

## Hanna Strack

### **‘Woman as co-creator through her strength, composure and courage’**

#### **Towards a theology of childbirth**

##### **1. The need for a theology of childbirth**

What exactly does it mean for our being human that we were born into this life from our mother’s womb? What significance does it have for our faith? Can we understand creation as an ongoing process in which women, together with God, have an active part to play? How do we experience this in the actual process of delivery? Furthermore: can we understand childbirth itself a spiritual event, an experience of the holy? What kind of theological interpretation can we offer with regard to the emotions, liminality, bliss and pain, illness and death, atmosphere and utter silence which those involved in childbirth experience?

Whom then can we ask about their experiences of birth? Mothers who may have had a number of different experiences of giving birth in an operating theatre, a delivery room or in their own home? Or fathers who attended the event as observers, helpers or ‘coaches’ of what might be understood as a sporting event? Maybe midwives are able to help. With or without the supervision of a doctor, they have attended hundreds of births? Before I discuss replies given by midwives, let us listen to some birth experiences of mothers and fathers:

‘I regard the power of the contractions as holy, just like that blissful emotion of light. Something grabs you, takes hold of you from outside your own thinking.’ (Maria P-K)

‘It was an experience of liminality in which I encountered God.’ (Krit)

‘I still remember the moment. I felt wretched, miserable, exposed and naked. Suddenly I saw light coming through the window. It really was the most amazing presence, illuminated by this incredible light and then, again, this calm little voice within me that said very clearly: all will be well.’ (Julia St.)

‘Just after the birth of my little daughter, when I was able to take the first deep breath, I suddenly felt this strong sense of clarity: there is nothing in this world of which I need to be afraid. Everything is held by love. And then, when I held little Hannah for the first time and looked at her, I felt very strongly from deep within me that I wanted to bless this little gift of God. Out of the depth of my heart and a very strong oceanic sense of being one with her and with God.’ (Angela

V.) ‘My feelings after hours of working together in giving birth were just extreme. This was very clear when I realized that the question whether it was a boy or a girl did not matter to me any more. Only a few minutes after the birth itself, while I was crying out of a deep sense of fear and joy, I found out.’ (Volker Str.) ‘I was very close to the creative power of God.’ (Rolf W.) In response to the question if he could give an example for the holy, a 16 year-old replied: ‘My little niece, she is eight days old.’ (Christina Przemeczek, letter)

These quotations show that giving birth is understood as an experience of life itself, the spiritual, the metaphysical or even the transcendent. They challenge us to explore the possibility of a theology of childbirth.

Before we begin, we must clarify one thing. The purpose of our exploration is not to restrict women to their potential role as mothers. The point is rather that all living beings exist because their mothers gave birth to them.

## 2. Towards a theology of childbirth as encounter with the holy

### 2.1 *The starting point*

Six interviews with practising midwives form the starting point for my reflections towards a theology of childbirth.<sup>1</sup> The interviews begin with questions about their own understanding of their profession. I deliberately put the main question very broadly: ‘What is the particular and special experience of childbirth?’ For me it came as a surprise that the same concepts came up time and again: a liminal experience, emotion, bliss, new life, pain, sickness and death, space and time, silence. For reference I also used a companion booklet for a video entitled *Co-pilots: fathers at the birth of their children*.<sup>2</sup> Again the same concepts occur.

So, how can we interpret the experiences referred to in these terms? I have chosen the concept of the holy and will now describe the deep experience of childbirth as an encounter with the holy.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Annerose Friedrich, Wittenförden; Dörte Köbcke-Friedrich, Schwerin; Regine Lagies, Ribnitz-Damgarten; Siv Nylund, Kvevlax, Finland; Dagmar Saeckel, Friedrichshof; Kerstin Sattler, Güstrow.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Gnielka, *Beifahrer. Männer bei der Geburt. Filmbegleitbuch und Tourenplaner für Gruppen*, Köln: Bundeszentrale für gesundheitliche Aufklärung, not dated. ‘As co-pilots men attending the birth of their children have to somehow bridge the gap between the request just to be there and their own ideas of being a strong man.’ (ibid., p. 36). I stress: A father who did not attend the birth of his child is also a good father.’

<sup>3</sup> Theological literature on childbirth: Maria liest. *Das heilige Fest der Geburt*, ed. Andrea Günter, Rüsselsheim 2004; Weltliebe. *Gebürtigkeit, Geschlechterdifferenz und Metaphysik*, ed. Andrea Günter Königstein 2003, pp. 147-173; *Die weibliche Hoffnung der Welt: Die Bedeutung des Geborensseins und der Sinn der Geschlechterdifferenz*, ed. Andrea Günter, Gütersloh 2000; Karin Ulrich-Eschemann, *Vom Geborenwerden des Menschen: Theologische und philosophische Erkundungen*, Münster 2000; Margaret L Hammer, *Giving Birth. Reclaiming biblical Metaphor for Pastoral Practice*, Louisville, Kentucky 1994; Verena Wodtke-Werner, ‘Geh hin, frag die Schwangere. Schwanger-

I interpret these experiences in theological terms, but will not restrict them to the interpretive framework of a particular denomination or religion.

The interviews I made with midwives also made it possible to interpret the experience of childbirth from a perspective that is not exclusively male or androcentric, but take into account the hitherto neglected religious identities of women.

## 2.2 What is the holy?<sup>4</sup>

The holy is an experience of depth in the context of other experiences of life. It is, in the words of Bernhard Welte, ‘the invisible, inaccessibly removed dimension which like an almighty stream of power delivers and carries the true liveliness of humanity and the world.’<sup>5</sup>

The holy can only be experienced as it breaks into our reality and allows us to encounter it. Such encounters can happen in all areas of life. They are not restricted to the context of the religious. The holy takes hold of our bodies.’ My body takes me into everyday life as a place of encounter with the holy.’<sup>6</sup>

We encounter the holy, the numinous, as the *fascinatum*, as absolute bliss, ecstasis, pure delight. We also encounter the Holy as *tremendum*, as absolutely horror, when we are tremendously shocked. The literature about the holy does not mention the experiences of women. I did, however, find a remark by the sociologist of religion Abraham Maslow: ‘These experiences ... result from the great moments of love and sexuality, from extraordinary aesthetic moments ... from being moved and captured by creativity ... from women’s experiences of natural childbirth, from moments of being at one with nature, .... Peak experiences can be understood as truly religious experiences in

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schaft, Geburt und Stillen im religiösen Brauchtum und in der Theologie’ in: Kraftfelder, *Sakramente in der Lebenswirklichkeit von Frauen*, ed Regina Ammicht-Quinn and Stefanie Spindel, Regensburg 1998, pp. 155 – 178; Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, ‘Natalität und die Liebe zur Welt. Hannah Arendts Beitrag zu einer immanenten Transzendenz’ *Zeitschrift für Ev. Theologie* (1998), pp 283-295; Luzia Sutter Rehmann, *Geh, frage die Gebälerin. Feministisch-befreiungstheologische Untersuchungen des Gebärmotivs in der Apokalyptik*, Gütersloh 1995; cf. Annegret Stopczyk, *Nein, danke, ich denke selber. Philosophieren aus weiblicher Sicht*, Berlin 1986, pp.195-212 ‘I realized that what we lack is an understanding of childbirth from the point of view of those who actually give birth’ (p. 211).

<sup>4</sup> The following are based on: Reinhold Esterbauer, *Anspruch und Entscheidung. Zu einer Phänomenologie der Erfahrung des Heiligen*, Stuttgart 2002; Elke Kirsten, *Heilige Lebendigkeit. Zur Bedeutung des Heiligen bei Bernhard Welte*, Frankfurt/M 1998; Rudolf Otto, *The idea of the holy : an inquiry into the non-rational factor in the idea of the divine and its relation to the rational*, London, 1923.

<sup>5</sup> Kirsten, *Lebendigkeit*, p. 239.

<sup>6</sup> Marianne Merckx, ‘Ein alltägliches Geheimnis. Die Sakralität des Daseins’, in: *Alltägliche Transzendenz. Postmoderne Ansichten zu Gott* eds Angela Berlis and Manuela Kalsky, Münster-Hamburg-London 2003.

the truest and most profound sense of the world.’<sup>7</sup> The response to an encounter with the holy is awe and silence.

### *2.3 Encountering the holy in the process of childbirth*

Childbirth is a dramatic process. All involved face their own limitations, the transition from unbearable pain to total and utter bliss and delight touches and disturbs the depths of the souls of both mother and father. Even midwives, in spite of the routine of their profession, encounter this again and again.

The holy ties in with these dramatic events. Here is the place where it wants to be encountered. For the holy is the essence of life, that which creates life and functions as the creative process. At the centre of the drama is the relationship between mother and child out of which new life enters the universe. As the mother with all her strength pushes the child into life, the creative power of the holy, of life itself, is revealed. If a child is born with an illness, in cases of stillbirth or miscarriage, we encounter the horrific power of the holy, the *tremendum*.

Being born means being born of a woman. The mother’s experience is utterly paradoxical: she has to labour with all her strength and yet totally surrender. Therefore the mother is - in theological terms - to be regarded as co-creator with the divine. There are references, in the theologies of other cultures, to this co-creative work of the mother. Mercy Amba Odouyoye, a Methodist pastor from Ghana, writes: ‘What we need to turn our attention to, therefore, is the poverty of the human spirit that ignores that humanity of women as persons in God’s image and mothers as co-creators with God and imitators of God’s management of creation.’<sup>8</sup> The holy, new life and death, takes place in the very bodies of women.

#### *2.3.1 Being gripped*

The first pointer towards birth as an encounter with the holy can be found in references to being gripped by what we experience. ‘This liminal experience, in my view, makes women very very strong, they come strengthened and so much is going on - they are gripped.’

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted in: Tatjana Schnell, ‘Wege zum Sinn. Sinnfindung mit und ohne Religion – Empirische Psychologie der Impliziten Religiosität’, in: *Wege zum Menschen. Monatszeitschrift für Seelsorge und Beratung, heilendes und soziales Handeln* (2003) 56:3, p. 9.

<sup>8</sup> Mercy Amba Odouyoye, ‘Poverty and Motherhood’ in: *The Power of Naming: A Concilium Reader in Feminist Liberation Theology* ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Maryknoll, 1996, p.129f.

Men too are ‘gripped by the experience of witnessing childbirth’... Midwives are ‘gripped every time by the fact that their hands are the first who will hold the child’. Being gripped ties in with moments of ‘bliss, holiness, innocence, an incredible feeling of delight’.

Being gripped and the experience of utter bliss are part of an experience of profound transformation which happens in childbirth. We don’t experience the holy in a specific event or a particular emotion, but in the dramatic and transforming events in which all involved - children, fathers, midwives - participate. The mother uses all her physical strength and all the pain that goes with it to push the child out of her body - a new human being is born - and instantly bliss takes hold of all involved, an incredible sensation of delight. ‘The experience of pain is suddenly followed by this deep breath and moments of profound bliss.’ After mothers and fathers went through moments of fearing death, their mood changes into liberation: ‘It is this moment: ‘wow’, awe, accepted, done, now you can let off steam.’ Relax and let go! The instant in which the child is born transforms all involved. The moment of birth transforms all involved: ‘Suddenly all my fear was somehow gone... All I could sense was utter delight.’

### *2.3.2 Liminal experiences*

A number of different boundaries have to be reached and crossed over in childbirth. There is the child itself which crosses over from the darkness of the womb to the light of the world of the living.

The mother experiences her limitations in labour and the pain that goes with it, it ‘throws overboard all concepts of suffering, of the limits of pain’. She cannot escape from it and has to ‘transgress her own boundaries to give life to the child...’.

Fathers experience the limits of their emotions. ‘He has never seen the woman, his partner, like this, meek, looking for help, angry, screaming, full of fear, shouting at the child’s father, cursing him. He cannot make sense of his own emotions, has no certainty that their relationship will last. He has to face the experience that the delivery is harder than expected. And yet, the maximum of despair is aggravated once more. Childbirth is a liminal situation.’

Finally, the midwife too has an experience of liminality. ‘I am responsible and that’s where I move, there are always experiences of my own limitations.’

As boundaries are encountered and transgressed walls of protection are pulled down and masks torn off. One’s own identity and all self-taught level-headedness are pulled apart. At the same time any kind of liminal experience is in any case an enrichment. Human beings are open to it,

within what Rudolf Otto calls the ‘depth of the soul’<sup>9</sup>. They can be captured by the holy. What is needed is a trigger as it can be found in such liminal experiences.

### 2.3.3 *The miracle of new life*

Midwives speak about women’s strength, their creative power. ‘What is special for me is the fact that women can give birth by themselves.’ Therefore midwives are moved by the question: where does this strength come from? This female strength is a threat to the everyday routine of Western society, achievement-oriented and enlightened as it is. Here is creative power which stands in contrast to the regulating power of disposal. ‘This may be another reason why this strength that is connected with pregnancy and childbirth is ignored and their experience is often denied to women.’<sup>10</sup> Creative power is also an experience of pleasure.

The andro-centric thinking of past centuries has obscured these most profound moments of the experience of childbirth, that this is an act of creativity. ‘By virtue of her power, her composure and her courage the woman becomes a co-creator. Through her life itself comes into the world.’ The creative act of giving birth, the miracle that takes place in it, is the ‘miracle of life itself’. The newborn child is not merely put together through a human act, even if it is faulty, no, there is something that ‘is in itself complete, without seams, totally and utterly complete ...’ Many are amazed that it is suddenly just there. Even fathers experience this moment: they find themselves close to the miracle of life itself.

The midwife who is at once in charge and waiting expectantly. She shares in the miracle of life. ‘What is special for me is the new life, that I can share that with the parents.’ The divine co-operates with the woman, the woman with the divine through saying ‘yes’.<sup>11</sup>

### 2.3.4 *Space and time*

When a mother has given birth to a child, when the midwife has caught it with her hands, when a new human being has come into the world, the whole room is filled. The room, that is the hospital delivery room, the parents’ bedroom at home or, the pool or bathtub. This room becomes

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<sup>9</sup> Otto, *The Holy*, p. 138.

<sup>10</sup> Eva Schindele, *Schwangerschaft zwischen guter Hoffnung und medizinischem Risiko*, Hamburg 1995, p. 38.

<sup>11</sup> In his moving account of the loss of his child, P.F. Thomése writes: ‘A child is not so much born, it rather appears to us. It literally becomes a revelation ... it was as if I myself had just been born ... All was made new.’ *Schattenkind*, Berlin, n.d., 41. 43.

more, something totally other than the geometric product of interior design. It is charged with atmosphere.

The initial contractions and the last moments of pushing out, the sudden emergence of new life has totally gripped all present. Emotions of pain - if the child is ill or unwanted - and joy pour out over the healthy child and there is a sudden transition from utter strain to being extremely relaxed within the room. 'It is a feeling, something very emotional, a very dense atmosphere.' The atmosphere of religious experiences is also a very sensual emotional experience. In case of a home birth it is possible to mark this by lighting a candle, the light of life and to choose a particular scent to go with it. 'This, however, is not possible on a hospital ward.'

The room itself changes character and becomes a space charged with atmosphere. Time is taken out of that which can be measured ... 'now we have all the time in the world'. Time is no longer *chronos* but *kairos*, time that is charged with significance, it is ek-stasis, it is taken out. 'Time suddenly stands still.'

### 2.3.5 Silence

The midwife leaves the couple or the woman and her girlfriend alone. 'I leave the door slightly ajar - I have to keep an eye on it - and leave the parents and the child alone.' This time - taken out of the rhythm of everyday life, demands silence and stillness.<sup>12</sup> Both are responses of awe towards the act of creation ... 'then this silence of childbirth follows, a holy stillness which goes on for a long time. They [the parents] have a couple of hours to themselves.' In the silence the experience is taken in and gradually we are beginning to understand.

'I do not regard the silence merely as atmosphere which emerges and spreads, but beyond that for the opening up of a space of understanding which is tied up with the linguistic horizon of meaning.'<sup>13</sup> The experience of stillness in response to the presence of the holy is a 'force to be silent, ... an immediate effect of the emotion, of the *numen praesens* itself.'<sup>14</sup>

In the transformation of the atmosphere and the changing horizons of understanding the holy becomes manifest in the silence, yet it can only be glimpsed with hindsight, in listening to and

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<sup>12</sup> Esterbauer, Anspruch, 183.

<sup>13</sup> The German novella *Schwimmer im dunklen Strom* describes the death of a child at birth. Here too the father responds with utter silence: 'There was nothing to do. All he could do was to sit in silence. ... Next to himself he sensed Diane's presence. She too sat in silence, a very strange deep silence. That was what he tried to cling to, resting and watching life and death merge in a motionless endless glowing sea.' William Kotzwinkle, *Schwimmer im dunklen Strom*, 95f.

<sup>14</sup> Otto, *Holy*, p. 89.

speaking about that which is given without having it at one's disposal.<sup>15</sup> It is a fleeting moment. 'The atmosphere changes altogether, yet it also disappears very quickly.' The holy appears and withdraws. We encounter the holy in the delivery room as the power of healing, as utterly alive and as an amazing mystery.

### 2.3.6 Pain

Research about women's labour pain shows that different cultures perceive the pain experienced through contractions differently. The cervical muscles are stimulated by hormones. This is meaningful body work without pathological cause. 'They have to surrender to the pain, so in most cases women don't have an easy delivery.' Pain may be experienced as a source of new strength and new energy. 'What is amazing for me is a woman's capacity, all those things she has to cope with, many dangers too ... to see how strong women are, to praise them...'

'Pain does not turn into surrender, strain becomes meaningful when an integration of experiences becomes possible and the goal of the subconscious is reached, to become a grown woman ... The main condition for this increase in identity is the experience of such independent body work and the successful development of a relationship with oneself and the child.'<sup>16</sup>

Fathers join in the experience of pain. 'They too are gripped by it. They have to watch the person they love suffer. They are not part of it. They are scared to death, especially if it is their first child. They don't know how it is going to end. Later on, if they have more than one child, they know that all will be well.'

Dorothee Soelle thinks about pain as an encounter with the holy when, in her autobiography, she refers to the experiences of childbirth and labour pains of earlier generations of women. She distinguishes between the pains of the initial contractions which are arduous, and the pains of the actual labour itself which is meaningful as it generates the actual delivery. They are pains for the sake of life. Dorothee Soelle writes: 'Labour pains raise a really important question: how actually do we get there that can come to perceive any kind of pain as labour pain, contractions, opening doors, groaning, as the beginning of the glory of the children of God. How can we come to per

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<sup>15</sup> Estenbauer, *Anspruch*, p. 185.

<sup>16</sup> Maria Luise Köster-Schlutz, *Schwangerschaft und weibliche Identität, Individuelle und institutionelle Konflikte als Ausdruck kultureller Pathologie. Eine empirisch-hermeneutische Studie*. Frankfurt/M, Bern, New York, Paris 1991, p. 186f.

ceive pain not as useless like kidney stones but as birth pangs of new being?’<sup>17</sup> Soelle draws the ultimate theological conclusion: she interprets labour pain itself as a sacrament: ‘Labour pains encourage us, they offer us the assurance of new life. Like the piece of bread which assures us of God’s love, this pain, how can we ever forget it, is a sacrament, a sign of the presence of God.’<sup>18</sup> It is the actual experience of labour pain which forms the background of the motif of giving birth in the New Testament and the apocalyptic literature. Luzia Sutter Rehmman, in contrast to male theological interpretations of pain as divine punishment, emphasizes the transition from pain during the delivery to utter bliss afterwards. For her this is an image of hope.<sup>19</sup>

### 2.3.7 *Sickness and death*

During pregnancy and delivery through the first few years of a child’s life the miracle of new life and sickness and death are almost inseparable. Miscarriages and abortions, stillbirths and children born with disabilities, even the death of the mother herself, are situations which are never experienced with quite the same level of intensity.... ‘Suddenly we wake up to the reality of just how close life and death actually are.’ In Germany as in most Western countries, the actual rate of infant mortality and the death rate of mothers in childbirth is very low. Yet most midwives will say from experience: There is no absolute certainty. There are decisions which we just have to accept. Life and death are not at our disposal.

In recent years a new attitude towards the pastoral care of those experiencing miscarriages has developed. Most hospitals used to treat a dead foetus as a ‘thing’, something to be thrown away like garbage. Nowadays we are beginning to realize that parents need to say goodbye to children even if they weigh less than 500g at birth. Their grief has to find a place.

What can a midwife do? Bereavement counselling is more than most midwives feel they can offer. Midwives need special training in areas like deep relaxation. We can motivate women to encounter the roots both of their grief and their happiness. There are sad cases too... I myself offer a special form of bereavement counselling to women who have had a miscarriage or a stillbirth. Together we move into deep relaxation. Once more women experience the deep bond which they once had with their child. Ultrasound and modern medicine can lull us into a false sense of security which can easily turn out to be the opposite from what we expected if we detect some kind of

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<sup>17</sup> Dorothee Soelle, *Gegenwind: Erinnerungen*, Hamburg 2<sup>1995</sup>, p. 156.

<sup>18</sup> *Op.cit.*, p. 158.

<sup>19</sup> Sutter Rehmman, *Gebärerin*, 252.

an anomaly. Women who experience a miscarriage or a stillbirth often have a particularly deep encounter with the holy as the horrific, the terrible. They experience the holy as the *mysterium tremendum*.<sup>20</sup>

### 2.3.8 Conditions of the holy

If the process of childbirth is determined by the rules of avoiding risk which is so central to modern medicine<sup>21</sup>, we rarely have an experience of being gripped by the holy. The focus is on risk and security not on openness and trust. The holy is outside our experience.

Yet the relationship of trust between the mother and the midwife can create an atmosphere which invites the presence of the holy and makes such encounters possible.<sup>22</sup> These are theological reasons, in parallel with the obvious medical ones, why a Caesarean section by choice is to be avoided. The silence and the couple sharing of the moments immediately after the delivery are situations when the presence of the holy comes to the fore.

The ambivalence remains: the holy needs to be invited in and yet it appears without our activity all by itself. Its presence is pure grace.

### 2.3.9 Summary

What makes childbirth special is the fact that it is a complex dramatic phenomenon which has at its centre the creative act of emerging new life. It is the ‘archetype of creative potential’<sup>23</sup>. The mother does her part in the process of creation, she becomes a co-creator. This is the realization of a connection between the holy, the creative and the physical. It is in the reality of embodiment that the holy appears.

On the other hand our encounter with the holy in the process of childbirth transforms anything we can then say about the holy. The holy is more than wholly other, *mysterium fascinosum et tremendum*. It is also the essence of creative power to which we owe life and liveliness. We also encounter it in sickness and death. The holy emerges on the boundaries of life.

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<sup>20</sup> Otto, *Holy*, 16.

<sup>21</sup> For a discussion maternity care and modern medicine see: Marsden Wagner, ‘Fische können das Wasser nicht sehen – Die Notwendigkeit einer Humanisierung der Geburt’, in: *Selbstbestimmung der Frau in Gynäkologie und Geburtshilfe* ed. Beate Schücking Göttingen 2003.

<sup>22</sup> Luisa Murora and the Milan school of philosophy use the term *affidamento*. What they mean is a relationship of mutual trust and confidence between two women. In their encounter both women grow and develop strength. Cf. Andrea Günter, ‘Affidamento/ Autorität’ in: *Wörterbuch der feministischen Theologie*, Gütersloh, 2 ed. 2002, p. 8f.

<sup>23</sup> Beate A. Schücking, Professor for Healthcare and Psychosomatics at the University of Osnabrück/ Germany. Public lecture, published on video.

The holy manifests itself as that which is powerful. It takes hold of us and shakes the very foundations of our being. It is that which gives us bliss and terrifies at the same time. Power emerges in a process of transformation. The child experiences the transition from the womb into the world, from the placenta to the breast. The mother undergoes the transition from being pregnant to being a mother. Fathers find themselves having a new identity. It is in these transitions and transformations that we encounter the holy as the power of healing and that which demands healing. It opens up new being.

The German poet Nelly Sachs proclaims childbirth as a form of resurrection. Here, she says is the place where we encounter the divine:

Imprisoned by our skin  
The dead grope  
in the terror of new births  
celebrating resurrection  
without words  
Divine being creates itself -<sup>24</sup>

### 3. *Consequences*

#### 1. Medical ethics

In ethical debates, for example about pre-natal diagnostics, abortions and embryological research women argue that an embryo cannot be regarded as a ‘thing’, but must be seen as ‘two-in-one’<sup>25</sup>, as a unit with the body of the mother. A theology of childbirth as encounter with the holy is a starting point for such a debate.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Nelly Sachs, *Gedichte*, Frankfurt/ Main 1977, p. 98.

<sup>25</sup> Ina Praetorius, ‘Das Ungedachte: Zwei in Einer. ein Essay zur Theologie der Schwangerschaft’, in: *Zum Ende des Patriarchats. Theologisch-politische Texte im Übergang* ed. Ina Praetorius, Mainz 2000, pp. 29-34.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Christiane Kohler-Weiß, *Schutz der Menschwerdung. Schwangerschaft und Schwangerschaftskonflikt als Themen evangelischer Ethik*, Gütersloh 2003, pp. 309ff; Eva Pelkner, *Gott, Gene, Gebärmütter. Anthropologie und Frauenbild in der evangelischen Ethik zur Fortpflanzungsmedizin*, Gütersloh 2001.

## 2. Professional midwifery

In our culture of assisted childbirth the midwife is the third person present when a new human being arrives in the world.<sup>27</sup> So far the churches do not officially recognize the spiritual dimension of this profession. Historically the midwife was a kind of emergency priest who could offer emergency baptisms<sup>28</sup> and pastoral care. All they were supposed to say about the Christian faith was focused on Genesis 3.16: God punishes women with pain as a loving father chastises an unruly child and 1 Timothy 2.15: Women are saved through childbirth and are therefore to be grateful for each child. Such andro-centric theology can no longer be sustained, but it has left us with a spiritual vacuum which is hard to fill.

The midwife becomes a ritual leader if she enables the parents or the mother and her girlfriend to have a time of silence during which they can have a profound experience of the holy. The midwife can endeavour to create a space and time for an encounter with the holy. She could even be called a priest, in the sense of ‘sacer-dos’, offering the holy.<sup>29</sup> Here I also see a connection to the ‘do not be afraid’ which the midwife offers to Rachel as she gives birth to Benjamin by the roadside.<sup>30</sup>

## 3. Ministry and pastoral praxis

Earlier in this paper I stressed that the holy is not restricted to the context of the religious or a religious framework of interpretation but that it can be encountered as an experience of depth in other experiences. This means that a religious upbringing is not a necessary precondition for an experience of the holy. And yet such a theology of childbirth has consequences for Christian theology and pastoral practice.

Let me highlight just a few points:

a) *Theology of creation*: God co-operates with the woman. She consents to her body bearing a new human being, to giving birth and to the initial nurturing of this new creature. Hannah Arendt, a philosopher, expresses this in theological terms: ‘Because the reality of each act of birth is so

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<sup>27</sup> Barbara Duden, ‘Die Ungeborenen. Vom Untergang der Geburt im späten 20. Jahrhundert’, in: *Rituale der Geburt. Eine Kulturgeschichte* ed. J. Schlumbohm et al., Munich 1998, p. 156.

<sup>28</sup> Today the situation regarding emergency baptism is pretty chaotic. If parents of a stillborn child ask for an emergency baptism, the pastoral role of the clergy is often overlooked. Often midwives conduct a small ceremony of blessing.

<sup>29</sup> Hanna Strack, ‘Fürchte dich nicht! – Hebammen und die Theologie der Geburt’, in: Günter, *Maria liest*.

<sup>30</sup> Genesis 37.15

unique, it appears as if each act of childbirth is a re-enactment of God's creation itself.<sup>31</sup> Now we no longer focus on Genesis 3.16, but move on to Genesis 3.20: Eve is the mother of everything that is. The history of the interpretation of Genesis 3.16 has hitherto obscured this verse.<sup>32</sup> Should we not think about adding to the first article of the Creed the following phrase: 'creator of heaven and earth who together with woman creates new life in every time a child is born'?

b) *Our understanding of God:* women's experiences and embodied experiences are worthy to be symbols of the divine. Holy communion involves food and nurture. In the same way pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding can become part of our image of God as mother. The divine can then be understood as the Trinity of origin, nurture and abundance of life. We encounter such imagery for the divine in the prayers of Janet Morley: 'God, our mother, you hold our life within you; nourish us at your breast, and teach us to walk alone.'<sup>33</sup> The experience of the mother as the origin of life is part and parcel of the experience of natality. This too offers a possibility for extending our image of the divine. Psalm 22 begins with the cry of dereliction: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' Later on in the same Psalm the Psalmist proclaims with confidence the image of God as a midwife: 'Yet it was you who took me from the womb; you kept me safe on my mother's breast. On you was I cast from my birth, and since my mother bore me, you have been my God.'<sup>34</sup>

c) *Christology:* God became human through Mary's consent to pregnancy and childbirth. The narrative of Jesus' birth makes it very clear that God is at work and acts in our being born of woman.<sup>35</sup> On the cross Jesus suffers the birth pangs of death. From them will spring forth resurrection and new hope. The apostle Peter preaches: 'God has raised him up from death and has freed him from [the labour pains of] death.'<sup>36</sup> The original Greek text shows strong birth imagery which is lost in most translations. The word for pain is ὄδινας, labour pains.

d) *Baptism:* The interpretation of baptism as new birth has led to a profound neglect of the first birth. In the Celtic tradition we still find references to the midwife blessing the child. This is of

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<sup>31</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Vita activa oder Vom tätigen Leben*, Munich<sup>11</sup>1999, p. 217.

<sup>32</sup> Helen Schüngel-Straumann, *Die Frau am Anfang. Eva und die Folgen*, Münster 1997, pp 74-100.

<sup>33</sup> Janet Morley in: *Women Included: A Book of Services and Prayers* ed. The St Hilda Community (SPCK, 1991, p. 45.

<sup>34</sup> Psalm 22. 10,11 (NRSV).

<sup>35</sup> Karin Ulrich-Eschemann, *Geborenwerden*, 23 et al.. Cf also *Ina May Gaskin: 'Spiritual midwifery recognizes that each and every birth ist the birth of the Christ child.'* *Spiritual Midwifery*, Summertown<sup>4</sup>2002, p. 271.

<sup>36</sup> Acts 2.24 (my translation).

ten understood as a first baptism. Our liturgies of baptism should take account of the experience of childbirth, the woman's courage and strength and the miracle of new life.<sup>37</sup> The Roman Catholic liturgical scholar Teresa Berger interprets pregnancy as a form of the catechumenate, as a time of preparation for the child's baptism. She proposes an act of worship during which unborn children are entered into a 'book of life'.<sup>38</sup>

e) *Pastoral practice*: What has the church to offer to families? And what does the church gain? The Church could draw on its experience with regard to ritual and pastoral care and offer advice in making sense of childbirth in the context of modern gynaecology. A theological interpretation of childbirth would enable the church to have more contact with young families, to broaden its image of the God and to develop new ways of thinking theologically about sexuality and embodiment.<sup>39</sup>

Pregnancy, childbirth and the weeks following childbirth could be integrated into pastoral practice, into our worship. New rituals could emerge, even an act of blessing for midwives. This is how the Church could contribute to new and humane thinking about childbirth in Western societies. 'We have to understand the cultural context of childbirth, the symbolic representation in the interface between particular situations in life and the symbols that carry their meaning.'<sup>40</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

In this paper I have developed some thoughts towards a theology of childbirth from the point of view of midwives. Understanding childbirth as an encounter with the holy is just one of many different possibilities. Women's experiences of their bodies have hitherto been disregarded as a source of our theology. I hope that other theologians too will begin to offer their own interpretations of these experiences which are an essential part of the reality of being human. Hannah Arendt's idea of natality is a good starting point.

What does it mean for our making sense of our own humanity that we are all born of a woman? I want to conclude with a poem:

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<sup>37</sup> Evangelische Frauenarbeit in Württemberg: *Ins Leben eintauchen! Feministisch-theologische Beiträge zur Taufe*. edition akademie 8, Bad Boll 2004.

<sup>38</sup> Teresa Berger, *Sei gesegnet, meine Schwester. Frauen feiern Liturgie*, Würzburg 1999.

<sup>39</sup> Hammer, *Giving Birth*, pp 1-13.

<sup>40</sup> Ruth Hampe, *Frau und Geburt im Kulturvergleich; eine kunst- und kulturanalytische Studie*, Frankfurt/M Berlin Bern New York Paris Wien 1995, p. 9.

*When your child asks you...*

Mum, what was it like when I was born?

And then your mother will say:

A holy moment it was,

when I pushed you

with all my strength and hurting like mad

into the light.

It was a holy act,

when the midwife

let you slide over her hands

and put you on my breast.

A holy silence filled the room,

as I was lying there,

exhausted and yet full of bliss,

when I looked at you and saw

this amazing miracle of creation:

You!

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