

Report

The international workshop “Pregnancies, Childbirths, and Religions: Rituals, Normative Perspectives, and Individual Appropriations. A Cross-Cultural and Interdisciplinary Perspective from Antiquity to the Present” was held at Max-Weber-Kolleg (University of Erfurt) from January 31 to February 1, 2019. It was organized by Giulia Pedrucci, COFUND-Fellow at Max-Weber-Kolleg, and Claudia D. Bergmann, coordinator of the Research Centre “Dynamics of Jewish Ritual Practices”, and financed by the University of Erfurt and the BMBF.

The aim of the workshop was to analyze how religious discourses have described and influenced the natural and strictly female practices of pregnancy and childbirth. Within a religious discourse, pregnancy can be a divine gift, childbirth can be virginal. As far as childbirth is concerned, impurity is a central issue. Moreover, pregnancy and childbirth are extremely delicate moments, both for the mothers and the newborns, which need to be protected by all means, including religious and magical ones. They are moments of passage, which need rituals to be performed by many religious agents involved to various degrees in the mother’s and child’s life.

In a first session on actual biological pregnancies and childbirth, Lorenzo Verderame (La Sapienza, University of Rome) discussed ancient Near Eastern birth metaphors, Claudia D. Bergmann (University of Erfurt) investigated the obstetrical knowledge and the theological constructions found in two biblical narratives of twin births, and Jan Bremmer (University of Groningen) spoke on the topics of pregnancy and birth in ancient Greece. Moving into more modern times and the European context, Wolfram Aichinger and Alice-Viktoria Dulmovits (University of Vienna) provided evidence for emergency baptisms in early modern Spain and Hannah Fischer-Monzón (University of Vienna) spoke about occurrences of the ancient birth goddess Lucinda in early modern Spain. Finally, Marie-France Morel (Ecole Normale Supérieure in Fontenay-Saint-Cloud, Lyon,) showed examples for *ex-voto* from the 17th–19th centuries.

In a section on pregnancy and childbirth as viewed through the eyes of (male) institutions, Dvora Lederman Daniely (David Yellin College) reinterpreted the Miriam-tradition of the Hebrew Bible and uncovered ancient traces of the goddess, David Lorin (La Sorbonne, Paris; La Sapienza, Rome) spoke on the topic “The Female Body in Late Antiquity: Between the Ideal of Chastity and De-Feminization”, Sucharita Sarkar (D.T.S.S. College of Commerce, University of Mumbai) discussed Hindu attempts to achieve an ideal pregnancy and child, Pascale Engelmajer (Carroll University, USA) presented her paper “Maya, a passive vessel or the culmination of mothering as the Buddhist path?”, and Ivan Arjona Pelado (Director General European Office Church of Scientology for Public Affairs and Human Rights) informed the audience about pregnancy and childbirth within the Scientology movement, especially the ideal of “silent birth”.

A third section focused on pregnancy and childbirth as a real female experience. Here, Florence Pasche Guignard (Ryerson University, Toronto) investigated evidence for homebirth and natural childbirth in francophone contexts, Zouhir Adaoui (Sidi Mohammed Ben Abdellah University, Fez) spoke about the single mothers’ experience of pregnancy and delivery in Morocco, and Kaja Kojder (University of Warsaw) presented the paper “Pregnancy and Childbirth Rituals among the Orthodox Christian Minority in Poland”.

In a final session entitled “Non-Biological Pregnancies and Childbirths: Negation, Negotiation, and Appropriation of a Biological Female Experience in Religious Narratives and Sacred Images”, Giulia Pedrucci (University of Erfurt) investigated examples of male pregnancies and Caesarean birth in the Greek and Roman lore, Georgia Petridou (University of Liverpool) presented on the topic “Adoption and Initiation Ritual in the Golden Lamellae”, Gerritt Lange (University of Marburg)

showed examples of divine non-births in Hindu mythology, and Romina Rossi (La Sapienza, University of Rome) provided a psychoanalytic interpretation of two myths found in *Mahābhārata*.

The workshop was accompanied by the viewing of a movie on the topic of pregnancy and childbirth and concluded by a visit to the Erfurt Mikwe where rituals concerning purity after childbirth were discussed. Proceedings will be prepared for publication.

Report written by Claudia D. Bergmann and Giulia Pedrucci