BIBLE AND THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD
4(1):103-146
DOI: https://doi.org/10.15664/bcw.v41.2773

TOWARD A CHRISTIAN MATERNAL FEMINIST THEOLOGY*

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***Abstract**: If female voices have been silenced over the years, mothers' voices have been silenced most of all. Feminists have historically often renounced motherhood as the primary condition men utilize to enforce female subjugation, while academic and theological institutions have and continue, in some cases, to block women from opportunities to study and serve. Conversely, motherhood has been idolized as the ultimate purpose of a woman's life in many Christian contexts. Thus, the concerns of Christian theology and feminism have often been considered at odds by members of each camp.*

I seek here to answer the question, Is there a means by which we might move past patriarchy toward a Christian feminist theology that is pro- rather than anti-maternal?

I will examine the anti-maternal bent apparent in the work of feminist scholars, then turn to a consideration of the idea of vulnerability common to the concerns of theologians, feminists, and mothers. In the Incarnation, these concerns take physical shape in the vulnerable body of Christ, who brings them all together. Therefore, the maternal body may be seen as a threshold and icon providing a way past patriarchy and toward a Christian maternal feminist theology.

Introduction

"All human life on the planet is born of woman."[1]

~Adrienne Rich

The early 2020s have witnessed increased attention to patriarchy's problematic roots and fruits. Understood here as a social system where men wield disproportionate power in political, economic, social, and religious settings, evidence of patriarchy can be found worldwide. For decades, feminists have called attention to the oppression of women and how that oppression is undergirded and maintained by patriarchal systems across multiple arenas. Contemporarily, the necessary exposure of the too-common abuse of women in church contexts and the exposition of

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† M Litt. University of St Andrews 2023
[1] Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1986), 11.

the lack of biblical support for structures that favor men over women in evangelical churches lead many Christians to take up a similar cry. Such echoing surprises some, as the concerns of Christian theology and feminism have been considered at odds. Often, childbearing forms a large part of the center of that debate.

Historically, many feminists have renounced motherhood because they understand it to be the primary situation men exploited in various ways to enforce female subjugation. By contrast, in many Christian contexts, motherhood has been venerated as the ultimate purpose of a woman's life. As an American woman who has grown up and raised children in evangelical contexts and under the sway of patriarchal belief systems both consciously and subconsciously, in the current atmosphere, I found myself asking these questions: Is it inevitable for the concerns of feminism and maternity to conflict for Christian women? Is it possible to be a feminist (when defined as believing in the total equality of men and women) yet still embrace motherhood? Having spent decades raising children and writing for and ministering to mothers in multiple international settings, I felt I owed both myself and those I influenced answers to these questions.

As a Christian and student of divinity, I have come to embrace and employ a lens for theological inquiry which places Jesus at the center of attempts to determine the truth and meaning of any statement or belief system. This study is no exception, so I also ask how Christ, as the light of the world, might reveal the truth here. As a female scholar, I recognize that women often live with both the sense and reality of a second-class status in which we are subject to systems that favor men within academic, political, social, and economic settings worldwide to varying degrees. Since God has demonstrated himself through scripture to be on the side of the oppressed, it seems clear this is not his way.[2] Consequently, I side with feminists striving for the recognition of women's full equality. Pope John Paul II called for a new feminism, one "which rejects the temptation of imitating models of 'male domination', in order to acknowledge and affirm the true genius of women in every aspect of the life of society, and overcome all discrimination, violence and exploitation."[3] To work toward such feminism is my aim in this paper.

As a mother of eight and a grandmother, I know the childbearing experience to be life-changing. I have compassion for the preborn and newborn, whose entirely dependent status and

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[2] Note: I do not understand God as being masculine, as will be clarified in this paper. My occasional use of the pronoun "he" in reference to God here and throughout may be taken in terms of acknowledgment of my own tradition and an attempt to avoid the awkwardness of less-familiar terminology.

[3] Pope Pope John Paul II, "Evangelium Vitae (25 March 1995) | John Paul II," accessed May 10, 2024.

lack of agency render them helpless to protect themselves or sustain their lives in any way. Additionally, as a mother of six boys, I have no interest in seeing the tables turned and oppressor and oppressed simply switching places; systems of domination diminish everyone involved regardless of who is in control. Therefore, I ask, Is there a means by which we might move past patriarchy toward a Christian feminist theology that is pro- rather than anti-maternal?

In this work, I begin by establishing the presence of anti-maternal sentiment through history and the corresponding lack of attention to maternal topics in academic study. Feminist, maternal, and theological voices are brought into conversation with one another, addressing some significant areas of contention and searching for agreement. Mothers' voices are highlighted in a discussion of the embodied realities of childbearing.[4]

Then I turn to a concept common to feminist, maternal, and theological writings: vulnerability. Having become somewhat of a buzzword in academic and popular contexts, vulnerability is variably defined, though universally (and usually reluctantly) acknowledged. Because connotations of weakness, lack, and inadequacy are common to its definition, vulnerability is often seen as something to escape. However, wishing to avoid vulnerability is like wishing to avoid oxygen: both are imperative to the human experience.

Next, I examine how the maternal body might be seen as a threshold to an enhanced understanding of human life, and consider that maternity's affirmation rather than rejection is highly desirable for both feminist and theological concerns. Finally, the paper highlights the Incarnation as the ultimate situation in which vulnerability is expressed, one in which these three sometimes-conflicting-arenas find a commonality: there, we find God's intention to upend patriarchal systems as Jesus and Mary experience and embrace vulnerability both human and divine. I conclude that the vulnerability expressed within the incarnation allows the maternal body to be seen as a threshold and icon which might point to and provide the way past patriarchy toward a Christian maternal feminist theology.

Part One: Literature Overview

Due to the limited number of works available on childbearing, those that exist have a profound effect, forming the foundation of contemporary studies. This paper will discuss that

[4] With the term "motherhood" being one of large scope and multiple interpretations, I will primarily use the terms "childbearing" and "maternity" throughout this paper in order to focus on the year-long process of pregnancy, birth, and nursing common to the first few months of a newborn's and mother's life.

foundation, then focus on developments of the past twenty years, particularly those regarding vulnerability.

A review of works on maternity in theology and feminism gave birth to the paper's structure and conclusions. I begin with discussions of the rise of anti-natal sentiment in contemporary culture, followed by those lamenting the dearth of maternal focus in academia in theology and feminism. I then consider discussions of childbearing that do appear within feminist and theological contexts to discover areas of overlap that might bring all three into a conversation.

Next, I turn to a consideration of the idea of vulnerability within various contexts, including feminist, maternal, and theological studies, and finally to the importance of vulnerability's expression in the Incarnation of Christ and what that means as we look to move past patriarchy toward a Christian maternal feminist theology.

Anti-Natality in Contemporary Western Culture

In a June 2022 article in Plough magazine titled "The New Malthusians," researcher Lyman Stone sites the foundation of contemporary anti-natal trends in the work of Thomas Malthus, whose 1798 "An Essay on the Principle of Population" triggered over-population panic.[5] He explains the irony of the term "Malthusian," as Malthus was a cleric whose concerns over this issue drew him to conclude that eventually, vice would lead to contraception and abortion, ideas he hated, which nonetheless became the very "solutions" since promoted by those claiming his name for their movement. Finally, Stone offers arguments against the pessimistic outlook held by many today as justification for avoiding childbearing.

We then move to "Humanae Vitae in Light of the War Against Female Fertility," in which Angela Franks, Professor of Theology at St. John's Seminary in Boston, refutes charges that the church's anti-contraceptive, anti-abortion stances are proof it is anti-woman.[6] Echoing Stone's assertion that anti-natality began with Malthus, she discusses how Malthus's work led to the eugenic sentiment at the foundation of early rhetoric from Planned Parenthood founder Margaret Sanger and others in the mid-1950s through 1960s. Franks lays blame there for policies of forced sterilization in various contexts around the world, including long-forgotten programs in the United States which affected more than 60,000 people in 32 states in the twentieth century, and goes on

[5] Lyman Stone, "The New Malthusians," *Plough*, accessed May 10, 2024.
[6] Angela Franks, "Humanae Vitae in Light of the War Against Female Fertility," *Church Life Journal*, accessed May 10, 2024.

to describe the way anti-natality has become commonplace with the acceptance of contraception and abortion.[7] Finally, she argues that attitudes against female fertility damage women by pitting them against their own bodies, harming their psyches and causing physical damage.

Next, I ask, Who is talking about childbearing, and what are they saying?

Feminists Speak of Maternity

In "Motherhood to Mothering and Beyond," Emily Jeremiah traces the history of feminist thinking regarding maternity as evolving through three stages, or waves.[8] Dating these stages is difficult, as researchers employ varying definitions and concur that they overlap. The first stage, led by authors such as Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Freidan, Shulamith Firestone, and Kate Millet, is interpreted as rejecting childbearing. In the second stage, Jeremiah describes authors such as Adrienne Rich, bell hooks, Julia Kristeva, and Sara Ruddick as seeking to "reframe" rather than reject maternity. Finally, Jeremiah turns to the third stage, in which the current feminist movement's engagement with the idea of childbearing is described as at an impasse, with mothers finding themselves torn as they acknowledge both their refusal to go back to oppressive expectations and restrictions involving motherhood, and a desire to embrace its joys as well as struggles. Acknowledging maternity's performativity as well as its embodied reality, Jeremiah celebrates contemporary diversity in thought and advocates for further study. Her encouragement to embrace diverse perspectives within maternal studies is imperative, yet the article does not go far enough in exploring the ambivalences of motherhood in both its performative and embodied aspects.

The "First Wave"

I began my study of the treatment of childbearing within feminism with the first complete unabridged translation of *The Second Sex* by French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir, initially published in 1940.[9] In this version, Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier set out to produce an authentic presentation of de Beauvoir's original work, which is a tour de force of the story of women throughout history in four groupings: fact, fiction, myth, and lived experience.

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[7] Alexandra Stern, "Forced Sterilization Policies in the US Targeted Minorities and Those with Disabilities – and Lasted into the 21st Century," The Conversation website, accessed May 10, 2024.
[8] Emily Jeremiah, "Motherhood to Mothering and Beyond: Maternity in Recent Feminist Thought," *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement*, November 1, 2006.
[9] Simone de Beauvoir, Constance Borde, and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage Books, a division of Random House, Inc., 2011).

Here de Beauvoir paints a picture of the feminine plight that is both pathetic and enraging. This book is essential to understanding feminist theory, raising important assertions regarding the subjugation of women throughout history. While *The Second Sex* offers genuine insight into de Beauvoir's beliefs, it also suggests that de Beauvoir suffered from a form of misogyny. Whether this was due to a lack of personal experience of marriage and motherhood or was a response to the twisted stories about these topics related to her by others, de Beauvoir appears disturbed about the realities of the female body and cynical about interpersonal relationships. Such a negative viewpoint has undoubtedly influenced the writings that followed this work profoundly.

In "The Feminine Mystique at Fifty," Susan Levine reflects on Betty Friedan's 1963's *The Feminine Mystique*, which reflects theories of the first wave despite its later appearance. Levine points out how Freidan paid little attention to motherhood, focusing instead primarily on relieving women from their supposed shackling to domestic concerns.[10] Levine describes Friedan's emphasis on women's need to work outside the home to accomplish something tangible—an echo familiar to readers of de Beauvoir—yet she also draws readers' attention to what often is missed: Freidan's insistence that to be genuinely helpful, the aim of this work should be relationally oriented. Unfortunately, many second-wave feminists overlooked this nuance in their battle to gain the right to work outside the home without thought for what that work might entail—and what it might lack, especially regarding the ways it complicated motherhood.

The "Second Wave"

Themes of oppression and opposition to the body are amplified in feminism's second wave, sometimes dated around the 1960s and 1970s. Radical feminist Shulamith Firestone took the extreme position of declaring motherhood "neither in women's best interest nor in those of the children so reproduced" and calling pregnancy "barbaric."[11]

Picking up the thread three decades after de Beauvoir, poet Adrienne Rich's 1976 *Of Woman Born* sought to separate the *experience of motherhood*, defined as the actions in which mothers engage, from the *institution of motherhood*, defined as the patriarchal system designed to oppress women within their roles as mothers.[12] Rich traces the history of both, beginning with her own experience of pregnancy and motherhood. She then moves to a discussion of dynamics of

[10] Susan Levine, "The Feminine Mystique at Fifty," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 36, no. 2 (2015): 41–46.
[11] Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: Bantam Books, 1970), 92.
[12] Rich, *Of Woman Born*.

power between men and women, from early goddess-worship cultures (which recognized and feared the power of women evident in birth) to the rise of monotheistic religions, which set all goddesses as well as other gods aside (she asserts) in a desire to subvert female power—the god remaining standing being, in all cases, one exemplified as male.[13] Describing the multiple negative results throughout history of this fear and subversion for individuals, societies, and nations, she calls for the upsetting of the institution of motherhood, insisting women must resist the urge to deny their female bodies, but ought instead to learn to think *through* them as a way toward necessary societal transformation. Rich rejects Christian theology, yet her explanation of the depth of powerlessness many women experience under patriarchal systems as well as within their lives as mothers offer much enlightenment to this paper.

Poet, activist, and professor bell hooks called for both the freedom of women and the honoring of mothering as vital work in her 1984 article, "Revolutionary Parenting."[14] Criticizing those who would romanticize childbearing, her goal here is to call for a collaborative philosophy of parenting that reflects the best of what is typically thought of as "mothering," recognizing that affection and care can and should be offered to children not only by mothers but also fathers, other family members, and neighbors, which is undoubtedly important. Hooks denies, however, that a unique relationship exists between mothers and children, a position this paper will refute.

Philosopher Sara Ruddick's 1989 book, *Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace*, builds on Rich's assertion regarding the benefits of maternal activity by focusing on the relationship between mother and child as enacted through the mother's activity and the ways such interaction causes the generation of new patterns of cognition.[15] She theorizes regarding control, vulnerability, and the interplay and conflict between nature and instinct. Ruddick seeks to elucidate the benefits of childbearing and the potential applications of maternal thinking to other kinds of work. She invites all who care for children to enter into similarly maternal ways of thinking. Such an invitation is good, yet the book does not clarify how such an entrance might be accomplished.

The "Third Wave"

Part of the current, third wave of feminism, Andrea O'Reilly, Professor of Women's Studies at York University, in her 2019 "Matricentric Feminism," stresses the need for a mothers-

[13] Ibid., 66–67.
[14] Bell Hooks, "Revolutionary Parenting," in *Maternal Theory: Essential Readings*, ed. Andrea O'Reilly (Toronto: Demeter Press, 2007).
[15] Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989).

interest-centered feminism and introduces the term she coined for such a view.[16]Lamenting feminists' exclusion of motherhood as a focus of their academic work, O'Reilly insists that mothers' concerns should inform theory in specific ways and occupy a place on academic and political stages. She sets her term "matricentric" against "maternalism," claiming that the latter is problematic due to its essentialist foundation that wrongly assigns characteristics such as empathy, intuition, and instincts stereotypically considered "motherly" specifically to women. Noting the linking of motherhood to patriarchal oppression in many feminist works, she challenges anti-natal conclusions by appealing to Andrea Rich's distinction between mothering and motherhood. Finally, O'Reilly stresses the need for matricentric feminism as an area of further study by mothers within the academy, a stance this paper upholds.

Tatjana Takševa, Professor of English Language and Literature at Saint Mary's University in Canada, discusses the lack of inclusion of motherhood studies within women's, gender, and feminist studies in "Motherhood Studies and Feminist Theory."[17] Noting second-wave feminism's rejection of motherhood, she points out the tendency of studies regarding subjectivity, even within feminist works, to focus on competition and individualism, calling for questioning such definitions because they are contrary to contemporary maternal and feminist understanding, which reject these and instead center relationality. Noting the prevalence of studies in non-white contexts which highlight those communities' questioning of typical feminist conclusions assuming the inherent oppression of motherhood, Takševa, like Jeremiah, argues for an appreciation of continued diversity of understandings of maternity within third-wave feminism. Finally, she turns to the works of Adrienne Rich, Sara Ruddick, and Andrea O'Reilly in demonstration of those understandings as well as their applications to political, social, and economic theories (among others). She also reasserts the importance of a maternal focus in studies of women, gender, and feminism. This article's highlighting of the questioning of second-wave feminism's rejection of motherhood due to new understandings of the primacy of relationality explains its inclusion here.

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[16] Andrea O'Reilly, "Matricentric Feminism: A Feminism for Mothers," *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement*, December 16, 2019.

[17] Tatjana Takševa, "Motherhood Studies and Feminist Theory: Elisions and Intersections," *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement* 9, no. 1 (January 1, 2018): 177–94.

In "One is Not Born but Rather Becomes a Mother," Takševa takes her title from de Beauvoir's famous assertion that "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman."[18] She laments the lack of studies of the maternal in academic feminism throughout her paper, noting the theoretical impasse Jeremiah also described. She, however, does not paint this impasse in a positive light but claims it is due to an incorrect concept of identity among feminists that too closely mimics the insufficient view of personhood rooted in patriarchy. Takševa points out the importance of contextualizing the term "motherhood" in writing and speaking of it as she traces maternal studies' progression through different understandings of maternity, noting how patriarchal forces have powerfully shaped them.

Childbearing In the Words of Theologians

That little is found in early church writings regarding the interaction of childbearing and theology is perhaps unsurprising when one considers that celibacy was encouraged at various times across various traditions. In addition, women throughout history have often been discouraged or disbarred from higher learning. While the Virgin Mary has been revered and written about from a distance and often by men, there is little discussion focusing on her childbearing directly. Recently, however, it has become possible to find works that offer first-hand narratives of both the spiritual and physical aspects of childbearing as mothers take pen in hand. In her autobiographical *Motherhood: a Confession*, Baylor University Associate Professor of Theology and Religion Natalie Carnes considers her childbearing journey in light of fourth-century Augustine's *Confessions*.[19] She places the physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects of pregnancy in conversation with theology regarding vulnerability, hospitality, the imitation of Christ, and spiritual growth, illustrating how theology might be furthered by such consideration. Carnes' writing is instructive regarding the wonders of pregnancy and illuminative because she elucidates the relationship between mother and child.

Carrie Frederick Frost explores how childbearing might inform theological understandings in her book *Maternal Body*.[20] Beginning with her own story of becoming pregnant with triplets while studying for a PhD. in theology, ensuing chapters reference icons familiar to her Ukrainian

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[18] Tatjana Takševa, "One Is Not Born but Rather Becomes a Mother: Claiming the Maternal in Women and Gender Studies," *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement*, January 1, 2019.
[19] Nancy Carnes, *Motherhood: A Confession* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2020).
[20] Carrie Frederick Frost, *Maternal Body: A Theology of Incarnation from the Christian East* (New York: Paulist Press, 2019).

Orthodox tradition, which depict various stages of motherhood (conception, pregnancy, birth, postpartum, and nursing). Frost highlights the ways both these icons and the childbearing experience have the potential to deepen understanding of what it means to be embodied persons. She sees such understanding and the embrace of embodiment as potentially contributing to the flourishing of individuals and the church.

After years as a gender and women's studies professor, Abigail Favale converted to Roman Catholicism and now serves as a professor at the McGrath Institute of the University of Notre Dame. Her 2022 book, *The Genesis of Gender*, focuses on the inherent purposefulness of human embodiment.[21] This book seeks to center individual identity in the body as expressive of the image of God and asks the reader to consider pregnancy in that light. Favale's history in gender studies positions her as a knowledgeable interlocutor with a deep understanding of the nuances of philosophies that would deny teleology, contributing much to this paper's study.

Theology and Feminism Speak of One Another

What happens when feminism and theology are brought into conversation with one another? Amy Peeler's 2022 *Women and the Gender of God* sets out to argue that while God is a Father due to his relationship with Jesus, he is not *male* and thus does not value men more than women.[22] She bases this assertion primarily upon Luke's detailed description of the Annunciation, after which he clarifies that the Holy Spirit *came upon* Mary rather than penetrating her, thus eschewing typically masculine action in Jesus' conception. She goes on to explore theological implications of Jesus' gestation and embodiment to demonstrate the value God places on women and problematize interpretations of scripture that limit female participation in any area of life for allegedly biblical reasons. Peeler's arguments are well-founded, based on both formal exegesis and the inherent physical realities of pregnancy, making this text vital.

<u>What is Said Regarding Vulnerability</u>

Contemporarily, we find vulnerability a popular topic of discussion in multiple contexts. For example, research professor Brené Brown writes about the ways a person's level of comfort with vulnerability indicates their capacity for courage in her 2012 book, *Daring Greatly*.[23] While researching the foundations of human connection, Brown developed a theory to explain why some

[21] Abigail Favale, *The Genesis of Gender: A Christian Theory* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2022).
[22] Amy Peeler, *Women and the Gender of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2022).
[23] Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead* (New York: Gotham Books, 2012).

people were more resilient and better able to recover after difficulty and loss than others. In questioning commonalities between people categorized in this way, her team concluded that a capacity for vulnerability topped the list. Brown's concluding understanding of vulnerability not as a weakness but as a strength key to the connection necessary for resilient and abundant living is crucial to this paper and offers an example of current understandings of vulnerability.

Similarly, in her article, "Toward a New Philosophical Imaginary," Pamela Sue Anderson seeks to develop a new way of envisioning vulnerability, suggesting it should be seen primarily as openness rather than wound-ability.[24] Stressing that labeling some people as vulnerable based on social, racial, gender-exclusive, or other categories can lead to an other-ing of those subsets and often elicit harmful responses, she calls for a way of understanding which rejects paternalism in favor of "love, vulnerability, and affection."[25] Following Judith Butler's work on vulnerability, Anderson describes the shift in contemporary understanding of personhood as evolving to one based on relationship rather than individualism and insists that people's responsiveness to the possibility of love is a more accurate understanding of vulnerability.

In "A Threshold for Enhancing Human Life," Kristine Culp of the University of Chicago Divinity School further explores Anderson's work with the Enhancing Life Project, explicitly highlighting her concept of capability within vulnerability.[26] Culp traces Anderson's research regarding radical human enhancement, beginning with a study of human response to loss. While Anderson began by understanding vulnerability as the always-negative loss of capability, she later modified that view to define vulnerability as openness to both negative and positive changes. While rejecting *prescribed* vulnerability as an inappropriate moral demand, she ultimately locates the capacity for enhanced life in vulnerability.

As suggested by Culp's call for acceptance of de Beauvoir's declaration of the body as a situation, I will argue that the childbearing body is the embodied situation where the capability that lies within vulnerability is on full display, offering the possibility of enhanced life—a threshold where it is possible to move beyond natural capability and experience transformation.

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[24] Pamela Sue Anderson, "Toward a New Philosophical Imaginary," ed. Sabina Lavibond and A.W. Moore, *Angelaki* 25, no. 1–2 (2020): 8–22.
[25] Anderson, "Toward a New Philosophical Imaginary," 9.
[26] Kristine A. Culp, "A Threshold for Enhancing Human Life," *Angelaki* 25, no. 1–2 (March 3, 2020): 231–44.

Vulnerability in Theology

Sarah Coakley's *Powers and Submissions* stresses the importance of theology to feminist studies.[27] Coakley proclaims the necessity of submission to the divine will and highlights contemplative prayer as the key to such submission and human empowerment. Within this book, the term vulnerability is often used in describing the human's stance before God, and Christ's incarnation serves as the foundational demonstration and model of power in vulnerability. Coakley asserts that such vulnerability can transform those who engage in it as a spiritual practice and has the potential to dismantle power systems based on patriarchy.

In the Christian Century article "Prayerful Vulnerability," Mark Oppenheimer discusses Coakley's understanding of prayer as a means of engagement with the Trinity, emphasizing the Spirit as its entry point.[28] In Oppenheimer's view, such an emphasis is "feminine" in nature as opposed to a more "male," rational appeal to Father and Son. Oppenheimer explains that it is specifically in prayer that Coakley finds the vulnerability often rejected by feminists to be helpful and even necessary, reimaging it as a place of power and transformation that may affect individuals and lend strength to a prophetic voice. While the article is primarily biographical, Oppenheimer's focus on the link of vulnerability to prayer in Coakley's work is vital to answer feminist concerns regarding potential exploitation.

Of course, not everyone agrees that vulnerability is constructive. "The Status of Vulnerability in a Theology of the Christian Life" by Gabrielle Thomas, Professor of Early Christianity and Anglican Studies, contrasts vulnerability in the writings of Gregory of Nyssa and Sarah Coakley.[29] Drawing from Gregory's writings which condemn vulnerability as dangerous, she claims that Sarah Coakley's work improperly exalts vulnerability, particularly in the context of the Christian's relationship with God. Thomas takes issue with the valorization of vulnerability when it is seen as exalting pain and suffering, as she believes Coakley insists (I am not satisfied that she reads Coakley correctly here.) Nevertheless, due to the exploitation of vulnerability which is always potential, concerns must be taken into account and addressed seriously.

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[27] Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, Challenges in Contemporary Theology (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2002).
[28] Mark Oppenheimer, "Prayerful Vulnerability: Sarah Coakley Reconstructs Feminism," *Christian Century*, June 28, 2003.
[29] Gabrielle Thomas, "The Status of Vulnerability in a Theology of the Christian Life: Gregory of Nyssa on the 'Wound of Love' in Conversation with Sarah Coakley," *Modern Theology*, June 22, 2022.

Jan-Olav Henrikson's article, "Embodied, Relational, Desiring, Vulnerable: Reconsidering Imago Dei," addresses the necessity of acknowledging vulnerability as part of being human.[30] He explains that contemporary theology increasingly looks to define the concept of humanity as bearing God's image in relational terms, as opposed to those which are material or functional, and asserts that humanity's propensity toward desire and vulnerability are intrinsic to our bearing of God's image and therefore inherently good. From Heike Springhart's work on vulnerability, Henriksen turns to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's work on desire, emphasizing both authors' convictions that vulnerability and desire are relational and establish us as dependent beings. Finally, Henriksen concludes that to live well one must orient oneself towards desire and vulnerability, suggesting love as the means of expressing both. The article's appeal to vulnerability and desire are of interest here due to the expression of both in maternity.

Missiologist Miriam Leidinger also engages the concept of vulnerability and its various aspects and effects in concert with theology in her *Missions Issues* article, "Vulner-ability: A Systematic Theological Approach to an Ambivalent Term," asking how the vulnerability of humanity might be spoken of in terms of Christ's embodied life.[31] With attention to Judith Butler's work on vulnerability, Leidinger seeks to ground vulnerability within material embodiment and frames the experience of that embodiment as pain and suffering, resilience and resistance. Finally, she looks to Jürgen Moltmann for a cross-centered theology that acknowledges Christ's participation in human suffering, adding a warning from liberation theologian Jon Sobrino, who calls our attention to the potential pitfalls of focusing on vulnerability's benefits if such a focus results in continued victimization of the oppressed. This article offers a clear description of vulnerability and its theological implications, as well as the tensions and ambivalences such a focus highlights, all of which are particularly germane to the topic of childbearing.

Vulnerability in Childbearing

Much of the vulnerability experienced by mothers obviously arises from the physical aspects of childbearing itself. For this section, I have purposefully turned to the works of mothers who write about childbearing experiences, as I want to offer direct interaction with these ideas. Greek Orthodox childbirth educator Laura Jansson follows the journey of pregnancy week by week

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[30] Jan-Olav Henriksen, "Embodied, Relational, Desiring, Vulnerable – Reconsidering Imago Dei," *Neue Zeitschrift Für Systematische Theologie Und Religionsphilosophie* 62, no. 3 (September 20, 2020): 267–94.
[31] Miriam Leidinger, "Vulner-Ability: A Systematic Theological Approach to an Ambivalent Term," *Mission Studies* 37 (December 16, 2020): 397–415.

in her book *Fertile Ground*.[32] Drawing on her own pregnancy experience and the experiences of hundreds of women she has coached, she reflects upon them from a theological standpoint. Jansson's work is helpful for the wonder it reveals as inherent in these momentous processes and the author's expression of the potential for spiritual development in a mother's contemplative response to pregnancy.

Feminist author Angela Garbes discusses the scientific, philosophic, and personal realities of mothering in *Like a Mother*.[33] Through fascinating details about the physiology of childbearing, ponderings on the vulnerabilities of maternity, and studies exploring the emotional impact of parenting on mothers, Garbes argues from each of these components for a societal adjustment that would reflect a reasonable response to them in the common yet life-changing experience of childbearing.

While the childbearing mother is clearly vulnerable in multiple ways, there is another person involved who is even more so: the child being borne.

Cohabitation: Welcoming the Vulnerable Other

Next, I turn to an article not intended to be part of a discussion of pregnancy yet of particular interest to this one. In "Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation," Judith Butler, Professor of Comparative Literature at the University of California, Berkeley, writes of the ethical responsibilities each of us has to the other, whether the other be near or far away.[34] Butler claims universal human boundedness transcends proximity of place, context, ethnicity, and other potential divisions, stating that personhood is rooted in dependence on community, which implies vulnerability to all. Drawing on Levinas's ethical philosophy of responsibility for the other, Butler primarily applies this ethic of care for the other to politics, concluding that it leads necessarily to the rejection of war. However, I would like to expand this conclusion by suggesting that Butler's understanding of our boundedness and resultant responsibility to the other also has applications to childbearing as the ultimate cohabitation, with powerful implications for the abortion debate.

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[32] Laura S. Jansson, *Fertile Ground: A Pilgrimage Through Pregnancy* (Chesterton, IN: Ancient Faith Publishing, 2019).
[33] Angela Garbes, *Like a Mother: A Feminist Journey Through the Science and Culture of Pregnancy* (New York: Harper Collins, 2018).
[34] Judith Butler, "Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation," *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 26, no. 2 (2012): 134–51.

The Incarnation

With all this work on vulnerability and embodiment in hand, we turn to consider the Incarnation of Christ.

First, a Mother

The Catholic church has maintained the veneration of Mary for centuries, in contrast to her relative minimization in most Protestant theology. Therefore, Catholic studies and writings about her are prolific and highlight doctrines regarding her own immaculate conception, perpetual virginity, bodily assumption, and current status as Queen of Heaven.[35] Theologians have argued about the applicability of Mary's motherhood as a model for others partly because of these exceptional qualities. In "Mary's Poverty, an Example of a Misogynistic Agenda?" Angela Franks highlights the debate by asking whether Mary can legitimately serve as a model of the Christian life or if she is merely a tool of repression in the hands of a church system endeavoring to restrain women beneath the control of men.[36] Her research is broad, and she concludes that Mary's reception of the givenness of her life is, like Christ's, a model which can be instructive for every person, inviting us to consider the Incarnation from every angle.

Then, a Son

Elizabeth O'Donnell Gandolfo, Associate Professor of Catholic and Latin American Studies at Wake Forest University, advises the recovery of the nativity, particularly in contemplative thought, in her article, "A Truly Human Incarnation."[37] She highlights the vulnerability Christ assumed in his Incarnation and notes the power of divinity's union with humanity within that vulnerability. Critiquing Grace Jantzen's call for attention to natality, she question Jantzen's lack of acknowledgment of vulnerability as an inherent component of every person's humanity.[38] Gandalfo explains that natality and morbidity presuppose one another and are inextricably linked, and, citing the works of Nicholas of Cusa and Gregory of Nyssa on kenosis, claims that this bond of vulnerability is central to all of humanity. She frames the link between vulnerability and power as being expressed most fully in the Incarnation and concludes that every

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[35] Pope Pius XII, , "Munificentissimus Deus (November 1, 1950) | PIUS XII," accessed May 10, 2024.
[36] Angela Franks, "Mary's Poverty, an Example of a Misogynistic Ecclesial Agenda?," *Church Life Journal*, January 1, 2021.
[37] Elizabeth O'Donnell Gandolfo, "A Truly Human Incarnation: Recovering a Place for Nativity in Contemporary Christology," *Theology Today* 70, no. 4 (2013): 382–93.
[38] Grace M. Jantzen, *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

new childbirth is another icon of this attachment and capable, upon contemplation, of enhancing our union with God and our care for one another.

Kathryn Tanner, Professor of Divinity and Religious Studies at Yale University, calls for a model of salvation based on the incarnation in her chapter, "Death and Sacrifice," in *Christ the Key*.[39] Describing the multiple and conflicting models common to the study of soteriology, she asserts that such diversity implies a need for critical evaluation of each. Tanner proposes that focusing on the cross alone is inadequate for understanding divinity's assumption of humanity in the person of Jesus and the extent of salvation's reach to all human life. An incarnational model incorporates the reality of human life in a more embodied manner, thus uplifting the importance of maternity.

In Summary

Why does all this matter? Are there any benefits to those who engage in childbearing or who would spend time considering its implications? In her article, "Epistemology or Bust" Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore argues for acknowledging maternal experience as the entrance to a new way of knowing with profound implications for theology.[40] Highlighting the unique nature of the embodied experience of motherhood, she echoes those who lament the missing voice of such experience within the academy. She stresses the vulnerability of childbearing as key to an embodied knowing that is currently neglected. Miller-McLemore's description of her own maternal experience provides powerful images of vulnerability. She claims maternal knowing has the potential to break down walls of division in multiple disciplines, adding that the addition of an acknowledgment of men's vulnerabilities might revolutionize epistemology. I hope to make here an effort in the direction of her suggestion. While McLemore's argument is strong, it would benefit from examples of what such epistemology looks like as applied to specific disciplines.

Considering the human experience of vulnerability in feminism, theology, and maternity suggests that the Incarnation makes it possible to embrace a Christian maternal feminist theology that moves past patriarchy. Doing so may allow both child-bearers and all who have been born to experience spiritual growth and enhanced relationships with themselves and the world as they come to experience and embrace the interconnectedness of life.

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[39] Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key*, Current Issues in Theology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
[40] Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, "Epistemology or Bust: A Maternal Feminist Knowledge of Knowing," *The Journal of Religion* 72, no. 2 (1992): 229–47.

Part Two: Speaking of Maternity

To move past patriarchy toward a Christian maternal feminist theology, we must first understand what has been said by those whose primary concerns lie in each of these areas. This chapter begins by discussing current attitudes around childbearing and seeking out the roots of such attitudes. Next, it explores what the voices of feminism, maternity, and theology say about one another. Finally, the realities of embodiment are explored as forming the basis for what is most important in this work.

Current Attitudes Regarding Childbearing

Declarations of pregnancy are often met with joy. Often, that is, yet not always; the implications of such a life-altering event are understandably immense and may conversely give rise to sadness, fear, hostility, or any other of a diverse range of emotions influenced by the practical circumstances as well as the emotional and spiritual concerns of those involved. Cultural pressures also play a role in attitudes regarding childbearing, with contemporary mothers surrounded by a slew of rhetoric that increasingly tends toward the anti-maternal. Books like *The Case for Not Being Born* and *Abolish the Family* argue against childbearing, newspaper articles highlight the gruesome aspects of childbirth, protestors argue that humanity should let itself die out, and on a recent Instagram live stream, United States Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez questioned the ethics of bringing children into the world.[41] In addition, following the 2022 repeal of Roe v. Wade, many clinics reported a suddenly-increased demand for vasectomies, with one study showing online searches for vasectomy providers rising over 850%.[42] Meanwhile, the online sale of abortion drugs also increased as a defense against the day purchasers might believe them needed and find them unavailable.[43] Reflecting on the proliferation of recent news articles decrying the terrors of pregnancy and childbirth, Kat Rosenfeld writes, "You would be forgiven for coming to the conclusion that … no woman in her right mind would ever carry a pregnancy to term unless she had some sort of death wish."[44]

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[41]Cara Buckley, "Earth Now Has 8 Billion Humans. This Man Wishes There Were None." The New York Times. The New York Times, November 23, 2023; Nicole Goodkind, "Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez Asks: Is It OK to Have Kids?," Newsweek, February 25, 2019.

[42] Stanton Honig, "Overturning Roe vs. Wade Causes Uptick in Vasectomy Consults," Yale School of Medicine website, accessed February 3, 2023.

[43] Anne Flaherty, "Women Turn to At-Home Abortions, as Unregulated Pill Sites Expand Operations," ABC News, accessed February 3, 2023.

[44] Kat Rosenfield, "The Left Killed the Pro-Choice Coalition," UnHerd, June 28, 2022.

Why such antagonism toward childbearing?

The genesis of such feeling may be situated in the work of Thomas Malthus, who wrote in the 1800s of a newly burgeoning fear of overpopulation as an imminent threat to the world's resources. This fear can be traced through various eugenic iterations, including the little-known history of forced sterilizations worldwide. These extend beyond China's well-known one-child population policy to programs in nations as diverse as Peru, India, and the United States, where over 60,000 such sterilizations took place in the twentieth century.[45] At the time, population growth-reduction advocates even questioned the normalcy of pregnancy; one writer, William Hearn, referred to human population growth as "carcinogenic."[46]

However, population control is not the only concern of those wishing to limit birth. Famous for promoting contraception, Margaret Sanger's "birth control, population control, and eugenic control" program continued the 1900s thread of anti-natal rhetoric.[47] Angela Franks notes that Sanger was also dedicated to the "untrammeled pursuit of sexual pleasure," which abortion and contraception made possible.[48] While some view such a focus as pro-woman, Franks questions this conclusion because Sanger rejected women's natural fertility. She writes, "When female fertility is valued, women's bodies are recognized as having a larger purpose beyond male sexual fantasy. That purpose is, of course, the bearing of children …."[49]While Franks may be faulted for not mentioning the reality of female sexual desire as part of the purpose of women's bodies, her call for the valuing of childbearing is vital.

National leaders may institute population control policies with benevolent intent due to the limitations of their country's resources as they endeavor to prevent declines in well-being. However, it must be asked, *what is the perhaps unintended result of such rhetoric*? In the United States, the framing of pregnancy-as-problem has fed unhealthy self-identity issues in young girls, who experience pressure to solve the world's problems through controlling or inhibiting their fertility as "the need to turn against their own bodies in order to be liberated."[50] Franks writes, "Most women unconsciously think: I'm imprisoned by my body … and I need to control it, bend

[45] Stern, "Forced Sterilization Policies."
[46] Franks, "Humanae Vitae," 6.
[47] Ibid., 4.
[48] Ibid., 4.
[49] Ibid., 8.
[50] Ibid., 7.

it to my will, in order to be free. My body, especially my fertility, is not a gift but a burden."[51] Such thoughts become understandable when we recognize that when the term "reproductive care" is used, what is usually meant is limiting or preventing reproduction; little, if any, attention is paid to care in terms of preserving or enhancing reproductive capabilities. While certainly not insisting that childbearing should be without limitation, I wish to question the overall message that avoiding childbearing should be the primary goal of women's healthcare, with contraception the preferred solution to the body's presumably problematic but actually healthy functioning.

Lyman Stone notes an increasing sense that it is better not to be born and records a drift toward despair in contemporary society.[52] However, Stone faults those who take a nihilistic view, insisting that each human life is worthwhile and that valuations of individual lives based on the relative poverty or wealth of the subjects being studied are deeply flawed. He argues that hope is a quality increasingly missing from today's rhetoric as it becomes more and more acceptable to judge the worthwhile-ness of living in monetary terms, and calls for serious questioning of this value system, writing, "The argument made by today's new Malthusians, that life is at the point of becoming unbearable, is factually and morally wrong, even as it becomes increasingly prevalent."[53]

The Silence of Mothers

Would-be-feminist mothers often experience a sense of betrayal to either childbearing or the feminist cause; there exists an uncomfortable sense that maternity is not to be spoken of—not even among women. Takševa writes, "Within the mainstream feminist paradigm, the absence of the maternal bespeaks the perspective that the feminist empowerment project is essentially incompatible with the social and personal entanglements arising out of the maternal role."[54] Noting the lack of discussion of maternal concerns and potentialities, many conclude that they must choose between childbearing and feminism.

Therefore, it has historically been challenging to find works in which mothers' voices are heard; Bonnie Miller Macklemore writes, "Mother as speaking subject is missing from literary, psychoanalytic, ethical, and religious dramas."[55] As recently as 2019, Andrea O'Reilly reported

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[51] Ibid., 7
[52] Stone, "The New Malthusians," 7.
[53] Ibid., 9.
[54] Takševa, "One Is Not Born but Rather Becomes a Mother," 29.
[55] Miller-McLemore, "Epistemology or Bust," 237.

that only 1 to 3% of work available within academic textbooks and journals takes motherhood as its topic, even though over 80% of women become mothers.[56] Through the theory she calls "matricentric feminism," O'Reilly set out to "make motherhood the business of feminism by positioning mother's needs and concerns as the starting point for theory and politics on and for women's empowerment."[57] She claims such feminism is necessary because while the movement has been around for decades, mothers remain disempowered.[58] The list of academic disciplines O'Reilly's work draws from includes history, anthropology, literary studies, and sociology, but not theology. Natalie Carnes similarly calls for the usually absent lives of women and children to become the focus of theological work.[59] The neglect of such focus leaves a gap that this paper attempts to fill.

Anti-Maternal Voices

When we search for what has been said regarding maternity by feminist authors, we find much antipathy toward childbearing. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex,* described in the forward of a 2009 translation as "one of the most important books of the twentieth century, upon which much of the modern feminist movement was built," contributed to this trend by painting a picture of women as not just generally oppressed, but oppressed by their very bodies.[60] The book is striking for its stark negativity toward motherhood. In the one chapter devoted exclusively to the topic, nine of its 46 pages focus on abortion.[61] De Beauvoir's descriptions of pregnancy are predominately negative and full of frightening imagery; at one point, she describes it as a "mutilation" and the fetus as a "parasite exploiting" a woman's body.[62] Elsewhere, *The Second Sex* refers to the fetus as "a hostile element" and the human species as "eating away at" mothers.[63] If this is one of the foundational texts of feminism, it seems little wonder that 75 years later, as Tatjana Takševa claims, most feminist rhetoric regarding childbearing takes a "distinctly negative stance toward motherhood."[64] De Beauvoir locates the devaluation of maternity early in human history as she describes the search for purpose as a competition between men and women:

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[56] O'Reilly, "Matricentric Feminism," 19.
[57] Ibid., 17.
[58] Ibid., 13.
[59] Carnes, *Motherhood: A Confession*, 3.
[60] Beauvoir et al, *The Second Sex*, xx.
[61] Ibid., 524.
[62] Ibid., 538.
[63] Ibid., 42.
[64] Tatjana Takševa, "Motherhood Studies,"179.

> The worst curse on woman is her exclusion from warrior expeditions; it is not in giving life but risking his life that man raises himself above the animal; this is why throughout humanity, superiority has been granted not to the sex that gives birth but to the one that kills. … Her misfortune is to have been biologically destined to repeat Life, while in her own eyes Life in itself does not provide her reasons for being, and these reasons are more important than life itself.[65]

My reading of de Beauvoir's work suggests a tacit agreement with this flawed value system that she appears to observe bitterly yet not reject, one that elevates production over reproduction. Elshtain, too, notes de Beauvoir's apparent acceptance of a "narcissistic male view," criticizing its "capitulation to silencing terms and female self-denial."[66] It is striking that nowhere does de Beauvoir suggest that a woman's capacity for giving life should be seen as the more inherently powerful and meaningful expression of humanity, a greater or even merely equal good.

This reluctant yet apparent acceptance of the superiority of the male role and an accompanying desire to escape motherhood seems to have become common in the work of feminists who followed. Takševa describes this rejection of the maternal which occurs right alongside the rejection of misogyny in academic feminist writings, noting the frightening inference such rejection implies: "The politics of exclusion of the maternal from academic feminism is thus symptomatic of a larger feminist ideological investment in a concept of identity that alarmingly mirrors the disembodied, male and unencumbered western model of the self."[67] Such a model has not served the world well, inhabited as it is by embodied, female and male, inherently encumbered humans, indicating a new model is required.

Pro-Maternal Voices

Not all feminists reject childbearing, however. Recognizing the vast diversity of circumstances and experiences possible within maternity, feminist poet Adrienne Rich takes a middle road, calling for a differentiation between mother*ing* as an experience that might be empowering and mother*hood* as the institution which seeks to ensure women's subjugation.[68] Acknowledging that some women may find enrichment and fulfillment in their reproductive capacities, she claims the institution has "ghettoized and degraded female potentialities."[69] Due to

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[65] Beauvoir et al, *The Second Sex*, 74.
[66] Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Public Man Private Woman: Women in Social and Political Thought*, 2nd ed. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981), 306–10.
[67] Tatjana Takševa, "One Is Not Born," 31.
[68] Rich, *Of Woman Born*.
[69] Ibid., 13.

this dichotomy, feminists have often found themselves torn in attempts to navigate maternity. Jean Bethke Elshtain describes one friend's experience of being rebuked during a mother's support meeting for expressing ambivalent feelings about changes in her beliefs and values after becoming a mother, upon which the group's leader dismissively declared, "We will have no diaper talk here." Elshtain continues, "My friend and I left, for we could not treat our children as abstractions, as nuisances to be overcome, or as evidence of our sad capitulation to the terms of patriarchy."[70] Must these be the only options available to women? It can certainly seem that way. Embracing maternity alongside a belief in the equality of men and women leaves many women philosophically homeless.

Theologians Speak About Maternity

What do theologians have to say about childbearing? Not much, apparently. Miller-McLemore laments the lack of academic theological works regarding maternity, saying feminist theologians fail to explore what might be learned through the experience of motherhood.[71] Likewise, Grace Jantzen claims, "Birth is not a topic that receives attention in any philosophy of religion, so far as I am aware."[72] However, while representations and recognition of childbearing may be few and far between in theological academia and contemporary church practices, it does not follow that the idea of maternity is absent from the Hebrew scriptures, the New Testament, or early Christian teaching and practice.

Scripture offers several examples of God's use of maternal imagery in reference to himself. "You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you; you forgot the God who gave you birth," Deuteronomy declares.[73] Here, the author quotes God's description of his founding of the nation of Israel as both bearing and birthing. Similar language appears in Isaiah regarding God's power and compassion: "For a long time I have held my peace, I have kept myself still and restrained myself; now I will cry out like a woman in labor, I will gasp and pant."[74] The nurturing that follows birth is also used as a metaphor: "As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem."[75] Maternal imagery continues in the New Testament as Jesus is quoted

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[70] Elshtain, *Public Man Private Woman*, 334.
[71] Miller-McLemore, "Epistemology or Bust," 230.
[72] Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, 141.
[73] Deuteronomy 32:18, New American Standard Bible.
[74] Isaiah 42:14.
[75] Isaiah 66:13.

as longing to gather his people like a hen gathers her chicks.[76] This usage throughout scripture suggests God's willingness to associate himself with childbearing intimately, as well as his acceptance of female bodies, as opposed to claims that he rejects or maligns them.

Theologians past and present have spoken of "the womb of God" as the origin of all creation.[77] The Council of Toledo wrote of Christ specifically being begotten from the womb of God.[78] Such a phrase is fascinating and undoubtedly disruptive to any insistence that God is male. Additionally, when the words *compassion* or *mercy* appear in scripture, most often referring to God's feelings toward a person or nation, they often share a Hebrew root: *rechem*—or womb.[79] Early church traditions included natal imagery such as naked, fully immersive baptisms representing the convert's new birth.[80] Often, a baptismal font was crafted in a womb-like shape, suggested by an understanding of the Holy Spirit as a mother and the new birth of the Christian from the womb of God.[81] This understanding finds foundations in the tradition of Jesus' discussion with Nicodemus recorded in John 3, where Jesus insists that those who wish to see the kingdom of God must be "born again."[82] So we see that while twenty-first century Christians, and perhaps evangelical Christians in particular, may be hesitant to discuss or acknowledge childbearing as a subject important to theology, the early church was not, but instead looked to it for understanding regarding humanity's relationship with God.

The Importance of Embodiment to Voice

In feminist writing, anti-childbearing rhetoric seems to stem from a desire to escape the biological realities of female bodies, due at least in part to the vulnerability experienced as a result of patriarchal systems' oppression often accomplished through the control of those bodies. Such a desire is understandable yet has multiple disadvantages, not the least of which is the impossibility of escaping embodiment. While this is not the place for an extended debate about mind-body dualism, Andrea Rich's assertion that "women are controlled by lashing us to our bodies" seems

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[76] Matt. 23:37.
[77] Nadia Marais, "'Bearing Fruit'?: Doing Theology from God's Womb," *Reformed Theology in Africa*, 1 (2019): 17–18.
[78] Ibid., 14.
[79] "Compassion," Oxford Reference, accessed March 16, 2023.
[80] Carnes, *Motherhood: A Confession*, 3.
[81] Ally Kateusz, "Holy Spirit Mother, the Baptismal Womb, and the Walesby Tank: Excavating Early Christian Women Baptizers," *Feminist Theology* 31 (January 1, 2023): 144-45.
[82] John 3:3.

to me nonsensical, as it must be asked who is doing this "lashing" and how it is to be undone.[83] While we may well concede that women are often controlled, the phraseology here is problematic because it implies that "us" and "our bodies" are separate entities capable of being either fixed together or somehow split apart. Although there have been centuries of philosophical debates about that, in everyday experience bodies are intrinsic to humanity. This is a recognition of simple reality, not punishment. While those bodies are both material and social, we must find ways to condemn and resist their exploitation, not their function.

Furthermore, embodiment is purposeful. Without our bodies, there is no experience nor expression of personhood; our bodies are the means by which we know and make ourselves known.[84] This embodiment, I argue, offers value best not left behind or rejected but considered and understood.

In Summary

It is challenging to hear mothers' voices, even for those seeking them out. The tendency toward anti-maternal rhetoric may be rooted in early seekers of female-male equality, who sought to escape patriarchal systems' wielding of motherhood as a weapon of oppression. However, some voices highlight the positive aspects of childbearing and insist on the necessity of finding a way forward that includes maternity. Evangelical theology and church practices largely avoid the topic of childbearing, yet this, too, must be questioned.

It is necessary again to make clear that movement toward a Christian maternal feminist theology does not seek to minimize people who have chosen not to have children, nor to claim that childbearing is the *most* enlightening contributor of insight into theological concerns, nor to increase the grief experienced by those who long to be mothers and are not. Instead, it is to agree with O'Reilly that "Any understanding of mother's lives is incomplete without a consideration of how becoming and being a mother shape a woman's sense of self and how she sees the world."[85] In other words, gestation, birthing, nursing, and caring for young children make up a large part of most women's lives (in quality, if not quantity), a part that cannot be excluded or denied by any movement that would seek to understand them. With Miller-McLemore, I ask, "Can we not uncover an experience of motherhood that lies somewhere between the extremes of oppressive

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[83] Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 13.
[84] Mary Healy, *Men and Women Are From Eden* (Cincinnati: Servant Books, 2005), 15.
[85] O'Reilly, "Matricentric Feminism," 14.

traditional discourse and avant-garde feminist protest that totally rejects this but offers nothing in its place?"[86]

In attempting to uncover and consider such a maternal experience, it becomes apparent that the concept of vulnerability is common to the concerns of feminists, mothers, and theologians alike. Thus, vulnerability is the focus of the next part of this paper.

Part 3: Vulnerability

In this Part, vulnerability takes center stage as current understandings are contrasted with historical ones. The inescapable nature of vulnerability will be highlighted, and its desirability considered. Mothers' voices will then be invited to speak as the vulnerability of childbearing is brought into focus. Finally, I suggest the childbearing body should be considered as both a threshold and an icon.

Vulnerability Defined

Susceptibility to harm. *Exploitable weakness*. *Inherent flaws*. Such descriptors, all commonly understood to apply to the concept of vulnerability, have historically led to its rejection and dismissal. However, Miriam Leidinger notes that growing knowledge of world events and multiplying difficulties within those events may contribute to the increasing academic interest in vulnerability.[87] Pain and suffering clearly persist as inherent qualities of human embodiment, with the materiality of the body making vulnerability tangible in particular places.[88] Such reality defies attempts to ignore or avoid it. As Jan-Olav Henriksen writes, "Because vulnerability is a deeply ambiguous element in this existence, it constantly sparks the need for orientation, transformation, and reflection with regard to the conditions on which human beings live, and how to cope with it. This is unavoidable because to be human is to be vulnerable."[89] We understand this ambiguity. Nevertheless, regardless of our desire to be impervious to outside effects (especially adverse ones), our bodies root us firmly to physical needs: food, shelter, and clothing, to be sure, but also emotional needs such as attention, connection, and affection.

Researcher Brené Brown explains that in her team's research on resilience, willingness to experience and express vulnerability contributed to the well-being of their subjects in every area,

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[86] Miller-McLemore, "Epistemology or Bust," 236.
[87] Leidinger, "Vulner-Ability," 398.
[88] Ibid., 404.
[89] Henriksen, "Embodied, Relational, Desiring, Vulnerable – Reconsidering Imago Dei," 273–74.

both by self-report and the researchers' surprised conclusion.[90] She notes that vulnerability is experienced within relationships; our needs are always met, unmet, or exploited in the context of human connections. In summary of her findings, Brown concludes, "Vulnerability is the core, the heart, the center of meaningful human experiences."[91] In other words, it is within relationships that purpose and fulfillment may be found. Her research explained that people risk diminished courage, clarity, and connection if they do not understand and accept their vulnerability.[92]

However, the frequent exploitation of vulnerability in relationships has justifiably caused a feminist outcry against patriarchal systems that seek to oppress. It is here that the idea of *appropriate* vulnerability becomes essential. Karen Lebacqz highlights the importance of appropriate vulnerability within sexual encounters in particular, but this is a critical concept for all relationships.[93] Exploiting vulnerability in any area—financial, social, spiritual, intellectual, relational, etcetera—must be condemned. The exploitation of others' vulnerability, which often happens within patriarchal systems, is an act of power-seeking domination, leading not to enhanced lives and relationships but devastation and brokenness. Thus, protecting others must always be highlighted in any discussion of vulnerability.

Vulnerability and Theology

Within theological works, vulnerability is a fraught topic. Sarah Coakley begins her book *Powers and Submissions* with a chapter subtitled "On the Repression of 'Vulnerability' in Christian Feminist Writing."[94] She first acknowledges the ambiguity of vulnerability, recognizing the difficulty of reconciling the idea of submission with the cry for equality and freedom from oppression, especially for women.[95] Nevertheless, she questions Christian feminists who seek to minimize the reality of vulnerability, claiming that accompanying this suppression is "a failure to confront issues of fragility, suffering, or self-emptying except in terms of victimology."[96] Rather than viewing it this way, Coakley focuses on vulnerability as necessary to Christian practice.

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[90] Brown, *Daring Greatly,* 11–12.
[91] Brown, *Daring Greatly*, 12.
[92] Ibid., 2.
[93] Karen Lebacqz, "Appropriate Vulnerability: A Sexual Ethic for Singles," in *Christian Perspectives on Sexuality and Gender*, ed. Adrian Thatcher and Elizabeth Stuart (Leominster, Herefordshire and Grand Rapids, MI: Gracewing and Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1996).
[94] Coakley, *Powers and Submissions,* 3.
[95] Ibid., xv.
[96] Sarah Coakley, "Waiting for God," *Christian Century*, June 28, 2003, 27.

At the root of the word vulnerability is the Latin *vulnus*, or "wound," making its rejection by those seeking to free women from harm understandable. Accordingly, Miriam Leidinger insists we take tensions inherent in any discussion of vulnerability seriously, warning, "We need a vulnerable theology in order to engage in a theology of vulnerability."[97] She also highlights that to the Latin *vulnus,* we have attached the English noun *ability*. Thus, Leidinger notes, we have a word implying both the ability to be wounded and the ability of or in the wound itself.[98] This idea is key as we expand our understanding of vulnerability.

Furthermore, humanity's inability to escape vulnerability indicates that such escape may not be desirable or necessary, as Henriksen argues: "Vulnerability is part of the created world, and hence it can be considered a part of what constitutes the goodness of creation."[99] Acceptance of appropriate vulnerability, therefore, is a healthy response for those who will inevitably encounter it, while its exploitation requires resistance.

The Vulnerability of Embodiment

Judith Butler writes of the connected vulnerability humans experience in evocatively enlightening ways. Due to the givenness of life which comes to us apart from our conscious volition, Butler claims we are "under an obligation" toward others.[100] Describing the self as defined fundamentally by attachment and receptivity, Butler notes this means we experience the possibility of harm. Nevertheless, our connections, as well as our obligations to one another, remain: "I want to insist upon a certain intertwinement between... other lives and my own... whatever sense our life has is derived from precisely this sociality, this being already, and from the start, dependent on a world of others, constituted in and by a social world."[101] Recognizing this dependence and intertwinement as inescapable vulnerability causes us to acknowledge our bodies in a way that may be challenging: not as ends but as places of inherent connection. As Butler suggests, "To find that one's life is also the life of others … means that one's boundary is at once a limit and a site of adjacency, a mode of spatial and temporal nearness and even boundedness."[102]

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[97] Leidinger, "Vulner-Ability," 412.
[98] Ibid., 399.
[99] Henriksen, "Embodied, Relational, Desiring, Vulnerable – Reconsidering Imago Dei," 275.
[100] Butler, "Precarious Life," 143.
[101] Ibid., 140–41.
[102] Ibid., 141.

Such connectedness is vividly apparent in the maternal-fetal pair. Here, at our beginning, is the truth of our identity as connected beings, whether we consider our literal attachment by the umbilical cord or the intimate connection of the nursing dyad. This understanding is vital to a Christian maternal feminist theology because of its contribution to our knowledge of what it means to be human; vulnerability is fundamental to humanity. Scripture indicates this revelatory potential of the body when it says humans were created in God's image; as Abigail Favale asserts regarding the teleological nature of Christianity, being created in God's image indicates our bodies are telling us something.[103] Favale writes, "Genesis … presents a correspondence between human and divine nature. This mirroring is made explicit in the Imago Dei language of chapter one. … He is a God who loves, and he creates beings who are made to love and be loved."[104] The maternal body declares that humans are made for the vulnerability of relationships.

Maternal Bodies Speak

As Carrie Frost claims, mothers experience "a singular incarnational reality" worth exploring.[105] To say so is not to assert the superiority of the maternal experience but to bring it out of the shadows. It is a plea for mothers' voices to be heard, allowing a clearer image of God and our lives as human beings to become visible. What, then, do maternal bodies have to say for themselves?

Abigail Favale describes one purpose of the body as the expression of "our inherent capacity and need for interpersonal communion."[106] Similarly, Mary Healy writes that Adam and Eve's natural aptitude for union reflects their internal capacity to form a communion of persons.[107] With their potential capacity for pregnancy, birth, and nursing, women's bodies offer "a distinct perspective and may evoke particular ways of perceiving and thinking."[108] This perspective might serve as a response to de Beauvoir's cry for female purpose beyond reproduction.

Many childbearing women as well as those who study them wonder at the magnitude of bodily changes that occur without their purposeful agency. For example, during her own

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[103] Gen. 1:27.
[104] Favale, *The Genesis of Gender*, 225–26.
[105] Frost, *Maternal Body*, 86.
[106] Favale, *The Genesis of Gender*, 41.
[107] Healy, *Men and Women Are From Eden*, 39.
[108] Miller-McLemore, "Epistemology or Bust," 231.

childbearing's subconscious beginning, Natalie Carnes wonders at the invisible sacrifice taking place in a letter to her daughter:

> My body still looks the same, like it was just going about its primary business of keeping itself alive while my bones were hollowing themselves to help you grow? Bizarre and beautiful thought. Who is this calcium-consumer inside me? And who is this bone-sacrificer I have become? In this new world of our existence together, I make you from my very body, giving to you despite the cost to me. It is unlike anything I have ever done. [109]

The childbearing body invisibly becomes the site of incredible happenings: record-breakingly high metabolic rates; the development of an essential new organ, the placenta, which does the job of heart, kidneys, and lungs for the fetus; and microchimeric fetal cells which traverse the maternal-fetal barrier and may be found in the mother's body decades later.[110]

After birth, the incredible connection continues even as the maternal and fetal bodies are physically separated. A mother's body can regulate her baby's temperature just by holding her, and breastmilk adjusts hormonally and substantively in response to signals passed through the infant's saliva.[111] Laura Jansson shares the persistent connection she experienced after her son's birth: "I no longer had to do his breathing and digestion for him, but we still needed one another. As much as he required my milk, I needed him to take it."[112]

Miller-McLemore highlights the ways a woman's anatomy infers a physical kind of knowing, one outside the bounds of most theories of knowledge:[113]

> What does it mean to lactate—to have a body that, sensing another's thirst, "lets down," drenching me with sweet-smelling milk? Does it alter knowing? I know physically … In this knowing, few abstractions come between me and the other. … As with pregnancy, lactation subverts artificial boundaries between self and other, inside and outside.[114]

Childbearing is full of mystery. Carnes explains, "We do not choose to send calcium from our bones or to make these other sacrifices of care. Our bodies simply do these things, caring for

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[109] Carnes, *Motherhood: A Confession*, 12–13.
[110] Ibid., 15; Angela Garbes, *Like a Mother,* 58–63; Hannah Sparks, "Pregnant Women Are Basically Endurance Athletes: Study," June 11, 2019.
[111] Frost, *Maternal Body*, 68; Garbes, *Like a Mother*, 153; Jansson, *Fertile Ground*, 189.
[112] Jansson, *Fertile Ground,* 85.
[113] Miller-McLemore, "Epistemology or Bust," 242.
[114] Miller-McLemore, "Epistemology or Bust," 240–41.

the vulnerable one within as if charity were the grain of the universe, as if we were already a charitable people."[115] What if the maternal body's vulnerability tells something of the truth about who and what we are, and reveals something about who God is?

Vulnerability as Threshold

An expanded understanding of vulnerability as a combination of openness and capability is described in Kristine Culp's article summarizing the work of Pamela Sue Anderson.[116] During her work on the Enhancing Life project, Culp explains, Anderson began to see vulnerability "as an openness to becoming, as well as to becoming undone."[117] Anderson sought to develop a new perspective in which "vulnerability is (re)conceived as a capability for an openness to mutual affection."[118] Humanity's natural receptiveness and responsiveness, our ability to affect and be affected by others, constitute our vulnerability.[119] Culp writes of the potential suggested here: "'Openness' suggests both the capacity for being transformed and a place of devastation or transformation."[120] Anderson concludes that those willing to acknowledge their vulnerability live more openly, leading to enhanced lives, mirroring Brown's work in this area.[121]

For Anderson, capability and vulnerability intersect at a particular point she calls a *threshold*. While acknowledging that the term threshold is never explicitly defined in Anderson's work, Culp explains it was understood as a temporal and spatial juncture.[122] Taking up de Beauvoir's understanding of the body as a situation, Culp proposes that vulnerability, too, is a situation to which the concept of threshold might be applied.[123] I suggest further that the maternal body should be viewed as a threshold according to Culp's description, one in which vulnerability is visible as openness and capability. Indeed, the childbearing experience powerfully reveals vulnerability as a threshold, as mother and child interact in needing and giving. They are a visible example of openness and capability, testifying of the necessity of relationships and functioning as reminders of our existence as interdependent beings.

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[115] Carnes, *Motherhood: A Confession,* 14.
[116] Culp, "A Threshold for Enhancing Human Life."
[117] Ibid., 234.
[118] Anderson, "Toward a New Philosophical Imaginary," 8.
[119] Henriksen, "Embodied, Relational, Desiring, Vulnerable – Reconsidering Imago Dei."
[120] Culp, "A Threshold for Enhancing Human Life," 237.
[121] Ibid., 234.
[122] Ibid., 237.
[123] Ibid., 237–38.

The Maternal Body as Icon

Icons -- artistic pieces designed for spiritual reflection, "mediators of divine reality" -- have been part of worship since the times of the early church.[124] Legend says the first icon was a painting of the Virgin Mary with the infant Jesus, which seems particularly apropos.[125] Considering its vivid expression of both human connection and dependency, as well as the capability and openness that constitute vulnerability, the maternal body, too, might be seen not only as a threshold but also as an icon capable of directing its viewers to the contemplation of God. Franks speaks of such iconic capability within the human body in relationships, potentially reminding others of God's love.[126] Favale similarly says,-"From another angle—one that sees human embodiment as integral to personhood and the person as an icon of the divine—pregnancy becomes a living mirror through which we can glimpse the qualities of God."[127] Such potential is powerful, and to ignore it is to miss a significant opportunity to grow in the knowledge of God.

In Summary

While vulnerability has historically been understood primarily as weakness, it is better recognized as crucial to resilient and enhanced living and a threshold where both openness and capability are visible. The maternal body vividly expresses the vulnerability-as-threshold idea due to the interdependence revealed there, which also allows it to serve iconically as an invitation to consider humanity's connection and relationship to one another and God. This is certainly true if we look at Mary and Jesus as maternal-fetal pair in the Incarnation.

Part 4: Incarnation

With an understanding of vulnerability as inherent to human embodiment and characterized by both openness and capability, and keeping in mind the concept of the childbearing body as a threshold and icon, we turn to consider the Incarnation.

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[124] Mariamna Fortounatto, Mary B. Cunningham, and Elizabeth Theokritoff, "Theology of the Icon," in *The Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology*, Cambridge Companions to Religion (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 137.
[125] Ibid.
[126] Franks, "Mary's Poverty," 8.
[127] Favale, *The Genesis of Gender,* 113.I find Favale's use of "mirror" awkward here and feel "window" would be preferable. Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 66–67.

When God Appears

It is remarkable to consider that the first appearance of God incarnate occurred when Mary's waistline began to expand. This coming as a mere embryo initiated divinity's visible assumption of humanity's vulnerable state.[128] Jesus did not just appear on earth as an adult, nor with a physical body somehow impervious to damage. He began living just as all do—inside a mother's womb. As Elizabeth O'Donnell Gandolfo declares, "The liberating goodness of divine incarnation does not begin with Jesus's public ministry as an adult. Rather, it begins with a socially high-risk pregnancy; with a humble, messy, and painful birth; and with the natal body of a squalling, dependent, and vulnerable infant."[129]

In the Incarnation, the concerns of feminists for the recognized equality of women, the cry of mothers longing for recognition and affirmation of the life-altering experience of childbearing, and the desire of theologians seeking knowledge of God, already bound together by their known, recognized, inherent vulnerability, all find common ground. Here, divine love appears in the womb of an unmarried Galilean teenager. Here, the creator of the universe somehow reduces himself to a single cell, dependent on a woman to provide his very flesh and blood.[130] Here, we also find an argument dismissing the idea that God is male or prefers men to women.

The Incarnation Speaks to Feminists

De Beauvoir dismisses God as too typically "male."[131] Rich also expresses a distaste for God, especially the use of "father" terminology rooted in patriarchy. They are not alone. This rejection is understandable if one accepts Rich's definition: "A father is simply a male who has possession and control of a female (or more than one) and her offspring."[132] Those whose negative experiences of fathers and other males provoke discomfort with a God to whom others ascribe such characteristics will recognize this repugnance. However, Amy Peeler explains that God is a father not because of possession and control but rather in light of his relationship to Jesus. Thus, the problem may be the tendency to anthropomorphize God rather than taking his fatherly behavior as the model for human fatherhood. To those who claim or fear that God elevates men above

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[128] Henriksen, "Embodied, Relational, Desiring, Vulnerable," 276.
[129] Gandolfo, "A Truly Human Incarnation," 382.
[130] "Cell Division - Health Video: MedlinePlus Medical Encyclopedia," accessed May 10, 2024.
[131] Beauvoir et al, *The Second Sex*, 303–4.
[132] Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 67.

women or that Jesus' embodied maleness separates him in some way from women, Peeler makes a bold assertion:

> All orthodox Christians who affirm the virginal conception would affirm that (Jesus)—in a way unique to the human race—embraces female and male in his body because his male body came from a female alone. …The only way it is possible within the system of human procreation for God to involve both sexes in the revelation of divine embodiment is to have the image of God born as a male from the flesh of a female.[133]

Peeler cites the means of Christ's Incarnation, which eschews the usual male-dominant motif of penetration in favor of an *overshadowing*, to challenge assumptions that God is male. Furthermore, throughout her work Peeler claims Jesus' gestation in, birth through, and nursing from Mary's female body confirms God's approbation of female bodies.[134] God's opinion regarding the status of women must be considered as revealed here in the Incarnation: "To send the savior, the spirit came upon only one human, and that human was a woman."[135] Such entwinement with female flesh has an import that should clarify the status of women universally.

In fact, the Incarnation reverses the original creation story. In the beginning, Eve is crafted from the body of Adam, but Jesus, the "second Adam," is here formed from the body of the "new Eve." The Incarnation makes clear that women are honored expressions of the image of God, not second-class citizens designated for oppression.

<u>The Incarnation Speaks to Theologians</u>

"The Prince of Peace (Isa. 9:6) who was laid in a cold manger and cried out for succor, is for Christians the one who grants the power to make peace with the vulnerable nature of our lives," Gandolfo insists. [136] In other words, Jesus' act of taking on flesh and entering into the human situation makes him vulnerable in ways similar to our own experience and enables him to understand those vulnerabilities.[137] Unfortunately, while the Incarnation reveals essential truths about humanity and God himself, it seems few benefit from its message; as Gandolfo points out, "Contemporary Christology pays scant theological attention to the fullness of divinity and its

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[133] Peeler, *Women and the Gender of God*, 140-141.
[134] Ibid.
[135] Ibid., 136.
[136] Gandolfo, "A Truly Human Incarnation," 392.
[137] Hebrews 4:15.

redemptive power taking on vulnerable human flesh in the newborn Christ child."[138] This neglect takes a toll on our understanding of both God's vulnerability and our own as we miss the opportunity to truly consider the meaning of God embodied, experiencing humanity's dependence and vulnerability.[139]

The Incarnation Speaks to Mothers

The Incarnation could not have happened without a maternal body. As the woman who carried Jesus, Mary holds a primary place in this tale; through Mary's motherhood, the rebirth of the cosmos is begun.[140] Still, there are tensions in theologians' reception of Mary. Frost notes these issues include the way the early church highlighted her virginity to bolster its authoritative insistence upon celibacy as the dividing line between religious and common life, which led to the devaluing of sexuality and the human body in general.[141] Some argue that Mary's exceptionality renders her inaccessible, with little to offer "normal" mothers. As Amy Peeler writes, "Mary the mother of God has proven a slippery character in the Christian narrative. For some, she has slipped off the page completely, or at least for most of the year until it is time to set out her figure in the nativity."[142]

However, Mary should not be set aside because her story has been misappropriated.[143] To do so is only to acquiesce again to patriarchy and render yet another woman mute. Again, the embodiment central to the Incarnation is key as God manifests within a female human body. Mary's acceptance of the angel's announcement is an expression of appropriate vulnerability, as her response indicates that her willingness was required.[144] Mary is the first human to literally carry the gospel; the first person to touch the body of God. The current subjugation of women within many Christian traditions indicates that this fact has been inadequately considered and taught. The implications of Jesus' gestation are vast, as Peeler writes: "In the incarnation, God has deemed the female body … worthy to handle the most sacred of all things, the very body of God. With bold simplicity, the incarnation of Jesus through Mary affirms the confluence of holiness and

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[138] Gandolfo, "A Truly Human Incarnation," 384.
[139] Henriksen, "Embodied, Relational, Desiring, Vulnerable," 276.
[140] Frost, *Maternal Body*, 44.
[141] Ibid., 48.
[142] Peeler, *Women and the Gender of God*, 115.
[143] Peeler, *Women and the Gender of God*, 141.
[144] Luke 1:38.

female bodies in a radically powerful way."[145] Mary is not merely welcomed into the sacred space from which women were previously barred—she *becomes* the sacred space.[146] This truth should have revolutionized the understanding of the categorization of women and established the equality of men and women.

The Vulnerability of Incarnation

Mary is vulnerable. She is a young, unmarried woman, a member of an oppressed nation, whose economic state at the time of Jesus's dedication at the temple rendered the family eligible to make the less-expensive offering assigned to the poor.[147] Later, in Matthew's telling, she is forced to flee her homeland, becoming a refugee. Gandolfo writes that she "cares for her son in a situation of displacement and oppression, where she and her husband must make the best with what they have."[148] Mary, therefore, offers not a one-dimensional image but a relatable one; though honored by God, she is still human and, therefore, vulnerable.

The child in Mary's womb, too, shows evidence of human vulnerability, as Gandolfo explains. "When divine love enters into the human condition in the incarnation, there is no supernatural exemption from the perils of existence."[149] Gabrielle Thomas insists there is a need for more reflection on this idea in the Christian tradition.[150] While vulnerability has often been depicted as a negative characteristic predominately ascribed to women, Coakley asserts that Jesus' humanity confronts the assumption that vulnerability "need be seen as a 'female weakness' rather than a special sort of human strength."[151] Christ's vulnerability is the wellspring of his capacity for human relationship, connection, and all those entail; his body the place divinity and humanity find common expression.

While theologians may debate the extent of Jesus' vulnerability, scripture presents Jesus as subject to typically human emotions, including those we experience as unfavorable. As Tanner expounds, "The humanity of the Word is humanity suffering from fear and distress, persecution by others, anxiety before death, betrayal and isolation, separation from God—all the qualities of

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[145] Peeler, *Women and the Gender of God*, 61.
[146] Ibid., 61.
[147] Luke 2:21-39, Lev. 12:4-8.
[148] Peeler, *Women and the Gender of God*, 54.
[149] Gandolfo, "A Truly Human Incarnation," 386.
[150] Thomas, "The Status of Vulnerability in a Theology of the Christian Life," 452.
[151] Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, 25.

death-infused, sin-corrupted life that requires remedy."[152] The vulnerability of the Incarnation reveals God's understanding of our humanity and opposes the patriarchal preference for individuality and competition over relationships.

Jesus offers an example of appropriate vulnerability which mirrors Mary's, demonstrated by his own agency regarding the Incarnation. As Philippians 2 declares, Jesus "did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a slave, assuming human likeness. –"[153] Lebacqz points out that this exercise of agency demonstrates Christ's upending of power structures: "Jesus shows us the way to redemption by choosing not power but vulnerability and relationship."[154]

In Summary

The concerns of feminists, mothers, and theologians meet in the Incarnation as nowhere else in history or culture. Mary is favored by God, exemplifying his acceptance and honor of women, yet experiences difficulty in her situation. Jesus, too, is subjected to the potential exploitation of his vulnerability. He finally overcomes not through a demonstration of power that puts others in their place but a demonstration of ultimate surrender leading to resurrection. Therefore, as Coakley writes, "Jesus may be the male messenger to empty patriarchal values."[155] In multiple ways, the Incarnation shows the power to be found *in* vulnerability. Therefore, the Incarnation offers a way past patriarchy toward a Christian maternal feminist theology.

Part 5 Discussion: What Might be Gained

As we have seen, mothers' voices are missing from much academic work, and those who take up the feminist cause often feel pressure to reject childbearing. Nevertheless, repudiating patriarchal systems does not require such renunciation. In fact, does the rejection of maternity itself hamper the progress of female equality? Perhaps motherhood demonstrates a woman's powerful capability, not her oppression. As Elshtain explains, we must resist women's subjugation within ideologies and structures dominated by men rather than the activity of mothering, which can be life-affirming.[156] Honoring the maternal body's potential as an icon invites us to learn its

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[152] Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 260.
[153] Phil. 2:6-7.
[154] Lebacqz, "Appropriate Vulnerability," 426.
[155] Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, 25.
[156] Elshtain, *Public Man Private Woman,* 333.

expression of vulnerability as the openness and capability common to all people, which was voluntarily assumed by God himself through the body of a woman.

The interests of feminists, mothers, and theologians overlap in their concerns regarding vulnerability. Furthermore, vulnerability should be seen not merely as the expression of humanity's weakness but as the capability of connection necessary for living. It then becomes a threshold that expands our lives, as Culp explains: "When vulnerability is interpreted as a situated susceptibility for being changed, for good or ill, then threshold language can be reintroduced in relation to the intensification, enhancement, and transformation of life."[157] Such transformation is, or certainly should be, a primary goal of any theology.

In her article titled "Epistemology," Bonnie Miller-McLemore writes that women report their knowing has expanded through the experience of motherhood. Noting the difficulty of integrating knowledge and practice, she describes maternal thinking—ways of understanding particular to mothers due to their experience of having been inhabited by another—as transcending this difficulty.[158] I suggest that such knowing offers insight into what it means to be human, as well as what it means to be connected to others and to God. However, no one gains from this insight until mothers' voices are heard. The development of paradigms that seek the well-being of individuals, families, societies, and nations may find their genesis in an appreciation of maternity. While academic practice has historically favored a stance of detachment on the part of the learner, maternal thinking suggests that deeply felt experience might offer an additional means of knowledge. McLemore suggests, "A liberated consciousness of the potential power of woman's sexuality and mothering and a renewed awareness of the latent powers and vulnerabilities of men, heretofore suppressed under the reign of patriarchy, would transpose our ways of knowing both in theology and in society."[159] Such knowledge ought not be set aside.

To accomplish the emptying of patriarchal values, as Coakley has suggested, we must give the Incarnation our full attention, meaning the nativity's reminder of the physical interaction of God with the world must not be minimized to a sweet children's story rehearsed every December. In other words, as Gandolfo writes:

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[157] Culp, "A Threshold for Enhancing Human Life," 231.
[158] Miller-McLemore, "Epistemology or Bust," 243.
[159] Miller-McLemore, "Epistemology or Bust," 246–47.

> Recovering the nativity as a Christological symbol brings into focus at least three important theological insights: that the natural life taken on in the incarnation, like all human life, is inherently vulnerable from the start; that the nativity is an overlooked, yet powerful, icon of divine redemption; and that contemplating the vulnerability of Christ's nativity can cultivate the practice of peace in a vulnerable and violent world.[160]

An effort toward such recovery has been this paper's goal.

Careful consideration of the Incarnation's central role in theology could have numerous meaningful implications for everything from discipleship to atonement theory to social justice. A holistic view of the Incarnation as explanatory of atonement is suggested by Katherine Tanner, who notes that the current diversity in such theories implies the need for critical evaluation of each; she proposes an Incarnation-based model.[161] This is not a call to set the cross aside but to include all of Christ's humanity, including his gestation and birth, in our theology. Without Christ's birth, after all, his death is an impossibility.

A maternal feminist theology insists on increased concern and care for others. As Evan writes in *Rewilding Motherhood*, "When we begin to translate our love for our children into love for the strangers around us, we begin to walk out the holistic meaning of fertility. We begin to create and birth love wherever we go."[162]

Value systems that depreciate maternity in favor of production and power must be questioned rather than accepted. As Miller-McLemore writes, "The power to reproduce the species that is biologically unique to women and historically the chief source of our oppression must be reclaimed for the power it holds."[163] Finding ourselves surrounded by evidence that women are still suffering under the shadow of covert and overt patriarchal systems, it is time to consider that rather than eschewing maternity, feminists must embrace it if true equality is to be found. The fact that the central event of Christianity, the Incarnation, involved childbirth indicates the desirability of such an embrace. For those whose evangelical tradition casts feminist ideology in a negative light, considering *all* the implications of Christ's Incarnation reveals a vision of equality that tends

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[160] Gandolfo, "A Truly Human Incarnation," 382.
[161] Tanner, *Christ the Key*.
[162] Shannon K. Evans, *Rewilding Motherhood: Your Path to an Empowered Feminine Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2021), 110.
[163] Miller-McLemore, "Epistemology or Bust," 245.

toward the flourishing of all people accomplished through an icon that points directly to Jesus—and His mother.

Conclusion

I have sought to answer the question*,* Is there a means by which we might move past patriarchy toward a Christian feminist theology that is pro- rather than anti-maternal*?* While reviewing the literature, I sought an overlap in the concerns of feminist, maternal, and theological studies which might offer clues to such a path. Ultimately, vulnerability emerged as a vital concern in each of these areas and thus became the focus of my inquiry. Historically defined negatively, vulnerability has lately been revealed as the potential site of great capacity when understood as universal to human experience and vital to human connection and relationship.

Considering the vulnerabilities of the maternal body through mothers' voices led to an awareness of its vivid portrayal of this new understanding. The maternal body was therefore proposed as a threshold where both susceptibility to harm and expanded life are on display. Finally, the Incarnation and its implications for feminist, maternal, and theological concerns were considered and determined to be crucial to this search.

It has been demonstrated that the Incarnation offers evidence of an anti-patriarchal, pro-woman, pro-maternal God entering into the vulnerability of humanity. Therefore, the Incarnation is especially germane to efforts to transcend oppressive structures that harm women and clarifies that childbearing is worthy of honor rather than rejection. Thus, the Incarnation offers a way past patriarchy toward a Christian maternal feminist theology.

Connecting a positive understanding of vulnerability as a threshold to its clear demonstration in the maternal body is one essential contribution made by this study. I have sought to establish that one can subscribe to Christian theology, promote the full equality of women and men, and have a favorable view of childbearing concurrently, despite the disputes that often arise between these factions. For Christian women in American evangelical contexts, particularly, patriarchal systems that insist on female subjugation have been so common that they have become invisible, and claiming to be a feminist raises eyebrows. However, this need not be the case if we take the Incarnation as our starting point. To move past patriarchy does not entail an embrace of matriarchy; instead, a Christian maternal feminist theology argues for equality that allows the full flourishing of men as well, believing they, too, are negatively affected by structures in which

women are oppressed. Reclaiming both a favorable view of childbearing and an understanding of women's equality as central to Christian theology is imperative.

Karen Lebacqz reminds us that we must take the potential for exploitation in all contexts seriously, insisting on "a theology of vulnerability" that approaches this topic carefully.[164] A Christian maternal feminist theory must embrace vulnerability commensurate with Coakley's description: not an ascetic seeking after unnecessary suffering, but a self-emptying that allows for spiritual and social growth.[165] We must also guard against any sense of the diminishing of those who are not mothers by choice or otherwise; the claim here is not to a superior knowing but one worth consideration and contemplation.

It is also important to acknowledge that childbearing happens in widely diverse circumstances, most of which are challenging at minimum. Therefore, the contemplation of childbearing—one's own or anyone else's—is a privilege not shared by many. Consequently, such contemplation and expression of the fruits of that contemplation by those who are able to do so are even more critical. Narratives about childbearing are effectual tools that allow at least some particularly maternal knowledge to be passed on.[166] Understanding the Incarnation as pointing past patriarchy amplifies *all* voices as we recognize our ultimate connection to one another and God himself through vulnerability.

Acknowledging the lack of mothers' voices in multiple arenas, the need for additional work in this area is clear. Some might seek to understand how and to what degree childbearing experience has affected women and men in various areas, such as spiritual growth, work productivity, social interactions, and public policymaking. Henriksen's work emphasizes the necessity of acknowledging desire alongside vulnerability as part of being human, suggesting research into maternity's unique combined expression of desire, vulnerability, and love; such study has profound theological implications.[167] Judith Butler's acknowledgment of the entwined nature of humanity and our responsibility toward those we might not even consider human suggests the application of a consideration of the vulnerability of the fetus to the abortion debate.[168] Further

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[164] Lebacqz, "Appropriate Vulnerability," 426.
[165] Coakley, "Waiting for God," 27.
[166] Fiona Woollard, "Mother Knows Best: Pregnancy, Applied Ethics, and Epistemically Transformative Experiences," *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 38, no. 1 (2021): 155–71.
[167] Henriksen, "Embodied, Relational, Desiring, Vulnerable."
[168] Butler, "Precarious Life," 140.

research into the link between the vulnerability of pregnancy and contemplative prayer is encouraged by Frost, who highlights the expansive awareness potentially common to both as the heart of vulnerability, forming the threshold (Frost's "authentic space") in which connection and relationship occur.[169]

Christian theologians have noted the importance of acknowledging the power of the lens one looks through when attending to various texts, traditions, and personal faith practices. Desiring to center Christ in my research, I once presumed the cross offered the most accurate lens. Later, I wondered if the manger might provide more clarity. I now theorize that a theology of the womb might offer the most transparent lens of all, because it is one through which the relational nature of our situation in the world is evident. Mary's womb, after all, is the place God entered into the vulnerability of human connectedness across generations, nations, and even sexual differences and divides. Since human vulnerability means natality and mortality are entwined, such imagery is inclusive of all of Jesus' life, as well as our own. As Frost writes, "Some say that the Christian life is understood as a series of deaths and resurrections. It can also be understood as a series of births and returns, and the maternal body reveals this sense of ever-renewal."[170]

"All human life on the planet is born of woman," Adrienne Rich insists.[171]

Indeed, each of us begins as a being-in-relation, attached to and dependent upon a mother, subject to the vulnerabilities of the human condition, connected to all of humanity: past, present, and future. This is the same attachment and vulnerability Christ took upon himself in the Incarnation, and every maternal body offers us an iconic reminder of this vulnerable place where maternal, feminist, and theological interests coincide. In searching for a theology that directs us towards enhanced life for all of humanity, the maternal body is a propitious starting place. For feminists who wonder whether they might embrace maternity or Christianity (or both); for Christian mothers wondering whether they might embrace feminism, I propose the Incarnation as the common ground from which we might find a way forward.

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[169] Frost, *Maternal Body,* 47.
[170] Ibid., 88.
[171] Rich, *Of Woman Born,* 11.

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