

IN THE IMAGE OF HER: RECOVERING MOTHERHOOD IN THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION, by Amy E. Marga, Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2022. 207 pages. \$42.99 (paperback).

Christian theology has long been dominated by white, male voices. While this tradition is valuable, it is also incomplete: “women’s voices, mother’s voices about being mothers in particular, are glaringly absent from the Christian historical record” (9). Amy Marga seeks to investigate this gap in the literature in her book *In the Image of Her: Recovering Motherhood in the Christian Tradition*. Spanning over fifteen hundred years of Christian history, this work provides an overview of how motherhood and the maternal body have been viewed and understood in the Christian imagination. These theological understandings have been expressed in a myriad of ways, including art, prayers, rituals, stories of mothers, and writings by (primarily) male theologians. Although this topic is beyond the scope of a single volume, Marga’s overview provides a thought-provoking starting point for “further research into the ways that mothers have navigated male-dominated Christian theology to develop their own ideas about how God works in their lives” (17).

The subject of motherhood is inevitably tied up with Christianity’s historical treatment of women. The early chapters of the book wrestle with misogynistic views of the maternal body and the mother-child bond. Early Christian mothers were urged to renounce motherhood and pursue an ascetic lifestyle in order to fully commit to God. The church fathers considered virginity the most holy option for women, as seen in the theology of Mary’s perpetual virginity: she was “the perfect image of the Christian woman as sinless, silent, and obedient to male authority” (51). In contrast, childbirth and labor pains were considered punishment for sin, which extended all the way back to Eve. The female body was seen as defective and shameful, which became the site of Jesus’s incarnation via “uterine filth” and his birth into a morally corrupt world (47). These dominant views were subverted by women such as Julian of Norwich, whose visions emphasized the maternal nature of Christ and connected his blood with the life-giving blood of the uterus.

The maternal body has also been considered a source of love, nurture, and comfort that helps people connect with God in new ways. In the medieval period, marked by catastrophe and high mortality rates, people of faith found comfort in the presence and protection of female saints such as Anne, the mother of Mary, and Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Mother Mary, especially, interceded on behalf of the people and provided a connection with the divine. By the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, she was also a source of comfort for mothers who had lost children, as she knew the grief of losing her own son, Jesus. During and after the Reformation, though many women were limited to the household, they continued to demonstrate maternal authority by teaching faith to their children. Within the scope of cultural expectations, their written theology (a genre known as “mothers’ legacies”) was able to “uphold gender stereotypes and subvert them at the same time” (132). God might be seen as a loving mother, and mothers viewed themselves as agents of God’s work in their children’s lives.

In the final chapter, Marga addresses historical intersections between gender, motherhood, and race. In North America, white Protestant mothers continued to manage the faith of the household, which led to horrific, colonizing encounters with Indigenous peoples, including removing children from their Indigenous mothers. Enslaved African mothers also suffered during this period and had very different understandings of Christianity and motherhood compared to their white counterparts. Though this book primarily focuses on the experience of white, European-descent mothers, Marga names the intersection of white Protestantism with Indigenous and enslaved mothers as an ongoing research need in contemporary Christian parenting.

Overall, *In the Image of Her* shows that there is no single overarching narrative about mothers in the Christian tradition. As a historical study, I would have appreciated more detail, but the major theological themes were captured and well organized. Ultimately, and most importantly, this overview gives voice to a historically voiceless and marginalized population and adds nuance and depth to Christian theology. These are voices that need to be included in theological conversation. As Marga concludes, “Mothers have had a profound understanding of God’s work—and they continue to do so. Mothers were theologians of the highest kind, even if their ideas were neglected” (168). This book successfully recovers several of these ideas, even if many of them have been lost to time. I am curious about how this topic will be furthered in subsequent works: this book provides fertile ground for additional research and the development of maternal theology for our time.

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