



Amy E. Marga. *In the Image of Her: Recovering Motherhood in the Christian Tradition*

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In her book, *In the Image of Her: Recovering Motherhood for the Christian Tradition*, Amy Marga shows that the Christian understanding of the mother has historically been neither uncomplicated nor monolithic. At the same time, the very mothers Christianity struggled to make sense of emerge from Marga's analysis as bulwarks of the faith. While Christianity struggled to make sense of their vocations, their bodies and even of Mary herself, Christian mothers – often in the face of overwhelming obstacles – laboured to instil their faith in their children. Whether or not one agrees with all of Marga's assessments, this is a rich and informative book, all the more so because it helps to fill out a largely unexplored dimension of the Christian tradition.

Marga argues that Christianity has historically struggled to make sense of mothers and motherhood. Is motherhood, as Luther claimed, the highest calling of the Christian woman? Or might an especially fervent faith call a mother to something higher still, even at the expense of her children and her family? As Marga shows, Christian answers to such questions have not been all on one side. The early church applauded Perpetua and Felicity for welcoming the martyrdom that tore their (literally) newborn children from their arms, and church fathers such as St. Jerome praised Roman mothers like Paula and Melania, who left behind not only their husbands but even their young children to enter (and even lead) Christian communities.

Even setting aside the possible conflict between faith and family, Marga shows that Christianity has historically struggled with the very idea of the feminine, and especially with the feminine body. In keeping with Aristotle's notion of the female as a misbegotten male, many Christian thinkers equated the feminine body with uncleanness and vice. At the same time, however, those same Christians recognised that the female womb was Christ's first earthly habitation. Far from being despised by Christ, the maternal body seems to exemplify the magnitude of Christ's transformative love.

Conflicting Christian attitudes towards the feminine and the feminine body are even evident in Christian attitudes towards Mary herself. From the early church up until the Reformation, Mary and the saints were seen as a consolation and a refuge, intercessors to whom the repentant sinner seeking forgiveness might turn. Protestant reformers, insisting on the centrality of Christ, rejected devotions to Mary and the saints. Their insistence, though, was not always successful, as evident in the persistence of some traditions and devotions even among Protestant women.

Perhaps the most interesting feature of Marga's analysis is her depiction of mothers – the very mothers Christianity struggled to understand – as bearers and transmitters of the faith. It was Christian mothers who took upon themselves the responsibility for perpetuating the faith: making (sometimes heroic) efforts to instil it in and teach it to their children, and even reinterpreting it for them in the face of apparent contradictions. The efforts of Augustine's mother are well known, but Marga also describes the struggles of other mothers throughout history. The medieval mother Dhuoda, forcibly

separated from her young sons, wrote a ‘handbook’ enjoining them to live a moral and Christian life. The American Protestant mother Dorothy Leigh wrote a popular book, *The Mother’s Blessing*, aimed at instructing children (both her own and others) on Christian life and Christian belief. And enslaved mothers, who had been taught a version of Christianity aimed at justifying their oppression, recognised the dissonance between those teachings and scripture and taught a revised version to their children.

Marga’s book is fascinating, helpful and timely. Although some of the details of her analysis will already be familiar to those who have read books like Clarissa Atkinson’s *The Oldest Vocation*, there is much in Marga’s book that is new. I confess I was not always convinced by Marga’s assessments. It is not clear to me, for instance, that early Christian mothers like Paula left behind their families because they were motivated by ‘ambitions of spiritual power and position’ (p. 24). Such an assessment seems to ignore, or at least omit, the surrounding context, especially the early Christian belief that the second coming was imminent. Quibbles like these notwithstanding, this is an enjoyable and important book, one which is helpful for scholars while at the same time accessible to the average reader.

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Michael F. Bird, *Jesus Among the Gods: Early Christology in the Greco-Roman World*

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In *Jesus Among the Gods*, Michael Bird sets out ‘to demonstrate that ancient notions of divine ontology have been sidelined for too long in academic discussions of early Christology’ and ‘to engage in a comparative analysis of Jesus and ancient intermediary figures with a view to showing what is distinctive about Jesus’ divinity in early Christian discourse’ (p. 2).

Chapter 1, ‘Problematizing Jesus’ Divinity’, offers an overview of what it might mean to call Jesus ‘divine’ in the ancient world. Far from being a straightforward proposition – Jesus equals God in the modern sense of the world – both the Graeco-Roman and Jewish worlds offered a spectrum of possibilities. Gods might be properly divine beings of various ranks, or humans drafted into the divine realm; even in the Jewish sphere (which Bird still wishes to regard as ‘monotheistic’ despite some necessary caveats in light of current research) a figure like Moses might receive the epithet ‘god’.

With the possibilities thus expanded, Bird goes on in chapter 2, ‘The Search for Divine Ontology’, to see where Jesus best fits amidst this multiplicity of divine figures. His primary goal is to demonstrate that ontological concerns about God (and hence Jesus) were not raised only in the Nicene era; they were a consistent part of Graeco-Roman, Jewish and Christian discourse about deity. In this, Bird sets himself on the one hand against scholars like Larry Hurtado and Richard Bauckham, whose