discipline for Baptist ministers and a tool for growing in wisdom and holiness, especially when encountering difficulty.

Theological reflection is also constantly measured: I was formed for Baptist ministry as a very young adult and had my first child fairly immediately after ordination, during what is called our 'Newly Accredited Status'. As a Newly Accredited Minister or 'NAM' in the Baptist Union of Great Britain, a weekly reflection journal must be sent to your mentor, and two larger theological reflections must be developed as part of your 'learning contract' with a Baptist College. These must be written at the academic level of your theology diploma or degree; in my case an MTh in Applied Theology (Baptists Together 2021). Gaining 'Fully Accredited Status' is therefore conditional on the constant demonstration of theological reflection. This matters in Baptist praxis, as there is a firm resistance to a narrative of the ontological priesthood as belonging to the ordained in their being and little in what they practice that clearly demarcates ordained ministry from laity in their doing: this is a tradition that allows for lay preaching and presidency at communion. Instead, it is the process of theological formation that gives accreditation, 'the way in which ministers are formed ... the way in which what they learn about theology, and themselves'. (Goodliff 2017, 35) As Paul Goodliff, the Head of Ministry for the Baptist Union when I formed for ministry, explains:

It [academic learning] does not constitute the summation of ministry, but it is not an optional extra for those so inclined. Rather is it an indispensable dimension of what it is to be a minister of the gospel, a teacher of the faith, a pastor to God's people. (2017, 132)

To be a minister, in Baptist life, is to be able to theologically reflect. For me the shame was not only in encountering a mental health crisis which contains the taboo of not loving your child, it was that I could not — seemingly still cannot — even write about it. I'm

simply going to note at this point that when I was Newly Accredited only 34% of NAMS were women and only 16% of Fully Accredited Ministers were women. This is possibly a progression with time, or possibly a dropout rate.<sup>2</sup> To state it differently, there were 1077 men in Fully Accredited Ministry and only 206 women. Taking maternity leave automatically pauses the journey towards accreditation for at least a full year. It is not itself considered to be a formative work of ministry.

## Maternal (dis)embodiment in ministry

However, in my attempts at reading during feeds, I discovered the systemic barriers for mothers in ministry were noted in other's traditions. Wilcox (2016) shows women in ministry's bodies are viewed as 'dangerous', both threatening and threatened because of any implied sexuality, which is explicit if pregnant. In a study of maternity and priesthood in the Church of England, Sarah Page (2012) comments on the pregnant body subsuming every other part of a woman's identity, a visibility that 'is at odds with the rational, disembodied organisation' (2012, 6). Elsewhere she shows how women seek to boundary priesthood, or very unusually, boundary their motherhood, out of necessity as both roles expect her to be constantly available and loving (Page 2016). I noticed the comment:

This is evidenced in the assumption that allowing mothers to be clergy will result in the neglect of their children. (Page 2016, 51)<sup>3</sup>

Thus speaking of my experience could confirm expectations and lead to further discrimination of others. Dawn Llewellyn reflects on maternal silence in both academic study and church life:

the silence moves through Christianity to affect all maternal bodies, purported by a pronatalism that renders the unwelcome aspects of mothering and childlessness as a departure from faith. (Llewellyn 2016, 69)

Llewellyn's interviews with multiple childless women show how Christianity is emblematic, and possibly the creator of the 'institution of motherhood' as named by Adrienne Rich. The simultaneous and complex emotions present in 'mothering' for many women, which contains anger and indifference, are collapsed into a narrative that sees motherhood as a sacred, even salvific, act:

having children was described as 'a joy', as signalling God's grace and blessing, as a gift, as having 'unbelievable value', and as central to living a faithful life with God. (Llewellyn 2016, 69)

It was certainly my experience of reading that motherhood is offered as a spiritual virtue, where the complexities are hinted at, but absorbed as formational, with the effort made on the mother's part to be more patient, pray harder and not to be complained about as part of the vocational element of motherhood (Gloria Furman 2016).

Here a pronatalist theology of women's bodies emerges as a practical barrier for ministering. Embodiment is something that cannot be avoided in ministry, but for women it is already often a bar to preaching, pastoring and presiding. The corporate body of Christ looks at the biological essentialism of women in ministry and spiritualises them in a

certain way (Allison-Glenny 2020). There is perhaps the beginning of an answer here about why this has not been theologically considered: to name the taboo of being a mother who does not adequately love her child, immediately implies a far greater failure to minister than the failure to theologically reflect.

Similarly, Purser and O'Brien's study (2021) of ordained women in the Church of Ireland discusses at length the challenge of two vocations of motherhood and ministry as part of their discrimination. Whilst I want to echo the competition of the two roles, even here the language used is that ministers experience 'competing devotions' between work and family; a phrase which itself implicitly assumes the presence of love.

There is less in my own tradition on the structures of ministry and motherhood, but Helen Collins interviewed new mothers in charismatic churches, including UK Baptist, noticing the frequent physical relocation of women who have children to the back of church:

It is a direct consequence of her mothering responsibilities (in relation to every perceived need the child may have) that she is unable to participate in the worshipping ritual. The result is that what was previously a place of fulfilling encounter with God is now experienced as exclusion. (Collins 2019, 473)

She considers how in charismatic spirituality there is a need to work hard at focusing on the worship and feeling the experiential nature of the Spirit, which they describe as conflicting with attending to an infant. She considers the return to the back as more than a practicality, and in turn cites Elliot's study on sacred space in these charismatic traditions that 'the back is the place for those who do not channel the sacred which interestingly includes not only the unconverted but those women who are looking after children' (Elliot 1999; cited in Collins 2019, 472). Whilst I would disagree that there is a less sacred space, my body moved position from the place of presiding at worship to frequently leaving the sanctuary with a crying child. If the theological reflection is a ministerial act, as I have suggested, that offers something as a spiritual tool for formation, then it is an interesting correlation that the rest of spirituality of mothers in our tradition renders them physically on the edge, at the back of worship, rather than presiding at the front. We move their bodies, and their babies' bodies, to the back.

### **Motherhood as positive image for ministry, God and theological reflection**

It is of little surprise then that much work has been done to rescue mothering as a positive metaphor for ministry. Emma Percy's doctorate (2012) on how we are the fillers of the fridge, for example, shows the similarities of routine care and unexciting work, which nevertheless feeds and sustains growing bodies. Cristina Grenholm does the same, noting that the mother is 'guarantor of love' (Grenholm 2011, ix). The complexity is that these parts of motherhood are my undoing, and so again there is a duality that leaves me questioning my ministry because of my motherhood.

The same too is done for imagery of God throughout much feminist literature. There is not space to adequately capture the vast nuances of all these, but I would pick out the singular example of Lee Ann Pomrenke's reflection on clergy motherhood and the solidarity of a mothering God, who even suggests the Spirit of God as manifested in oxytocin, flowing through the body with purpose:

... it gets labor going in the first place. Then a newborn scrambling to breastfeed releases more oxytocin, which increase a mother's feelings of attachment. God knows we cannot muster it on our own, especially after a traumatic birth... we could also think of that hormone release as God no longer holding her breath. (Pomrenke 2020, 14)

I want to honour God as midwife, as creative Spirit, breastfeeder and more, but here I find myself shamed: my body did not attach to my child's body adequately and well; the oxytocin did not enable attachment to my child, and the inadequacy of this suggests less spirituality, perhaps even less salvation.

The language to reclaim motherhood as positive in the work of theological reflection beyond conversations about ministry is also persistently present. Janet Martin Soskice comments on the received view of spiritual life as including 'long periods, of quiet, focused reflection, dark churches and dignified liturgies ... above all, it involves solitude and collectedness. It does not involve looking after small children' (Soskice 2007, 13). Yet, in replacement she uses the image of attending to children, and the scanning of environment for threats to them, as a spirituality. I wonder if Soskice worried about throwing her baby down the stairs. If it was a spirituality, for me it was one that wrestled with terrifying demons.

Nicola Slee's work on the fragmentation of theological reflection also develops Soskice, drawing on the language of immersion as a metaphor in response to overwhelm in theological process. She acknowledges, as Soskice does, that our default model of holiness, 'predicated on the lonely, detached, rational and controlling Enlightenment male self, disenfranchises many people especially women' (Slee 2020, 90). Instead, her language of immersion consents to overwhelm, on the conviction that it is suffering that it is leading to life. She explores baptism and birth as illustrative of this, arguing that to both mother and babe labour is experienced as profound loss, akin to death. This is deeply useful, yet she again looks to Soskice's discussion of the spirituality of parenting, that 'rather than to try to escape the overwhelming tasks of parenting, the mother and father of a newborn infant immerses willingly in the task, both losing and finding themselves in attending to the overwhelming reality' (Slee 2020, 90). She suggests therapy creates space-making opportunity, as does writing and research, 'stepping back from the immediacy of felt and lived experience to refract the experience in words and analysis, patterns on a page' (Slee 2020, 90).

I find myself echoing the same tensions back: hearing someone else critique that the holiness offered has been limited for women is helpful, as is the loss of the (pre)parental self into the infant's needs and the equation of therapy and theology as both meaning making in the midst of chaos. This is to echo the importance of the mystical theological reflection as spiritual space. Yet, there is the word 'willingness' that broods over these waters of chaos; I was — still am — far too angry and distraught to be willing, for the same reasons perhaps contained in Slee's next paragraphs: she nevertheless talks about the return to research, pattern making and order as the refracted rainbow in the rain. These tools had gone from me as a bodily means to hold these tensions together or to find my own sense of self again. Even the space for therapy as an ark in the flood, imply resource, time and capacity exist in some way. To access the NHS-funded Infant-Parent Perinatal Programme that saved my life required me to be heard by health professionals, and studies show that black women are far less likely to be believed in their experiences of pregnancy and birth (Knight et al. 2021).<sup>4</sup>

## The challenge of generative theology

Here however, by circling the edges of what is spoken, I am beginning to name my own sense of challenge: theological reflection is often shown as a reproductive act, creative and generative. If birth has been a disembodiment experience, this shows why theological reflection in turn becomes problematic. Karen O'Donnell cites Michelle Gonzalez Maldonado in her opening chapter to *Feminist Trauma Theologies*, suggesting that the theology 'from the place it hurts' (O'Donnell 2020; 3 citing Maldonado 2016) is the theology that matters and that we should take seriously our bodily experience as worthy of exploration and as sites of theological construction. Constructive theology is described as:

not interested in merely describing what theology has been; we are trying to understand and construct it in the present, to imagine what life-giving faith can be in today's world ... an inhabitable, beautiful, *fruitful* theology. (italics mine; O'Donnell 2020, citing Lakefield and Jones 2005, 1)

One may note this 'life giving', 'fruitfulness' language curiously, that this act of theologising (even the act of redeeming a trauma such as perinatal mental illness) has generative overtones. Furthermore, infertility, the death of a child and even ordination are considered sites of bodily trauma, but motherhood itself is not commented on as a grief.<sup>5</sup>

So, to theologically reflect comes with the emotional challenge of an overlap in the language of generativity as well as a practical challenge - that of holding an infant body instead of a book. The ways of theologically reflecting that had been formed in me and expected of me were no longer practically possible, as exhaustion and physical attention had to now attend to different bodies. The Canadian Baptist formed minister, Natalie Wigg-Stevenson, comments on how a theological constitution

is always happening in, on, with and through my body. And that's the body that holds the hands that write the theology of these pages ... like any norms, Christian theological norms constitute and are constituted by their writing into, onto, with and through bodies. (Wigg-Stevenson 2021, 17)

Considering the narrative that theological reflection is generative, the inability to theologically reflect on the trauma of perinatal mental illness, to beget this body of work, I want to suggest, is the inability to repeat the trauma of disembodiment that came through birth and early motherhood. In *Spirit and Trauma* Shelly Rambo offers the observation

for those who have survived trauma, the experience of trauma can be likened to a death. But the reality is that death has not ended; instead it persists. The experience of survival is one in which life, as it once was, cannot be retrieved. However, the promise of life ahead cannot be envisioned. (2010, 7)

In the development of her trauma theology, Rambo insists on witnessing the broken body, staying with the place that persists between cross and resurrection. She looks at the Johannine description of the Holy Spirit and insists 'if the power of the Spirit is only expressed in terms of the forces of life, or even the forces of life countering death, then the power of the middle Spirit testifying to what emerges in unexplored' (2010, 139). Here trauma theology opens up the idea that witnessing to the unresolvable and unthinkable is a form of theological reflection. However, even here in trauma theology, generativity is used as a metaphor: 'life becomes defined in the light of death and love is born at this interstice' (2010, 139).

## The failure to theologically reflect

Feminist theology has sought to reemphasise motherhood in ministry and theology, as a tool for dismantling patriarchal oppression and the barriers that limit spirituality. However, there remains a challenge here for the maternal silence. It has taken five years to say even these unformed thoughts. What happens when the taboos are too taboo, and naming them potentially creates greater oppression for you and others, not lesser? What do you do when the image that is used as positive feminist restoration for your experience is one that you have found to be deeply harrowing?

To form words around the void, it is worth returning to Geddes, who articulates the difference between redemptive and apophatic use of religious language, suggesting:

When used redemptively in relation to atrocity, religious language seeks to bring the atrocity, or some element of it, to closure. The atrocity is placed within a framework in which it is redeemed, ultimately overcome. (Geddes 2009, 22)

The apophatic, contrastingly, is that which is beyond our ability to know, understand or imagine:

References to the impossibility of speaking about atrocity are trying to recognize, point to, acknowledge, communicate the excess and extremity of the event, and our incapacity to express that extremity. Making this sense of impossibility and inadequacy explicit by talking about it allows the speaker to begin speaking, thereby creating a little room within the double bind. (Geddes 2009, 22)

If we are going to reclaim images of birth and mothering in theological reflection, then we will also need to look at the bit that we cannot name, the small space within the double bind. If motherhood contains a loss of self and ministry, then we need to include that as we use it as a metaphor for theological reflection.

## Conclusion

For me motherhood was disembodiment: the moving of a small body I had grown to being outside of me, disrupting sanity and sense of self, and leaving me with a deformed self. Any generative act of theological formation needs to name the stitches, the sagging and the soreness. It needs to name that attachment to what and to whom we create is not always easy. Motherhood was also disembodiment by physically moving me to the back of church, changing the shape of the ministry and spirituality I could offer, in a way which I did not want. Motherhood removed my capacity to theologically reflect, to write, think through tiredness, and to use what I had been formed in, and I think this contributed to my perinatal mental illness. In ministry, we need to reemphasise the uncomfortable space for using theological reflection as apophatic: as a means of opening up the unsafe, unspeakable and sitting with the unresolvable. The work of reflective, rational, sane ministry, may be far more preferable to us; it may be a privileged body we no longer have, and it is worth grieving those wounds.

Thus, I have not yet managed, emotionally or practically, to generate a theological reflection on perinatal mental illness, but instead to do the persisting work of theologically reflecting on not being able to theologically reflect on perinatal mental illness. For

others, or myself, to do so would, perhaps now could, involve borrowing much from trauma theologies, and I am deeply grateful especially for the bodies of work I find in womanist theologies' consideration of sacrifice and salvation and from theologies of infertility for their pronatalist criticism. So, I leave this with the challenging words of one of those, from an ordained Baptist minister who wrote on the theology of childlessness:

'What if this ... broken grieving person, who struggles to utter any words in prayer, who struggles to contemplate hope — what if they were not the one that needed to change?' (Nash 2021, 175)

## Notes

1. 'Perinatal' mental illness is used here as a descriptor over postnatal, because whilst the initial experience of mental illness after my first child was postnatal anxiety and depression, this triggered an experience throughout the whole of pregnancy, birth and post-partum with my second child. This also echoes the language of the team whose care I was under. The NHS lists a broad range of mental health conditions under this, including those who experience post-traumatic stress disorder following birth trauma, depression, anxiety, psychosis, perinatal loss or severe fear of childbirth (tokophobia).
2. For more information on the recent history of women in ministry in the Baptist Union, consider Goodliff, A. 2020. "Women and the Institution: The Struggle for Women to be Involved in the Baptist Union at the End of the Twentieth Century". *Journal of Baptist Theology in Context* (1): 21–36.
3. Page references the work of Dyer (2004) and Francis-Dehqani (2002).
4. Recent studies show the danger to black women giving birth, as they are four times more likely to die in childbirth; thus this presumably comes with a far higher rate of birth trauma.
5. Throughout this book motherhood as trauma is considered primarily through the lens of a loss of a child. The exception to this is in O'Donnell's consideration of Mary's pregnancy as traumatic on page 11.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

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