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ARTICLE

Delivery and Deliverance: Religious Experiences of Childbirth in Eighteenth-Century America

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Abstract

This paper argues that childbirth served as a prism for religious experience in early America, not just among the women who experienced it but also among the members of their households and communities. Examining childbirth as the source of religious experience can shed light on the social and physiological dimensions of early American spirituality by illuminating a religious culture of childbearing that shaped the piety of anyone who came into contact with it. We might expect that childbirth molded women's spirituality. But this article proposes that not just women but also others in their midst experienced religion differently because of their proximity to childbirth. Pregnancy, labor, and infant loss forced women and men to confront mortality and became means through which they carved out spiritual life, created ritual, and forged religious community. Using the body as a category of analysis, this paper reveals a space where the physical and spiritual persons intersect, and it argues that spiritual responses to childbirth as a physiological event were part of the longer arc of religious experience than we have previously appreciated. In doing so, it offers new ways to center women and gender in the narrative of early American religious history.

Keywords: Women; Gender; Childbirth; Religious Life; Families; Early America

I. Introduction

People who recorded their religious experiences in eighteenth-century America certainly seemed to have childbirth on their minds. Whether they felt the "new birth" of conversion—or something else, like devotion or doubt—they drew from the vocabulary of labor, delivery, and maternity.[1] When Experience Wight Richardson of Massachusetts mourned her young son's death, she prayed that God would restore her faith "with all the quick[en]ing powers," metaphorically invoking the moment

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[1]Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, *The Practice of Piety: Puritan Devotional Disciplines in Seventeenth-Century New England* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 146–147.

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when a mother first feels signs of a living fetus.[2] And when Congregationalist Samuel Clarke described a vision he experienced "after a long and tedious confinement"—a word that signified a new mother's bed rest—he imagined that "my loins were filled with pain . . . as the Pangs of a Woman that travaileth."[3] Breastfeeding metaphors invoked pure doctrine, as in John Cotton's catechism *Spiritual Milk for Boston Babes in either England: Drawn Out from the Breasts of Both Testaments for Their Souls Nourishment*, as well as the Bible, which was called the "Milk of God's Word."[4] And "weaning" suggested the denial of grace, as when doubt-plagued Connecticut diarist Hannah Heaton worried that "god is agoing to wean me from the milk and draw me from the breast."[5] Terms like *quickening*, *loins*, *travail*, *pangs*, and *milk* call childbirth to mind, but these writers used them to explain profound religious experiences. Their choices suggest that the vocabulary of childbearing resonated with far more people than those who physically experienced it.

Examining childbirth as the source of religious experience can shed light on the physiological and social dimensions of early American piety.[6] Childbirth was a prism for religious experience—which might include prayer, conversion, wrestling with doubt, encounters with institutional Christianity, or simply sensing a divine presence—for mothers along with their households and communities. It is unsurprising that childbearing affected women's spirituality. Pregnancy, labor, and infant loss forced them to confront mortality and became means to forge spiritual identity. But childbirth shaped others' religious lives, too. Husbands, childbed attendants, and fellow churchgoers followed familiar rituals and cultural scripts that framed religious and emotional responses to pregnancy and labor. Just as childbirth informed the language of religious experience, religion imbued childbirth with greater meaning.

This spiritual culture of childbirth, which drew from a range of inherited traditions, was grounded in the distinctive nature of early American religious life. Eighteenth-century America was peopled by cultural and religious groups that existed in combination nowhere else. Their beliefs and practices differed in fundamental ways, but they shared overlapping sets of rituals and doctrines that informed a complex, overarching religious culture. One component of this culture was using the body for spiritual expression. The body figured into rituals like baptism, kneeling in prayer,

[2]Entries on October 19, 1752 and June 8, 1753, Diary of Experience (Wight) Richardson, Sudbury, Mass., 1728–1782, transcribed by Ellen Richardson Glueck and Thelma Smith Ernst, 1978, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston. The diary is hereafter cited as the Richardson Diary.

[3]Samuel Clarke, *A Short Relation, Concerning a Dream* (Boston: Andrew Barclay, 1769), 3–4. Karin Wulf and Catherine La Courreye Blecki provide context for Clarke's jeremiad, which Milcah Martha Moore reproduced in her commonplace book. See Catherine La Courreye Blecki and Karin Wulf, eds., *Milcah Martha Moore's Book: A Commonplace Book from Revolutionary America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 97–98, 153n131.

[4]1 Peter 2:2–3. This catechism was first published in 1656 but remained in print and was eventually used in the *New England Primer*. John Cotton, *Spiritual Milk for Boston Babes in Either England: Drawn out of the Breasts of Both Testaments, for Their Souls Nourishment, but May Be of Use to Any Children* (Boston: Samuel Green, for Hezekiah Usher, 1656); Susan M. Stabile, "A Doctrine of Signatures," in *A Centre of Wonders: The Body in Early America*, ed. Janet Moore Lindman and Michele Lise Tarter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 122.

[5]Barbara E. Lacey, ed. *The World of Hannah Heaton: The Diary of an Eighteenth-Century Farm Woman* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2003), 47–48.

[6]I refer mainly to Protestant and Catholic faiths, as well as African and indigenous syncretic religion that engaged Christian practice. Although Jewish, Muslim, and African and non-Christian indigenous beliefs were significant, they are beyond the scope of the argument for this paper.

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and ingesting wine and bread for communion. Physical experience enhanced emotional experience during convulsive and ecstatic conversions, spiritual healing, and deathbed visions. Some believers, especially Moravians and Catholics, used the image of Christ's body and fleshly wounds to heighten devotion. Not every faith stressed the physicality of religious experience in the same way, but enough faiths did in *some* way that bodily sensation and movement were common facets of religious life.[7]

When it came to childbirth, the physical experience of religion became conflated with intellectual and emotional understanding. In the eighteenth century, when Enlightenment-inspired interrogations of faith and science stood in tension with emotional religious sensibilities, many American Christians shared a belief in providentialism: trust in and submission to God's will and a quest to understand divine intervention. Providentialism fostered active introspection and mindful acceptance of God's plan, which empowered Christians even as illness or childbirth robbed them of control. It promoted what Philippa Koch calls "redemptive motherhood," which encouraged women to achieve a higher spiritual status by enduring trials in pregnancy and labor.[8] In doing so, they created a narrative of childbirth that interwove physical, emotional, and spiritual transformation.

This narrative enhanced mothers' spiritual power, but it came together within a social framework that privileged white men's authority. According to ideals of household governance, families functioned as microcosmic states and churches that managed behavior, imposed order, and supported social hierarchy. Householders were to exercise power in their homes and over dependents, including in religious matters.[9] Mastery depended on relationships between governors and the governed; spouses, parents, and children; and slaveholders and the enslaved. Childbearing likewise called attention to relationships: sexual unions, friendships, kinship, and maternal and paternal ties. But relationships governed by mastery did not always work like those governed by childbearing. Childbirth reinforced women's places in a patriarchal system by demanding their submission, but it also gave them the spiritual authority that temporarily nudged the system of mastery off its axis.[10] As a result, households and communities underwent fluctuations in the balance of spiritual power that defined gender roles in home and church.

[7]Janet Moore Lindman, *Bodies of Belief: Baptist Community in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 208), especially chapters 3, 4, and 5; Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), especially chapter 5.

[8]Douglas L. Winiarski, *Darkness Falls on the Land of Light: Experiencing Religious Awakening in Eighteenth-Century New England* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 63n66; Philippa Koch, *The Course of God's Providence: Religion, Health, and the Body in Early America* (New York: New York University Press, 2021), introduction, chapter 5. Koch identifies providentialism as a Protestant concept, but evidence suggests Catholics also borrowed from some aspects of it as it related to childbearing.

[9]Andrew Cambers and Michael Wolfe, "Reading, Family Religion, and Evangelical Identity in Late Stuart England," *The Historical Journal* 47, no. 4 (December 2004): 875–896; Nancy Christie, "'He Is the Master of His House': Families and Political Authority in Counterrevolutionary Montreal," *William and Mary Quarterly* 70, no. 2 (April 2013): 341; Kathleen Wilson, "Rethinking the Colonial State: Family, Gender, and Governmentality in Eighteenth-Century British Frontiers," *American Historical Review* 116, no. 5 (December 2011): 1295–1297.

[10]Mary Fissell observes that the contested meanings of reproductive bodies reflected a crisis in gender roles prescribed by patriarchalism in seventeenth-century England. See Mary E. Fissell, *Vernacular Bodies: The Politics of Reproduction in Early Modern England*, revised 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 11, chapters 6–7.

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These power dynamics also reinforced a racial hierarchy. The spiritual experience and rewards of childbirth were open primarily to white women. Europeans and white Americans commodified and exploited indigenous and African women's bodies; they assumed those women did not feel pain or spiritual awe in childbirth as white women did. Slaveholders expected postpartum mothers to return to work quickly, with their productivity unaffected by labor and delivery. And because most Native cultures prized stoicism regardless of gender, white observers concluded that indigenous women did not suffer in childbearing; as a Scottish traveler noted of Ojibwe women, "child-birth is not the object of that tender care . . . among the savages as it is among civilized people." Labor pains accordingly became signs of respectability, piety, and racialized femininity.[11] The expectations for childbearing among white women were culturally conditioned.

Childbearing in early America is well-studied, but most scholarship has situated pregnancy and maternity within medical and social contexts, separate from religious experience.[12] Religious historians have begun to explore those connections, and this article builds on their work by showing how pregnant, laboring, and postpartum women became hubs of spiritual life.[13] To do so, it draws from a growing literature on the body and emotions, which explores how people derive spiritual meaning from

[11]Sir Alexander Mackenzie, *Voyages from Montreal, on the River St. Lawrence, through the Continent of North America, to the Frozen and Pacific Oceans in the Years 1789 and 1793* (Philadelphia: John Morgan, 1802), quoted in Nora Doyle, *Maternal Bodies: Redefining Motherhood in Early America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 39, 200–201. Mackenzie refers to "Chepewyan" women, which probably means "Chippewa," which we know today as Ojibwe. Susan E. Klepp, *Revolutionary Conceptions: Women, Fertility and Family Limitation in America, 1760–1820* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 16; Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), especially chapters 1 and 3.

[12]Richard W. Wertz and Dorothy C. Wertz, *Lying-In: A History of Childbirth in America* (New York: Free Press, 1977); Rose Lockwood, "Birth, Illness, and Death in Eighteenth-Century New England," *Journal of Social History* 12, no. 1 (Autumn 1978): 111–128; Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650–1750* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980); Catherine M. Scholten, *Childbearing in American Society, 1650–1850* (New York: New York University Press, 1985); Judith Walzer Leavitt, *Brought to Bed: Childbearing in America, 1750–1950* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Jan Lewis and Kenneth A. Lockridge, "'Sally Has Been Sick': Pregnancy and Family Limitation among Virginia Gentry Women, 1780–1830," *Journal of Social History* 22, no. 1 (Autumn 1988): 5–19; Sylvia D. Hoffert, *Private Matters: American Attitudes toward Childbearing in Infant Nurture in the Urban North, 1800–1860* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1988); Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785–1812* (New York: Vintage, 1990); Morgan, *Laboring Women*; Klepp, *Revolutionary Conceptions*; Doyle, *Maternal Bodies.*

[13]David D. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989); David Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death: Ritual, Religion, and the Life-Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 16–21; Erik R. Seeman, *Pious Persuasions: Laity and Clergy in Eighteenth-Century New England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); Michelle Marcetti Coughlin, *One Colonial Woman's World: The Life and Writings of Mehetabel Chandler Coit* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012); Catherine A. Brekus, *Sarah Osborn's World: The Rise of Evangelical Christianity in Early America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013); Douglas L. Winiarski, "Lydia Proutt's Dreadfullest Thought," *New England Quarterly* 88, no. 3 (September 2015): 356–421; Winiarski, *Darkness Falls on the Land of Light*; Janet Moore Lindman, "'To have a gradual weaning & be ready & wiling to resign all': Maternity, Piety, and Pain among Quaker Women of the Early Mid-Atlantic," *Early American Studies* 17, no. 4 (Fall 2019): 498–518.

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physical stimuli along with emotions like grief or ecstasy.[14] It applies Catherine Bell's theory of the "ritualized body," which exists in a spiritual space and structures the surrounding environment and human relationships that play out therein. Bodily experience connects to emotional experience.[15] As Monique Scheer suggests, emotions constitute "practical engagement with the world," conditioned by historical and cultural contexts.[16] Laboring women's bodies integrate emotional, physical, and spiritual understanding.

But the religious experience of childbirth was not solely the province of mothers. A typical married woman of childbearing age endured repeated intervals of pregnancy, childbirth, and nursing over decades of her life. If we imagine the number of women in any community undergoing these cycles, we can extrapolate the impact of childbirth on them, their families, and their churches. The spiritual drama of birth placed women at the center of the religious life in their homes, surrounded by other women, with their husbands at the periphery. Life in congregations ebbed and flowed with anxiety about churchgoers' labor, mourning of lost mothers and infants, and collective relief after safe deliveries. Although childbearing demanded women's submission, it also vested them with power.[17] Examining the spiritual experience of childbirth sheds light on a gendered religious culture that revolved around mothers.

[14]Among the landmark scholarship to connect the body with ritual is Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, especially chapters 4–5. Scholarship on spiritual healing includes Pamela Klassen, "The Politics of Protestant Healing: Theoretical Tools for the Study of Spiritual Bodies and the Body Politic," *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 14, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 68–85. Other work focuses on the physiological, neurological, and chemical sources of thought, emotion, and desire, but much of this scholarship ignores childbirth. See William LaFleur, "Body," in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Robert C. Fuller, *Spirituality in the Flesh: Bodily Sources of Religous Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Robert C. Fuller, *The Body of Faith: A Biological History of Religion in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013). For work that does situate the childbearing body in social and religious contexts, see Lindman and Tarter, eds., *A Centre of Wonders*; Lindman, "'To have a gradual weaning & be ready & wiling to resign all'"; Pamela E. Klassen, "Sacred Maternities and Postbiomedical Bodies: Religion and Nature in Contemporary Home Birth," *Signs* 26, no. 3 (Spring 2001): 775–809; Fissell, *Vernacular Bodies*; Martha L. Finch, *Dissenting Bodies: Corporealities in Early New England* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009). Scholarship on religion and emotion includes John Corrigan, "'Habits from the Heart': The American Enlightenment and Religious Ideas about Emotion," *Journal of Religion* 73, no. 2 (April 1993): 183–189; John Corrigan, Eric Crump, and John Kloos, *Emotion and Religion: A Critical Assessment and Annotated Bibliography* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 2000); John Corrigan, ed., *Feeling Religion* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2018); John Corrigan, *Business of the Heart: Religion and Emotion in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Monique Scheer, "Are Emotions a Kind of Practice (and Is That What Makes Them Have a History)? A Bordieuian Approach to Understanding Emotion," *History and Theory* 51, no. 2 (May 2012): 193–220; Heather D. Curtis, "House of Healing: Sacred Space, Spiritual Practice, and the Transformation of Female Suffering in the Faith Cure Movement, 1870–1900," *Church History* 75, no. 3 (Sept. 2006): 598–611; Phyllis Mack, *Heart Religion in the British Enlightenment: Gender and Emotion in Early Methodism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Martha Thomhave Blauvelt, *The Work of the Heart: Young Women and Emotion, 1780–1830* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007), especially chapter 5; Nicole Eustace, *Passion Is the Gale: Emotion, Power, and the Coming of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), especially chapter 5.

[15]Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 98–100.

[16]Scheer, "Are Emotions a Kind of Practice?"; Fuller, *The Body of Faith*, ix.

[17]Doyle, *Maternal Bodies*, 63.

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II. Childbearing, Pain, and Women's Spirituality

The religious culture of childbirth was marked most of all by its spiritual impact on pregnant and laboring women. Delivery was a test. Cultural and religious expectations, which framed the physical experiences of pregnancy and childbirth, ritualized and conditioned women's responses. They drew upon religious models of virtuous womanhood to navigate pain and distress, and to search their souls for signs of sin and redemption. In doing so, they sought to exert control over their circumstances in the moments when they felt most vulnerable.

Women's maternal roles placed them at the junction of competing and sometimes paradoxical expectations. They drew on three models of Christian womanhood: the daughter of Eve, the mother in Israel, and Mary. Daughters of Eve, like their namesake, shouldered the burden for original sin, including suffering in childbirth. Labor—oppressive, painful, and dangerous—called Eve to mind.[18] Eve's association with childbirth was so pervasive that even Quakers, who rejected the doctrine of original sin, voiced thoughts of affliction as they anticipated labor. But maternity also conferred status as mothers in Israel, whose piety—apparent through qualities like submissiveness and patience—conferred sanctified status among their families and communities.[19] Mothers in Israel shared traits with Mary. Although we often consider Mary to be the object of Catholic devotion, early modern Protestants venerated her as well for her example of maternal love. Because Mary appears most prominently in the Bible as a pregnant and postpartum woman and as a grieving mother, she offered a model of pious motherhood.[20] These complementary ideals of maternity suggested that women accept the agonies of labor with forbearance to prove their mettle as wives and mothers.

These models existed alongside two other concepts that informed the experience of childbirth: the theology of affliction and the philosophy of virtue. The theology of affliction held out pain as a reminder of depravity even as it promised salvation for those who persevered. Pain served a godly purpose; God sent violence, distress, and trials like illness and childbirth to remind people of their helplessness and innate sinfulness.[21] The theology of affliction is generally linked to reformed Protestantism, but many cultures understand pain as a test of spiritual fortitude. World religions provide examples of figures who are transformed through pain and affliction, as well as ascetic rituals, like self-flagellation and fasting, that help the faithful experience the sacred through pain.[22]

[18]Mary Fissell shows that identification with Eve resulted in part from Protestants' emphasis on original sin, which shifted women's self-image from one reflecting Mary to one reflecting Eve. Philippa Koch, by contrast, argues that Mary remained an important maternal figure for Protestants as well as Catholics into the nineteenth century (after which Mary remained important for Catholics). See Koch, *The Course of God's Providence*, 155–162; Fissell, *Vernacular Bodies*, 46–47. On Quaker women, see Lauren F. Winner, *A Cheerful and Comfortable Faith: Anglican Religious Practice in the Elite Households of Eighteenth-Century Virginia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 51. On race and labor pain, see Morgan, *Laboring Women*, 40, 47. Because Europeans assumed that African and indigenous women did not bear the curse of Eve, they did not meet the standards of white womanhood.

[19]On Mothers in Israel, see Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1998), chapter 4.

[20]Koch, *The Course of God's Providence*, 155–162.

[21]For affliction, see Winiarski, "Lydia Proutt's Dreadfullest Thought," 362–363; Winiarski, *Darkness Falls on the Land of Light*, 63n66.

[22]Fuller, *Spirituality in the Flesh*, 131–135; Scheer, "Are Emotions a Kind of Practice?," 18; Fuller, *The Body of Faith*, xi; Elaine Forman Crane, "'I Have Suffer'd Much Today': The Defining Force of Pain in Early

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Suffering, then, offers a path to virtue. Virtue was an elastic concept in the eighteenth century, carrying implicitly masculine qualities like strength and manly courage, along with the Machiavellian model of self-discipline and theological virtues of faith, hope, and love.[23] For women in labor, virtue suggested piety, submission, and resignation—but not weakness. Rather, laboring women exhibited strength by trusting God's plan.[24] Just as the religious model of the pious mother scripted an emotional response to affliction, the Enlightenment model of the virtuous mother encouraged deliberation and restraint.[25]

Childbearing women experienced birth as a religious and physiological event because their bodily ordeal framed their spiritual and emotional responses.[26] Expected to endure discomfort without complaint and to avoid divulging intimate details, they wrote little about pregnancy symptoms as they prepared themselves for the trials to come.[27] But they often made note of quickening, which awakened body and spirit to pregnancy. Experience Wight Richardson wrote in December 1747, "If I be with child, O my courig fails me," and asked God to "look on my distressed condition & many dangers threaten me . . . [and] be thou the strength of my heart."[28] Her anxiety may have sprung from her age; at forty-three years old (having last borne a child fifteen years earlier), her pregnancy was likely unexpected and alarming. But her language of supplication was typical. Hannah Callender Sansom, a member of a prominent Philadelphia Quaker family, was typically reserved in writing about childbearing. But in November 1762, when she likely felt the first signs of her first pregnancy, she remarked that she was "very unwell." She observed that "a hard lesson to flesh and blood [is] to bear affliction" and asked God to "preserve me." Months later, she mourned her father's death just "when I may be like to feel the pangs of a Parent!" As if to quiet her sorrow, she prayed that "our afflictions work together for

America," in *Through a Glass Darkly: Reflections on Personal Identity in Early America*, ed. Ronald Hoffman, Mechal Sobel, and Fredrika J. Teute (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 372–375.

[23]Ruth Bloch, "The Gendered Meanings of Virtue in Revolutionary America," *Signs* 13, no. 1 (Autumn 1987): 37–58; Richard Dagger, *Rights, Citizenship, and Republican Liberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), chapter 1; Julia Conaway Bondanella and Peter Bondanella, Introduction to Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, reissue edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), xv–xvi; J. A. G. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition*, revised edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), chapter IIB; Philip Gould, "Virtue, Ideology, and the American Revolution," *American Literary History* 5, no. 3 (Autumn 1993): 564–577. As Bloch demonstrates, the concept of virtue later took another turn in which it came to mean feminine morality and sexual purity.

[24]Talal Asad, on the other hand, questions the link between pain and moral agency or empowerment. See Asad, "Agency and Pain: An Exploration," *Culture and Religion* 1, no. 1 (May 2008): 45–51.

[25]Eustace, *Passion Is the Gale*, 298; Lindman, "To have a gradual weaning & be ready & wiling to resign all," 503; Ruth Bloch, *Gender and Morality in Anglo-American Culture, 1650–1800* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), chapter 3; Doyle, *Maternal Bodies*, 4–7. The eighteenth-century model of resignation mediated religious responses to pain for later generations of women. See Curtis, "House of Healing."

[26]For perspectives on pain perception in historical contexts, see Joanna Bourke, "What Is Pain? A History 'The Prothero Lecture,'" *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*. Sixth Series, 23: 155–173; Klassen, "Sacred Maternities and Postbiomedical Bodies," 775–809; David B. Morris, "What We Make of Pain," *The Wilson Quarterly* 18, no. 4 (Autumn 1994): 8–26.

[27]Lindman, "To have a gradual weaning & be ready & wiling to resign all," 502.

[28]Entry on December 22, 1747, Richardson Diary. Richardson gave birth to her son, Luther, on July 14, 1748. See also Seeman, *Pious Persuasions*, 189.

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good" and that "they be sanctified unto us." Though her father's death and child's imminent birth triggered grief and panic, she reminded herself to "let thy Happiness take its rise in Resignation."[29] Pregnancy brought into focus feelings of helplessness and dependence, which women like Richardson and Sansom framed within the constructs of motherhood and its qualities of submissiveness and forbearance.

For women who bore the curse of daughters of Eve but also aspired to convey the selfless love of mothers in Israel and Mary, childbearing served a complex purpose. Mothers interpreted pain as consequence of sin and test of faith, and they resigned themselves to distress as a path to absolution. Hannah Heaton, like many women, believed labor was "satans time to try to tempt me to sin against god by holding up ghastly death before me."[30] But even as pain indicated guilt for original sin, it also provided laboring women, as Cotton Mather promised, an "Excitement for those Exercises of Piety, that Secure to them . . . Eternal *Blessedness*."[31] Childbirth was both an imposition and an opportunity; just as it brought pain and trauma, perseverance could attest to a woman's godliness.[32] Only by submitting to the agonies of childbirth could women prove their mettle as dutiful wives and virtuous mothers, reaping spiritual rewards for their efforts.

Much of the religious rhetoric surrounding childbirth stemmed from anxiety about labor. Although the likelihood of dying in childbirth was lower than most people perceived, the fear was very real.[33] And it was no wonder. Ministers constantly reminded pregnant women of their proximity to death, often in handbooks intended to guide families in prayer over the childbed.[34] Cotton Mather wrote that upon conception, "your Death has entered into you" and that "***preparation for death*** is that Most Reasonable and Most Seasonable thing to which you must now Apply your self."[35]

[29]Susan E. Klepp and Karin Wulf, eds., *The Diary of Hannah Callender Sansom: Sense and Sensibility in the Age of the American Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), 197, 212–214. Women often used words like "unwell" to describe the discomforts of pregnancy and labor. Sansom gave birth to her first child on June 1, 1763.

[30]Lacey, ed., *The World of Hannah Heaton*, 54.

[31]Cotton Mather, *Elizabeth in Her Holy Retirement: An Essay to Prepare a Pious Woman for Her Lying In* (Boston: B. Greene, 1710), 2; Catherine M. Scholten, "'On the Importance of the Obstetrick Art': Changing Customs of Childbirth in America, 1760 to 1825," *William and Mary Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (July 1977): 427–428.

[32]For literature on the Puritan theology of affliction, see Ross W. Beales, "The Smiles and Frowns of Providence," in *Wonders of the Invisible World, 1600–1900*, ed. Peter Benes, Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife, Annual Proceedings (Boston: Boston University Press, 1995); Crane, "I Have Suffer'd Much Today"; Winiarski, "Lydia Proutt's Dreadfullest Thought," 362n6; Winiarski, *Darkness Falls on the Land of Light*, 63n66.

[33]Figures for maternal deaths in early America were far lower than comparable rates in Great Britain, possibly because the American population was mostly rural. Higher maternal death rates correlated with cities, where disease spread more easily. According to Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, maternal death rates in rural New England in the early republic ranged from 1 to 6 per 1,000 births—far fewer than corresponding numbers for London or Dublin. In Newport, Rhode Island (urban, but not a metropolis), Ezra Stiles recorded 10 maternal deaths out of 1,600 deliveries between 1760 and 1764. Maternal death rates were higher in the South (between 6 to 20 deaths per 1,000 deliveries), partly because of the higher incidence of disease and poor maternal care for enslaved women. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale*, 172–173; Seeman, *Pious Persuasions*, 56, 189; Doyle, *Maternal Bodies*, 129–130.

[34]Devotional prayer books and advice books were published on both sides of the Atlantic and circulated widely. Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death*, 24–26.

[35]Mather, *Elizabeth in Her Holy Retirement*, 6–7. Emphasis is in the original text.

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Similarly, John Oliver warned "Women in this condition" to consider both material and spiritual necessities for labor, warning that they might need "no other linen shortly but a *Winding* sheet and no other chamber but a *grave*."[36] Their reminders terrified women, but they also underscored the fact that childbirth might be an expectant mother's last chance—on the precipice of death—to demonstrate maternal virtue.

Women took these warnings to heart. They armed themselves with protective rituals, including prayer, meditation, or participation in communion, to ease their way and safeguard their babies.[37] Martha Coit, who bore ten children, wrote of "being near unto death" and "under fears and troubles" as each birth approached. She "beged of the lord for to send me som soporting promiss" and consoled herself by reading Bible verses to prepare for labor.[38] Hannah Heaton wrote in 1755 of "a turn of extreme fear and terror upon me about the hour I cannot escape and now it draws near." She spent time in secret prayer to steel herself for childbirth.[39] Esther Edwards Burr and Experience Wight Richardson both recited specific Psalms during labor, the latter concentrating on "four promises in the scripture," including God's pledge to "call on me in the day of trouble and I will deliver thee."[40] Sarah Logan Fisher asked for God's help "during this fiery trial, which sometimes appears to be more than my nature can support."[41] Regardless of their methods, these women's strategies of self-preservation reflected both their perceived helplessness and desire to seize control.

Others were less verbal but no less deliberate in calming themselves through rituals. Margaretha Edmonds, a Moravian woman in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, prepared her memoir (the spiritual autobiography that Moravians wrote to document lives of faith) just before her first child was born in 1756, as if she anticipated that she would not survive to complete this work (Edmonds did survive childbirth but she did not return to her memoir during her lifetime).[42] Some, like Mary Scott Randolph of Virginia, sewed their newborns' baptismal gowns prior to giving birth. Elite Anglicans like Randolph often celebrated baptism at home and elaborate christening gowns were part of this rite. By sewing them during pregnancy, women could make sure their infants would have this heirloom even if their mothers did not survive.[43] Such rituals might have soothed these women, but rarely did they fully mitigate their fears. While death did not pose a statistically ominous threat, it nonetheless loomed palpably over pregnant women.

[36]A "winding sheet" is a shroud in which a corpse is wrapped for burial. John Oliver, *A Present to Be Given to Teeming Women, by Their Husbands, or Friends* (Boston: Benjamin Harris, 1694), 3. Emphasis in the original text.

[37]Catholic and Protestant women often chose to take communion before childbirth. Winiarski, "Lydia Proutt's Dreadfullest Thought," 376; Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death*, 22–23.

[38]Coughlin, *One Colonial Woman's World*, 41–44.

[39]Lacey, ed., *The World of Hannah Heaton*, 74.

[40]Susan M. Stabile, "A Doctrine of Signatures," 122; Entry on July 14, 1748, Richardson Diary. Richardson mistakenly identified this verse as part of Psalm 45, whereas it is actually from Psalm 50. For more on Richardson, see Seeman, *Pious Persuasions*, especially chapter 6.

[41]Quoted in Doyle, *Maternal Bodies*, 81.

[42]An author of a memoir (*lebensläufe*) typically wrote part of the document, and the surviving spouse or congregants would complete it posthumously, as Margaretha Edmonds's fellow congregants did. Katherine M. Faull, *Moravian Women's Memoirs: Their Related Lives, 1750–1820*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997), xxxi, 33–34.

[43]Winner, *A Cheerful and Comfortable Faith*, 59.

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Understanding affliction as a consequence of sin and as a means of seeking absolution allowed women to make sense of the agony of birth. This was true even when labor pains ended in infant loss. Unlike maternal mortality rates, which early Americans overestimated, infant mortality rates really were quite high, and most families experienced loss at some point.[44] When infants died, mothers tried to reconcile searing grief with a quest to understand how their losses revealed God's intentions. Grief was central to an emotional style of piety, which opened the believer to God—not just for ardent evangelicals, but also for more reserved Quakers who embraced "religious affections" as a way to heighten spirituality. But grief only advanced piety if it was tempered with resignation to God's will. For that reason, bereft mothers mitigated sorrow with submission.[45] After her young son died, Experience Wight Richardson feared she had "sined against God in distressing myself about the state of my child that is dead but I pray to God to give me a right sperit about this thing."[46] Richardson steadied herself in her grief with hopes that her loss could somehow serve God.

Many women feared that wishing too hard for their children to live would be a selfish sort of grief, because they were hoping for an outcome that God did not see fit to grant. Ministers cautioned them to bear grief with patience and trust that God was wiser in his wishes than they were in their own.[47] Accordingly, they should endure grief with the same resignation with which they endured childbirth. Richardson imagined that God saved her from a fate in which, years in the future, she might become ashamed of a son who "might have been a man grown" to become "very wicked."[48] Similarly, Ann Randolph Page consoled Mary Lee Custis by assuring Custis that her baby daughter, in dying, had been spared life's troubles. Much like Richardson, Page noted that Custis's loss paled in comparison to "many a parent who has vicious children, who behold them living in the error of their way." This child would be safe "from the dangers that daily assail us from our spiritual enemies" and had instead had "gone back to the omniscient Spirit." Page urged Custis to accept her loss with "placid resignation" and "composed reliance on the Almighty."[49] The prospects of their own or their infants' deaths were terrifying. But fear and grief could lead to steadfast resolve. Faith and affliction were inseparable; if God was as responsible for affliction as for faith, then grief was

[44]Infant mortality rates are more difficult to generalize than maternal mortality rates, since the statistics varied depending on urban or rural setting, race, class, and family size. Susan Klepp estimates that among eighteenth-century families in Philadelphia, families bearing 4 to 6 children experienced an infant mortality rate of 163 stillbirths or infant deaths per 1,000 births. Families with nine or more children experienced 224 stillbirths or infant deaths per 1,000 births. In New England, infant death or stillbirth occurred in 10 to 30 percent of all births, with greater frequency in poor families. Klepp, *Revolutionary Conceptions*, 61n7; Winiarski, "Lydia Proutt's Dreadfullest Thought," 377; Maris A. Vinovskis, "Angels' Heads and Weeping Willows: Death in Early America," in Gerald B. Moran and Maris A. Vinovskis, ed. *Religion, Family, and the Life Course: Explorations in the Social History of Early America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 215.

[45]Eustace, *Passion Is the Gale*, 289–93, 300–301.

[46]Undated entry in February 1753, Richardson Diary. This was not an infant loss, as her son had recently turned four, but her emotional response was similar to other mothers' reactions to lost infants.

[47]Winiarski, "Lydia Proutt's Dreadfullest Thought," 390.

[48]Entry on October 12, 1752, Richardson Diary.

[49]Ann Randolph Page, letters to Mary Lee Custis, September 10, 1806, and March 29, 1807, Section 9, Mary Lee (Fitzhugh) Custis Correspondence, 1800–1807, Mary Lee Custis Papers, 1694–1917, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond.

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part of an ordered universe in which labor pains, maternal death, and even infant loss served a purpose.

Many women found that surviving childbearing (even after loss) could bring spiritual peace, and mothers reflected on the aftermath of childbirth much like converts reflected on the aftermath of the new birth. They understood God to have intervened to protect them, their children, and their faith. Martha Coit, even after five of her ten children died (four of them in infancy), reflected on "gods gracious dealings with me in the times of sharp travail in Childe bareing."[50] After her son Luther was born in 1748, Experience Wight Richardson wrote, "God hath dalt wonderfully with me." She reflected that she had been "much afraid my travel which I had to pass through," but that "God was pleased to help me beleve."[51] Mary Dodge Cleaveland, who repeatedly thanked God for making "me the liveing mother of another liveing child," believed that "the Lord has appeared for me in the perilous our of childbaring" and resolved that "my spared life and all that I Call mine be devoted to the Lord."[52] Margaret Morris, a Quaker woman, "praise[d] the Glorious name" of God for her "safe delivery in childbirth." Although she endured doubt, plagued by her "unbelieving heart" and physical pain, she credited God for sustaining her: "Gracious God . . . suffered me not long to remain in doubt for thy arm assisted and I was delivered."[53] Even in the precarious postpartum stage, when mothers and infants remained vulnerable, it was possible to achieve a measure of assurance. So thought Quaker Elizabeth Drinker, who suggested that "women who live to get over the time of Child-bareing . . . experience more comfort and satisfaction than at any other period in their lives."[54] Were these women fully convinced in their gratitude? We cannot know for sure. But in their reflections on childbirth, they exerted great effort to channel affliction into order.

III. The Childbed and Household Religion

And they did not do so alone. For however solitary the experience of childbearing might seem, birth took place in overlapping social and spiritual spaces that rarely left women isolated. Eighteenth-century midwives and other childbed attendants claimed temporary power over households with laboring women. They did so at a time when Enlightenment science took shape within a framework of providentialism, so that medical practitioners saw themselves as carrying out God's will. Unbeknownst to them, midwives stood at the precipice of a new age of medicine, when they would be pushed aside by formally trained male physicians.[55] But in the meantime, the very ordinary event of childbirth conferred extraordinary authority on women, which undercut a patriarchal family order. In the household, pregnancy and delivery created sacred space that revolved around the childbed.

[50]Coughlin, *One Colonial Woman's World*, 41.

[51]Entry on July 14, 1748, Richardson Diary.

[52]Entries on January 17, 1749/50 and August 26, 1760, Mary Dodge Cleaveland Diary, 1742–1762, John Cleaveland Papers, MSS. 204, box 2, folder 11, Phillips Library, Peabody Essex Museum, Rowley, Massachusetts. The phrase "living mother of a living child" was in common use. See, for example, Lindman, "'To have a gradual weaning & be ready & wiling to resign all,'" 503. References to God's appearance at the childbed were similarly common. See Seeman, *Pious Persuasions*, 57.

[53]Margaret Morris, 1760, quoted in Eustace, *Passion is the Gale*, 297–298.

[54]Quoted in Doyle, *Maternal Bodies*, 52.

[55]Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale*, especially chapters 5 and 7; Koch, *The Course of God's Providence*, especially chapters 3 and 5.

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When a laboring woman's body occupied the home's spiritual center, she demarcated the sacred space around her with objects that blurred boundaries between religion, ritual, and folk tradition. Events like birth and death, which engaged both religious and medical ways of knowing, called household objects into ritual use. Childbeds assumed specific purposes for laboring women even if they reverted to everyday use after the period of lying-in. Women designated certain linens for the childbed, which they might pass down to their daughters.[56] Many New Englanders believed that placing red cloths over an infant's face could protect the child from bad air.[57] Other items carried more obvious religious meaning. Sacred books were used for worship at any time, but they served as spiritually charged totems during childbirth. It was common, for instance, to place a Bible or prayer book on a laboring woman's head to ease her pains.[58] Wealthy Anglican families, who often preferred to baptize children at home, used silver bowls for this ceremony. Silver suggested not just wealth but also divinity (which was why it was the material of choice for sacred objects), and families passed these bowls to descendants.[59] Between baptisms, they might sit on display as reminders of past births and markers of children's places in the family. Like other objects, they designated spiritual space for childbirth.

Those spaces gave shape to a social culture of birthing. Studies of childbirth in early America have shed important light on women's medical networks: female relatives and friends, including midwives, who aided laboring women.[60] The midwife and her assistants played religious as well as social roles, performing rituals that made the mother's body the focal point of the home. Some historians have likened these gatherings to women's prayer groups in form and function, and the women around the childbed often reinforced the church's presence.[61] It was common, especially in New England, for ministers' wives and adult daughters to provide medical care, including midwifery, for their congregations. Among the relatives of New England clergy who practiced medicine were Bridget Fuller of Plymouth, Elizabeth Davenport of New Haven, Elizabeth Greenleaf of Boston, and Dorothy Bulkeley Treat of Glastonbury. The clergy, too, were often more familiar with midwifery than physicians were. Ministers who owned books on midwifery and assisted with deliveries included Daniel Greenleaf (Elizabeth's husband), Gershom Bulkeley (Dorothy Bulkeley Treat's father), Thomas Palmer, John Fiske, and Ebenezer Parkman. While touring the Carolina backcountry in 1768, Anglican itinerant Charles Woodmason wrote that he, too, delivered a

[56]Kathleen Brown, "Murderous Uncleanness: The Body of Female Infanticide in Puritan New England," in *A Centre of Wonders: The Body in Early America*, ed. Janet Moore Lindman and Michele Lise Tarter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 86–87.

[57]Rebecca J. Tannenbaum, *The Healer's Calling: Women and Medicine in Early New England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 411. After Samuel Sewall's first child was born in 1677, his cousin "said we ought to lay scarlet on the Child's head for that it had received some harm." Samuel Sewall, *Diary of Samuel Sewall, 1674–1729*, vol. 1, Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society, 5th Series (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1878), 40.

[58]Whereas New England families used the Bible, Anglican families used the Book of Common Prayer for similar purposes. This tradition had a long history in Europe. David Cressy, "Books as Totems in Seventeenth-Century England and New England," *The Journal of Library History* 21, no. 1 (Winter 1986): 98–99, 101; Winner, *A Cheerful and Comfortable Faith*, 111.

[59]Winner, *A Cheerful and Comfortable Faith*, 28–29

[60]Richard Wertz and Dorothy Wertz coined the term "social childbirth"; see Wertz and Wertz, *Lying-In*, 2; see also Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale*, 61, 380n65.

[61]Tannenbaum, *The Healer's Calling*, 50; Hambrick-Stowe, *The Practice of Piety.*

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woman in labor "who could get but two Women, and no Midwife to attend her."[62] Possessing skills and lacking alternatives, he found himself performing that role.

Sometimes, the midwife represented the church in a more formal capacity. Where the Anglican church was established, midwives acted as deputy priests, licensed by the Church of England. Licensing—which had precedent in Europe—was intended to prevent midwives from acting against the church's interests (by practicing witchcraft or charging exorbitant fees, for instance). But it also conferred religious and social authority.[63] It was the midwife's job to solicit confessions of paternity from unmarried laboring women, which she was then required to report to a priest, thereby enforcing sexual and religious mores.[64] In Virginia and New York, the Anglican church licensed midwives to perform emergency baptisms of infants who might not live long enough for a priest to arrive. Some obstetrical kits included baptismal syringes so a midwife could baptize a dying infant in utero, just to be safe.[65] Catholic midwives (along with other laity) were authorized by Jesuit priests to perform "conditional baptisms" in an emergency (which a priest would repeat later for infants who survived).[66] But midwives' religious roles were not always so formal. Sometimes, they simply offered prayer and comfort, as the midwife did at a birth Hannah Heaton witnessed in 1754. When the laboring mother cried out that she was "a sinner" who deserved "no mercy," the midwife reassured her, insisting "yes you do."[67] Perhaps she offered reassurance as an afterthought, but in doing so, she helped make the childbed a site of prayer.

For husbands, too, childbirth reoriented household religious life. It seems obvious that men witnessed their wives' childbearing at home, but accounts of childbirth have tended to diminish men's presence. Even though men rarely joined the women who oversaw the birth, they remained close around the periphery. Moravians advised husbands to bless their wives at the start of labor, suggesting they should "lay a hand on her head and ask the Savior to be near her . . . and to help her."[68] Other men were deeply affected by their wives' labor, even without formal prescription. Samuel

[62]A "midwife" was a person who oversaw labor, regardless of that person's gender. The word root for "mid" means "with," so a midwife was literally someone who was *with* the wife (which was interchangeable in middle English for "mother"). Patricia Watson reports that 21 percent of New England ministers owned books on midwifery, which exceeded the percentage of physicians who did. See Patricia Watson, "The 'Hidden Ones': Women and Healing in Colonial New England," in Peter Benes, ed. *Medicine and Healing*, The Dublin Seminar for New England Folk Life Annual Proceedings, 1990 (Boston: Boston University, 1992), 25–33; Tannenbaum, *The Healer's Calling*, 76, 78. For more on Gershom Bulkeley, see Thomas Jodziewicz, "The 1699 Diary of Gershom Bulkeley of Wethersfield, Connecticut," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 131, no. 4 (December 1987): 425–441. For more on Ebenezer Parkman, see Francis G. Walett, ed., "The Diary of Ebenezer Parkman, 1719–1728," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 71 (1961): 93–227 and subsequent volumes. See Richard J. Hooker, ed., *The Carolina Backcountry on the Eve of the Revolution: The Journal and Other Writings of Charles Woodmason, Anglican Itinerant* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1953), 53.

[63]Tannenbaum, *The Healer's Calling*, xii–xvi.

[64]John Ruston Pagan, *Anne Orthwood's Bastard: Sex and Law in Early Virginia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 80–82; Tannenbaum, *The Healer's Calling*, xvi.

[65]Wertz and Wertz, *Lying-In*, 7, 35; Winner, *A Cheerful and Comfortable Faith*, 200n35.

[66]Tricia T. Pyne, "Ritual and Practice in the Maryland Catholic Community, 1634–1776," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 26, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 35–36.

[67]Lacey, ed., *The World of Hannah Heaton*, 48.

[68]Katherine M. Faull, ed. *Speaking to Body and Soul: Instructions for the Moravian Choir Helpers, 1785–86* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017), 136.

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Sewall, whose wife, Hannah, bore fourteen children, brewed "groaning beer" for her, comforted her before the midwife arrived, and offered food and drink to childbed assistants. He also personally experienced these births as spiritual events. As Hannah labored through the night with their first child, she urged Samuel to "goe to prayer" before sending for the midwife. He continued to pray alongside his father until he heard his infant's cry. When Hannah was in labor with their twelfth child, Samuel prayed with his mother and a minister. The next day, he "put up a Bill for to Thank God for delivering my wife in childbearing."[69] Ebenezer Parkman, the Congregationalist minister of Westborough, Massachusetts, "Engaged in a Short but fervent Devotion" when his wife Mary was in labor with their first child, worried that "I had not been Earnest enough with God yet." After "I cryed unto God most high . . . he brought Salvation" in the form of a healthy daughter.[70] Presbyterian minister John Craig of Virginia also experienced his wife's childbearing as a sacred event. When Isabella Craig went into labor in 1745, he underwent a spiritual trial, "meditating and offering up my requests to heaven Suitable to the present circumstances." He soon felt tormented, imagining himself before Satan. He found that he "could Not Express on [e] Sensible Sentence" as he endured "Dreadfull horror anguish and agony." Craig concluded that God had allowed this crisis to reveal his helplessness "in the midst of love and pity for a dutifull wife in pangs of child Bearing and a keen Desire to See my first Born."[71] Like Sewall and Parkman, Craig experienced his wife's labor and delivery from the outside, looking in. But also like these men (and their wives, we might imagine), he understood that physical and spiritual agony gave way to order and peace.

What can we make of these husbands' spiritual experiences of their wives' childbirth? They all had to accept feeling helpless as their wives gave birth, and the loss of power might have felt jarring to them. Childbirth dislodged them from their roles as masters and shunted them to the periphery of a social and spiritual order that revolved around the childbed. Not quite bit players in the drama, but not in control either, husbands' spiritual crises reflected their efforts to grapple with anxiety and uncertainty over their wives' and children's fates, along with a momentary surrender of mastery. That surrender, and these husbands' emotional responses to it, reflected the extent to which childbirth reordered households.

IV. Childbirth, Church, and Community

So, too, did childbirth reorder religious communities by channeling joint spiritual effort toward postpartum mothers and their infants. The prayerful anxiety that pervaded households extended into communities where laboring women had social ties. One way to grapple with uncertainty is to contain it with ritual, which can temper fears by ordering people's relationships through a set of predictable and mutually understood

[69]New England families posted prayer bills (or prayer notes) to request prayers for a newborn or postpartum mother. Winiarski, "Lydia Proutt's Dreadfullest Thought," 374; Samuel Sewall, *Diary of Samuel Sewall*, 36, 40, 394, entries on February 16, 1674, April 1, 1674, November 21, 1694, and November 22, 1694; Judith S. Graham, *Puritan Family Life: The Diary of Samuel Sewall* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2000), 20, 24–48; Tannenbaum, *The Healer's Calling*, xi, 48, 61.

[70]Francis G. Walett, ed., "The Diary of Ebenezer Parkman, 1719–1728," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 71 (1961), entry on September 14, 1725, 1118–1119.

[71]John Craig, "Autobiography, 1709–1770," 25–26, Virginia Historical Society.

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practices. Ritual strengthens communal emotional ties because it is both performative and expressive, dramatizing shared religious experience.[72] Some rituals were not exactly religious; the month of lying-in that typically followed birth had more medical than religious purposes, although it also reestablished ties within a religious community through social visits.[73] But two other rituals were crucial to forming religious relationships between the mother, her child, and their biological and spiritual kin; these were baptism, which introduced the newborn to the religious community, and churching, which marked the mother's reentry into public spiritual life.

Infant baptism, for those who practiced it, was among the most significant rituals that forged social and religious links between parents, their children, and their congregations. Most importantly, it paved a child's path from household to church. Religious groups differed as to when and where baptism should take place, but during the colonial period, most North American Christians favored infant baptism, which safeguarded the child's spiritual status and promised to usher him or her into heaven should the child die before experiencing conversion.[74] When parents had a child baptized, they chose to tie that child to a religious community; the choice of church, clergy, godparents, and even the infant's name all reflected parents' decisions to locate themselves and their children within religious, familial, and social networks.[75] Churches, in turn, set the bounds of those networks by limiting baptism to children of members or believers.[76] Along the same lines, the hesitation among slaveholders and some churches to baptize enslaved people also reinforced social and spiritual boundaries.[77] Baptism, then, was

[72]John Corrigan, "Emotion and Religious Community in America," *Religion Compass* 4, no. 7 (July 2010): 452–461.

[73]The length and events of the lying-in period varied widely. Poorer families and large families could not afford to lose a month of the mother's labor, and enslaved women were allowed minimal time. Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale*, 188–193; Tannenbaum, *The Healer's Calling*, 48; Winner, *A Cheerful and Comfortable Faith*, 49; Adrian Wilson, "The Ceremony of Childbirth and Its Interpretation," in *Women as Mothers in Pre-Industrial England: Essays in Memory of Dorothy Mclaren*, ed. Valerie Fildes (London: Routledge, 2014), 75–76.

[74]The Baptists favored baptism only after a conversion experience. Quakers objected to using water as a purifying symbol because they believed infants were born without sin. See E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 53–55, 76–77, 125, 248, 269.

[75]Parents had limited choices for baptism if they lived far from churches of their own choosing, so they might settle for clergy of other denominations. See Anne S. Brown and David D. Hall, "Family Strategies and Religious Practice: Baptism and the Lord's Supper in Early New England," in David D. Hall, ed. *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of a Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 41–68; Graham, *Puritan Family Life*, chapter 2; Winner, *A Cheerful and Comfortable Faith*, 35–55; Adrian Wilson, "The Ceremony of Childbirth and Its Interpretation," 79–80; Nicholas M. Beasley, "Domestic Rituals: Marriage and Baptism in the British Plantation Colonies, 1650–1780," *Anglican and Episcopal History* 76, no. 3 (September 2007): 343–353.

[76]The Halfway Covenant, which Puritans adopted in 1662, was a compromise that offered baptism to children of baptized but unconverted church members, so these children could join the congregation. Some version of this agreement remained in place in many Congregational churches through the nineteenth century. See Stephen Foster, *The Long Argument: English Puritanism and the Shaping of New England Culture, 1570–1700* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), chapter 5; Harry S. Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 58–61.

[77]In plantation colonies, laws to ensure that baptism did not confer freedom removed obstacles for clergy who proselytized to enslaved people. Beasley, "Domestic Rituals," 352–353; Winner, *A Cheerful and Comfortable Faith*, 40.

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part of an ongoing conversation between families and churches about how to define religious community and decide where families fit within its bounds.

Even when an infant appeared healthy, families felt a sense of urgency to have the child baptized. Moravians preferred that baptism take place as soon as a congregation could gather after the birth, with "not more than five sponsors" to present the infant.[78] Among Puritans and Congregationalists, either the father, the midwife, or the mother's lying-in nurse took the infant to be baptized as soon as possible, as the mother was not well enough to do it herself. Samuel Sewall usually brought his children to be baptized as Hannah Sewall recovered from childbirth, but their midwife, Elizabeth Weeden, brought their firstborn to church, arriving in the middle of the minister's sermon to minimize the time the infant spent away from home. Sewall recorded all of his children's baptisms, often with a note of impatience, as in 1690, when "the Baptism of my little daughter is deferred to the next Lord's Day" because his minister was preaching elsewhere on the Sabbath after her birth.[79] Other families had even more reason to be impatient, as they had to wait longer for clergy. When Charles Woodmason arrived in South Carolina's backcountry settlements, he often met parents who had been waiting for a clergyman of any denomination to baptize their children. It was not unusual for him to baptize dozens of children on a single Sabbath; in the year 1767 alone, he baptized nearly eight hundred people, performing the ritual so often that he complained that "I was almost tir'd in baptizing of Children."[80] But however weary Woodmason might have been, parents continued to flag him down so their children would go no longer than necessary without this rite.

The choice of where to baptize infants, and in what company, highlights the role this sacrament played as a social and religious initiation rite. This was especially true of Catholics and Anglicans, for whom baptism was a particularly elaborate ceremony. For guidance, Anglicans used *The Book of Common Prayer* and Catholics used *The Catholick Christian Instructed*, both of which provided the liturgy and included prayers and hymns (the latter also described rituals for those who performed them without clergy).[81] In both faiths, baptism required the presence of godparents, who usually came from the family's social network. Ashley Bowen, a Massachusetts Anglican, was typical in frequently standing as a godparent at the baptisms of the children of his friends and kin, just as many of these same people stood for Bowen's own children. The godparents' relationship to the infant signaled not just social connections but also relationships of power. Anglican slaveholders often served as godparents for enslaved children (and adults who chose baptism), which bolstered the authoritative structure of religious community in slaveholding societies.[82] Whether a godparent's identity reflected a family's social capital or lack thereof, their presence at a baptism

[78]Faull, *Speaking to Body and Soul*, 136.

[79]Sewall, *Diary of Samuel Sewall*, vol. 1, 1, 40.

[80]Beasley, "Domestic Rituals," 344; Hooker, *The Carolina Backcountry on the Eve of the Revolution*, 13.

[81]*Catholic Christian Instructed* was first printed in London in 1737 but was available in the North American colonies. Pyne, "Ritual and Practice in the Maryland Catholic Community" 40–42; Richard Challoner, *The Catholick Christian Instructed in the Sacraments, Sacrifice, Ceremonies, and Observances of the Church* (Philadelphia: C. Talbot, 1786).

[82]Ashley Bowen frequently noted his roles in baptisms (either as a parent or godparent), and he recorded who stood for his own children's ceremonies. See Philip Chadwick Foster Smith, ed., *The Journals of Ashley Bowen (1728–1813) of Marblehead*, vol. 1 (Boston: Peabody Museum of Salem and The Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1973), 232; Winner, *A Cheerful and Comfortable Faith*, 42.

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served as a visual reminder of the personal ties that connected an infant to his or her parents, kin, church, and community.

Although baptism typically occurred in church (as the clergy preferred), both Catholics and Anglicans often preferred to hold the ceremony at home. Home baptisms allowed the postpartum mother to observe the ritual, expedited the rite for infants with medical problems, merged religion with hospitality (because such events were usually followed by a celebratory feast), and established the home as the primary setting for a child's religious life.[83] For Maryland Catholics, the location was not really a choice. Restrictions on their religious liberty enacted between 1689 and 1704 ultimately forced Catholics out of public worship and inside private quarters, where they kept home altars and availed themselves of Jesuit itinerants rather than stationed priests.[84] Although the Anglican elite are often known to have chosen home baptism in a quiet contest for authority against the clergy, families of more modest means also decided to baptize their children at home, especially if they lived far from churches and rarely saw ministers. By choice or not, home baptisms highlighted the ritual's importance as a link between the infant, the parents, and the community.

The clergy maintained that home baptisms were neither convenient nor scriptural and tried to dissuade families from requesting them, but parents pushed back, criticizing clergy who would not travel to perform the rite. The Anglicans in St. Paul's Parish in Baltimore protested in 1715 that their priest, William Tibbs, "refuses to go to private houses to baptize children that are sick and not able to be brought to Church without being paid for it."[85] The complaints went both ways; in 1726, the rector of St. Philip's Parish in South Carolina bemoaned parents who "refuse bringing their Children to Church" for baptism but seemed at a loss to do anything about it.[86] The struggle over where to baptize infants reflected tensions between parishioners and clergy, but it also suggested something about the religious significance of childrearing—that is, the location of baptism reflected a family's spiritual sense of self; parents understood the church to revolve around the household instead of the other way around. Parents strengthened the family's status as a spiritual unit by initiating their infants into a world in which religious life began at home.

Just as baptism integrated newborns into religious communities, congregations also formally welcomed postpartum mothers back into public religious life. Among Catholics, Anglicans, and Moravians, the most popular means to do so was churching: a ceremony (with roots in European Catholic and Protestant practice) in which the clergy formally recognized mothers' return to church after the period of lying-in.[87] Churching originally served as a purification rite featuring special prayers to mark a woman as physically and spiritually cleansed from childbirth. But in early modern

[83]Winner, *A Cheerful and Comfortable Faith*, 35–47; Beasley, "Domestic Rituals," 343–48.

[84]Pyne, "Ritual and Practice in the Maryland Catholic Community," 27n35, 35–37.

[85]The Vestry of St. Paul's Parish, Petition Against Rev. William Tibbs, February 15, 1715, mss 2018, Maryland Center for History and Culture, Baltimore, Maryland.

[86]Beasley, "Domestic Rituals," 350–351.

[87]Its origins may lie in the Jewish mikvah, a ritual bath that marks women as cleansed and ready to resume sexual relations with their husbands after menstruation or childbirth. Puritans rejected the rite because they believed it derived from Catholicism. However, New Englanders often noted a mother's return to church after childbirth. See Ross W. Beales, "Nursing and Weaning in an Eighteenth-Century New England Household," in *Families and Children*, ed. Peter Benes, Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife: Annual Proceedings, 52, 62.

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practice, the emphasis shifted from purification to thanksgiving for a safe delivery.[88] The Catholic ceremony retained some elements of the older purification rite, although *The Catholick Christian Instructed* now designated "churching" as an occasion for women to "give thanks to God for their safe delivery." During the ceremony (which appears to have been optional), a woman would appear at the doorway of her church wearing a white veil. A priest would then sprinkle her with holy water before offering a blessing, at which point she would enter the church and kneel at the altar and the priest would offer more prayers.[89] Although the prayers' emphasis was on giving thanks, the ceremonial entry into the church retained elements of the older cleansing ritual.

The *Book of Common Prayer*, too, originally treated churching as a purification rite. But it dispensed with the language of purification in 1552, when a revised liturgy referred to "The Thanksgiving of Women after Childbirth." The 1662 revision, which remained in use in North America through the nineteenth century, suggested reserving a special place in the church for postpartum mothers. The prayer book prescribed Psalm 116, which spoke to the mother's harrowing experience of childbirth ("The snares of death encompassed me . . . then I called on the name of the Lord"), and Psalm 127, which commended her husband's success in expanding his household ("Happy is the man who has his quiver full"), along with other thanksgiving prayers.[90] The use of Psalm 127 suggests that churching began to take on a new purpose: it was not just thanksgiving for a healthy delivery but also a formal restoration of the husband's role of master and sovereign of his family after a temporary disturbance of the household order.

Different religious groups established distinctive rituals to usher mothers back into public religious life. Moravians, who imposed communal governance of family life, established guidelines for all phases of marriage and childbirth, including churching. The Bethlehem congregation had two separate rituals to welcome infants and mothers. One of these was an annual festival on July 2, when pregnant women, new mothers, and their infants all received a blessing during a love feast. This ceremony was a liturgical event featuring prayers, hymns, and scriptural readings celebrating birth and infancy, such as Luke 1:41–44, in which John the Baptist comes to life with the Holy Spirit in Mary's womb.[91] Churching, which celebrated individual families rather than pregnant and postpartum women as a larger group, took place after baptism, and it coincided with a new mother's reentry into the Married Person's Choir and resumption of sexual relations with her husband.[92] Typically, when a couple brought their infant to church

[88]David Cressy, "Purification, Thanksgiving, and the Churching of Women in Post-Reformation England," *Past and Present*, no. 141 (1993); Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death*, 197–232; Donna K. Ray, "A View from the Childwife's Pew: The Development of Rites around Childbirth in the Anglican Communion," *Anglican and Episcopal History* 69, no. 4 (December 2000): 443–473; Winner, *A Cheerful and Comfortable Faith*, 47–49; Pyne, "Ritual and Practice in the Maryland Catholic Community" 36–37.

[89]Richard Challoner, *The Catholick Christian Instructed*, 187–188.

[90]Ray, "A View from the Childwife's Pew," 456–457.

[91]The lovefeast is a common Christian ritual (notably among the Methodists and Moravians). It was meant to teach humility and reinforce spiritual fellowship. Craig Atwood, *Community of the Cross: Moravian Piety in Colonial Bethlehem* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012), 161–165, 179.

[92]Moravians grouped their members into choirs, which were divisions that governed prayer, worship, living arrangements, household economy, and sexual behavior. Atwood, *Community of the Cross*, 173–178; Faull, *Speaking to Body and Soul*, 1–22.

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for the first time, the mother (or sometimes both parents) and child received a special blessing. Such was the case when Susanna and Christof Pyrlaeus presented their infant daughter, Johanna Elis, to the Married Person's Choir in Bethlehem in April 1744. During regular devotions, the child "was presented to the Lord and the congregation and was given a blessing as were her parents for the upbringing of this little seedling."[93] Because the congregation blessed the child and her parents together, the Moravian churching ceremony restored the family unit after a period of disruption and brought its members back under the congregation's watch.

Churching, which remained popular through the eighteenth century (and longer for some) even as it declined in importance as a liturgical event, made the mother's body a site of public prayer. By offering thankful prayers for a woman who survived giving birth and ritualizing her resumption of normal activities, Catholics, Anglicans, and Moravians merged the physical, social, and spiritual in a public setting. Churching was important enough that some Anglicans complained bitterly when they could not avail themselves of the practice because they lived far away from churches or clergy. Among the grievances of the North Carolina Regulators in 1769 was that they had to "travel 2 or 300 Miles [to have] my Child Christen'd . . . and as for Churching of Women . . . and other Spiritual Offices we are entirely destitute."[94] The Regulators were insurgents whose agrarian revolts were informed by political and religious radicalism, and they believed churching was important enough to list with their other demands. For them as for others, religious ritual empowered communities and informed identity.[95]

We do not know the full extent to which African and indigenous Christian converts embraced rituals like churching, though there is some evidence that they did. At least one Anglican pastor, Adam Dickie of Drysdale Parish in Virginia, proposed to offer the ceremony to enslaved women. It is difficult to determine how many others did the same or how enslaved women responded, but it is possible that churching might have offered a rare and welcome acknowledgment of their status as mothers when motherhood itself was so fraught.[96] There is evidence that American Indian Christian converts also embraced churching. Rahel (Rachel) Post, a Wampanoag who had married Moravian missionary Christian Post, eagerly brought her infant, Ludwig Johanan, "into the congregation for the first time" in November 1744, when "the mother and child were committed in prayer to the protection of our dear Saviour."[97] In 1791, when the Mi'kmaq, Passamaquoddy, and Wolastoqiyik (formerly known as Maliseet or St. Johns) chiefs petitioned Archbishop John Carroll for a priest to serve their villages, they explained that "our Women [are] depriv'd of attending the Holy Rites of the Church after Child Birth."[98] It is unclear why these converts embraced

[93]Entry on April 17, 1744, Kenneth G. Hamilton, ed., *The Bethlehem Diary, vol. 1, 1742–1744* (Bethlehem, Penn.: Archives of the Moravian Church, 1971), 194. Choirs held quarter-of-an-hour services, so named because of their length, which featured daily texts, hymns, or prayers.

[94]"A Letter to John Rutledge," in Hooker, *The Carolina Backcountry on the Eve of the Revolution*, 275.

[95]For the role of religion in the North Carolina Regulation, see Marjoleine Kars, *Breaking Loose Together: The Regulator Rebellion in Pre-Revolutionary North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), chapters 4–6.

[96]Winner, *A Cheerful and Comfortable Faith*, 40.

[97]Entry on November 29, 1744, Hamilton, ed., *The Bethlehem Diary*, vol. 1, 212.

[98]The Indian Tribes on the St. John's, Passamaquoddy, and Adjacent Rivers, Petition to John Carroll, May 17, 1791, Maryland Province Archives, box 57, folder 13, mss 202 K3, Georgetown University Booth Family Center for Special Collections, Washington, D.C.

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this custom. Perhaps churching ritualized the unknowable.[99] Or perhaps something more was at work; when indigenous and African women claimed the right to perform childbearing rituals, they engaged in cultural dialogues and negotiations over who deserved to be recognized as virtuous and godly mothers.

Rituals like baptism and churching focused the community's attention on childbirth. They offered scripts for families and friends to follow as they dealt with the aftermath of birth, which could include not just exhaustion and confusion, but also illness, death, and trauma. In establishing a spiritual order of operations, these rituals provided a measure of predictability and reassurance during a fragile time. Even more than that, they forged essential pathways between the childbed, the household, and the church. By reinforcing relationships of affection and authority, postpartum rituals oriented religious life around mothers and infants.

V. Conclusion

Women's private physiological ordeal thus became the stuff of public and shared religion. Even though a laboring woman's religious experience of childbirth was her own in many ways, it was not entirely so. Much like religious conversion, it happened within constructs that informed her reactions to pain and suffering. Maternal piety provoked thoughts of submission, affliction, and salvation. Women wrote of childbirth as a spiritual struggle not just with physical pain and life-threatening danger, but also with prescribed qualities of motherhood and womanhood. But as much as we think of childbirth as a woman's own experience, it was in fact shared. We have underestimated the extent to which husbands, circles of friends, and members of spiritual communities internalized the experience of childbirth in ways that shaped their piety and paralleled laboring and postpartum women's experiences. This broader framework of understanding transformed the private into the public through the shared language of pregnancy and birth.

Framing religious experience in biological terms means we can use the body as a category of analysis to understand the experiences of anyone who encountered pregnancy and childbirth. In other words, participants' *and observers'* responses to childbirth as a physical and spiritual event were part of the same arc of religious experience. Childbearing upended women's lives, provoked crises of faith, and tied pain to salvation. It rearranged households because it disrupted the gendered dynamics of authority and duty in the home, if only temporarily. It also had the potential to upend communities, as friends and neighbors shared anxiety over the fates of women and children. At the same time, those same communities reordered religious life after disturbance wrought by childbirth. Postpartum rituals at home, along with religious ceremonies like baptism and churching, formalized religious bonds and restored arrangements of power and authority by incorporating new families into churches. Taken together, the shared experience of childbirth and its impact suggests we can better understand the gendered culture of early American religion if we consider women's experiences as the rule, rather than the exception, in shaping communal piety.

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[99]Ray, "A View from the Childwife's Pew," 445.

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