

MOTHERHOOD AND VOLUNTARY CHILDLESSNESS IN CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIANITY



Alt-text: A woman walking on the centre line in the middle of road.

Photo by [Anika Huizinga](#) on [Unsplash](#)

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OVERVIEW

- ❖ Motherhood and the Study of Religion
- ❖ Voluntary Childlessness/Childlessness by Choice
- ❖ Defining Pronatalism
- ❖ The Maternal Expectation: Pronatalism in Christianity
- ❖ Narratives of Choice
 - ❖ Accidental choices
 - ❖ Vocational choices

MOTHERHOOD AND THE STUDY OF RELIGION



- ❖ Motherhood is a key factor in women's faith development (Buller and Fast, 2013; Halbertal, 2002; Page, 2010; Reimer, 2016; Slee, 2004)
- ❖ Changing gender norms and affiliation and disaffiliation to Christianity (Aune, Sharma, Vincent, 2008; Brown, 2001; Bruce and Trzebiatowska, 2012; Davie, 2007)

DEFINITIONS OF CHILDLESSNESS

❖ Involuntary Childlessness

- ❖ Infertility: 'a disease of the reproductive system defined by the failure to achieve a clinical pregnancy after 12 months or more of regular unprotected sexual intercourse' (World Health Organisation)
- ❖ Secondary infertility: involuntary childlessness following a previous pregnancy or live birth

❖ Social Childlessness or Childlessness by Circumstance

- ❖ poverty
- ❖ same-sex couples in some societies are denied access to adoption or reproductive technologies
- ❖ being single involuntarily
- ❖ when one partner in a relationship wants children but the other does not
- ❖ caring for others
- ❖ early menopause
- ❖ illnesses unrelated to fertility or sterility (mental health conditions, recovery from addiction)

BIRTH RATES AND CHILDLESSNESS

❖ Birth rates

- ❖ 1 in 9 women born in England and Wales in 1940 were childless at the age of 45
- ❖ 1 in 5 women born in England and Wales in 1967 were childless at the age of 45 (ONS, 2016)

- ❖ Childlessness amongst 18s-50s estimated to range between 15% - 25% (Blackstone & Stewart, 2012; Hara, 2008; Iwasawa, 2004; Merlo & Rowland, 2000)

❖ Women without children Keizer (2010)

- ❖ 10% childless by choice
- ❖ 10% involuntary childless
- ❖ 80% 'childless by circumstance'

REASONS FOR VOLUNTARY CHILDLESSNESS

- ❖ Voluntary childlessness: active, positive choice not to have children
Childfree/Elective Childlessness/Non-motherhood/Intentional Childlessness/Childless by Choice
- ❖ Workplace and career (Gerson, 1985)
- ❖ Lack of a 'maternal instinct' (Park, 2005)
- ❖ Children perceived to 'detract' or 'preclude' happiness (Veevers, 1980)
- ❖ Emphasis on freedom and autonomy (Shapiro, 2014)
- ❖ Age differences between partners (McAllister with Clarke, 1998)
- ❖ Religion and childlessness is under researched:
 - ❖ Affiliation to Catholicism decreases the likelihood of voluntary childlessness by 37% in men and 35% in women (if other variables are held constant)
(Veevers, 1973; Waren and Pals, 2013: 163; see also Basten, 2009)

DEFINING PRONATALISM

Pronatalism can be seen operating on several levels: culturally, when childbearing and motherhood are perceived as 'natural' and central to a woman's identity; ideologically, when the motherhood mandate becomes a patriotic, ethnic or eugenic obligation; psychologically, when childbearing is identified with the micro level of personal aspirations, emotions and rational (or irrational) decision-making (by women or couples)[;]...and on the level of population policy, when the state intervenes directly or indirectly in an attempt to regulate dynamics of fertility.

(Heitlinger, 1991: 344-45)



The Five Reasons Royal Insiders Believe Meghan Markle Is Pregnant

PRONATALISM IN CHRISTIANITY

❖ *Amoris Lætitiae* ('The Joy of Love'): On Love in the Family:
'who lack a mentality of an openness to life'

'industrialization, the sexual revolution, the fear of overpopulation and economic problems... Consumerism may also deter people from having children, simply so they can maintain a certain freedom and life-style'

'... only the exclusive and indissoluble union between a man and a woman has a plenary role to play in society ... We need to acknowledge the great variety of family situations that can offer a certain stability, but de facto or same-sex unions, for example, may not simply be equated with marriage. No union that is temporary or closed to the transmission of life can ensure the future of society.'

Pope Francis

Choosing pets over babies is 'selfish and diminishes us', says pope

Pontiff laments 'denied parenthood' and people who 'substitute cats and dogs for children'

Harriet Sherwood and agencies

@harrietsherwood

Wed 5 Jan 2022 17:57 GMT



◼ Owing cats and dogs instead of having children is selfish, says pope - video

QUIVERFULL MOVEMENT

❖ (Cornwall, 2017; Joyce, 2009, McIntosh, forthcoming; McKeowen 2014)

❖ Ephesians 5:22-24

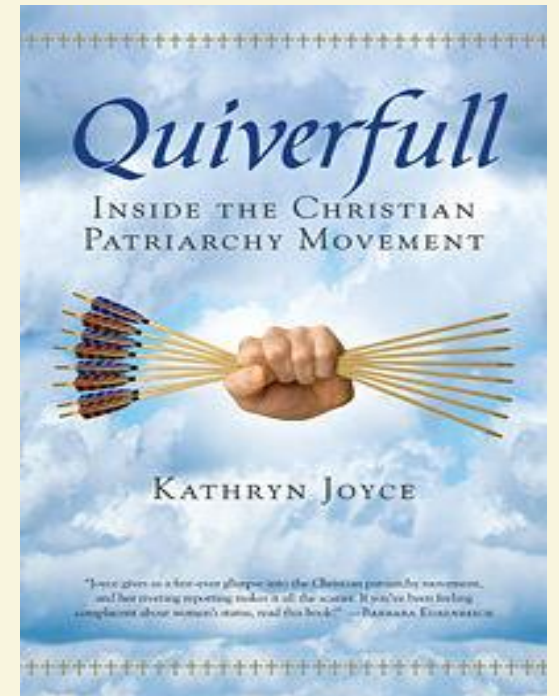
²² Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. ²³ For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. ²⁴ Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

❖ Psalm 127:3-5

Children are a heritage from the LORD,
offspring a reward from him.

⁴ Like arrows in the hands of a warrior
are children born in one's youth.

⁵ Blessed is the man
whose quiver is full of them.



ANTI-FAMILY TRADITIONS

❖ Plural models of the family (Ruether, 2001)

❖ Mark 3:31 (Mat 4:21-22; Luke 14:26)

Then Jesus' mother and brothers arrived. Standing outside, they sent someone in to call him. ³² A crowd was sitting around him, and they told him, "Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you."

³³ "Who are my mother and my brothers?" he asked.

³⁴ Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! ³⁵ Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother.

❖ *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas (Felicity)*



A CHALLENGE TO FAITH

Sam, 48, Anglican priest, female partner:

- ❖ ‘Too many people worship at the altar of “must have children.”’ (Sam, 48, Anglican Priest, female partner)
- ❖ ‘... if you’re a nice woman under 40, you’re bound to have a baby any minute now aren’t you?’
- ❖ ‘It’s difficult to work under the authority of an institution that says, “Tut, tut, tut” when you believe that God says, “You are who you are, and I want you to blossom, and be all that I’ve made you to become.” And that’s a tense balance.’

Rebecca, 35, Roman Catholic, mother of 2

- ❖ ‘not a lot of truth is told about what it [motherhood] actually involves.’
- ❖ ‘I don’t enjoy being constantly surrounded by children’s chaos and the constant demand. If you’re an intellectual type of person who could spend all day quite happily, for days on end, reading in a library, and you have to be surrounded by small people who are making demands on you all the time. That’s not an easy or cosy choice...Do I write a word at the moment? I haven’t written even a word in my journal for ... months.’

A CHALLENGE TO FAITH

Elizabeth, 42, Anglo-Catholic, Single, voluntarily childless

- ❖ ‘Mothering Sunday ... or as I like to call it, “Hetero-Patriarchal Day.”’
- ❖ ‘Mothering Sunday is not only painful for women who haven’t had children, but it makes...a lot of people think about their relationship with their own mother...which may have been very painful and difficult.’
- ❖ ‘I have sometimes wondered whether the fact that I ended up single...was a kind of punishment for not wanting children or for choosing not to have children. That God was saying, “Well, if you’re not open to life then you don’t deserve a partner.”’



NARRATIVES OF CHOICE

- ❖ Understandings of childlessness are shaped by their social contexts
- ❖ Tendency to define having children against not having children
- ❖ Identities may overlap: involuntary and voluntary childless people might still care for children; voluntary childlessness can coincide with infertility
- ❖ Choice suggests a clear cut path
- ❖ Intentions towards motherhood and elective childlessness are often transient (Gillespie, 2000; McAllister and Clarke, 1998)
- ❖ Choice can be a definite, or a hesitant process (Campbell 1999)
- ❖ Ambivalence or regret (Donath, 2015)
- ❖ Choice is not linear
- ❖ Even when agency is not always visible, participants claim choice

ACCIDENTAL CHOICES

Sara, 26, Roman Catholic, mother of one:

- ❖ 'I knew I shouldn't have been having sex but that [using contraception] might have made it worse.'
- ❖ I thought there would be religious consequences for having an abortion when there was ... no real reason to do it. There was nothing wrong with the pregnancy, there was nothing wrong with me. I'd made the decision to have sex unprotected and that's what happened...if I would've had an abortion I would have found it difficult ... I think it would have been morally wrong ... that situation ... would have ... sort of, distanced me from my faith and from God.
- ❖ 'I wasn't planning [to get pregnant] ... I always think, well, if you're engaging in risky behaviours then it's...that's a tricky...thing to say it was not planned. I think, it, I was open to it.'

Janice, 40, URC Minister

- ❖ '...children have a right to be loved and they actually have a right to two parents...I suppose that's part of my Christian ethic that children should have a mother and a father, in marriage.'

NARRATING VOCATION

Anna, early 30s, Anglo-Catholic, mother of 2

- ❖ 'I don't think I ever felt I had a free choice not to'
- ❖ 'I don't think as a Christian women *per se* [that you have to have children] but I think once one gets married in a Christian Church being open to the possibility of children feels like what marriage is about for me'

Marcia, 35, Christian

- ❖ 'You will change your mind later...you may well find this film star who wants to have a relationship with you and children with you.'
- ❖ '...house constantly filled with toys and clutter and business and laughter and stuff. Maybe, also feels sort of less spirituality fulfilled because there's so much activity and noise...with children.'

Emily, early 20s, Roman Catholic

- ❖ 'I play a role in the formation of may be 100 kids every year...that's how I see some of my creativeness coming in'.
- ❖ 'I don't understand why marriage just has to be about children...I think we can be much more effective in... following God in terms of our faith, if we don't have children...being married kind of helps us become more whole, more healthy in order to follow God better, then we can actually make more difference to the world'.

NARRATING VOCATION

Joanne, 42

- ❖ 'I never wanted to be mum...I was expecting that passionate desire...but it just never did...It's just not there'
- ❖ 'there's not much time left' but ultimately 'I just can't find the desire in me to have a child.'
- ❖ 'the biological thing is overrated ... it's more about relationships...and community ... that's the expression of my faith.'

NARRATING VOCATION

Laura, 46, Methodist Minister

- ❖ ‘...it is a self-offering and sense of vocation which I imagine is filled for some others by having children.’
- ❖ ‘...shame, a level of guilt’
- ❖ ‘hiddenness about not having children or the choice not to have children’
- ❖ ‘I’ve had to struggle with...believing other people would see it as the wrong choice but not quite opening up the conversation enough, that’s the hiddenness...I don’t think it’s just the not wanting to be challenged because I can be challenged on plenty of other issues...although maybe it does say something about how personal it is and how potentially undermining it is...to be challenged at the point where you are struggling to work out God’s desire and invitation for you and if somebody else simply comes and smashes it and says “Of course that can’t be God’s choice, ‘cos that’s wrong.”’

CONCLUSION

- ❖ Prompted by the neglect of women's experiences of motherhood and childlessness in religions studies
- ❖ Uncertainty of how women respond to the maternal expectation at a time when reproductive choice is emphasised
- ❖ Maternal expectation expressed in teaching, scripture, and practice frames women's lives
- ❖ Rather than signal the realisation of authentic Christian living, the maternal expectation can limit and hinder faith development
- ❖ Choice is an uneven and messy process
- ❖ Finding instances of agency