

Toward a Philosophical Theology of Pregnancy Loss

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CW: The following contains sometimes graphic descriptions of pregnancy and pregnancy loss.

1. Introduction

Issues surrounding pregnancy loss are rarely addressed in philosophical or theological circles,¹ let alone in Christian philosophy. Yet a *modest* estimate based on the empirical and medical literature places the rate of pregnancy loss between fertilization and term at somewhere between 40–60%.² If miscarriage really is as common as the research gives us to believe, then it is also likely that a significant number of women in philosophy and theology have experienced the loss of one or more pregnancies in their sexually active lifetimes. And when we add spouses, partners, family, and friends, the number of those touched by pregnancy loss within these disciplines grows even larger.

So why the dearth of Christian philosophical and theological literature on miscarriage, stillbirth, and other forms of reproductive loss? For starters, the scholarly silence tracks a much larger cultural quietism surrounding pregnancy loss, one tied to social taboos concerning the open discussion of women's sexual and reproductive health more generally. This has led to widespread ignorance about miscarriage, particularly among men (whose voices still dominate Christian philosophy).³ Some

¹ Notable exceptions include: Karen O'Donnell, "Reproductive Loss: Toward a Theology of Bodies," *Theology & Sexuality* 25, no. 1–2 (2019): 146–59; Karen O'Donnell, *The Dark Womb: Re-Conceiving Theology Through Reproductive Loss* (London: SCM Press, 2022); Jennifer Scuro, *The Pregnancy ≠ Childbearing Project: A Phenomenology of Miscarriage* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017); Serene L. Jones, "Hope Deferred: Theological Reflections on Reproductive Loss (Infertility, Stillbirth, Miscarriage)," *Modern Theology* 17, no. 2 (2001): 227–45; Ann J. Cahill, Kathryn J. Norlock, and Byron J. Stoyles, eds., "Miscarriage, Reproductive Loss, and Fetal Death," Special Issue, *Journal of Social Philosophy* 46, no. 1 (2015): 1–157; and a Special Issue of *Modern Believing* 60, no. 2 (2019): 103–210; and O'Donnell, Karen, and Allison Fenton, eds. "Theology and Childlessness." Special Issue, *Modern Believing* 60, no. 2 (2019)..

² Gavin E. Jarvis, "Early Embryo Mortality in Natural Human Reproduction: What the Data Say," *F1000Research* 5 (2017): 2765.

³ For example, a 2013 survey of 1,084 valid respondents in the United States (Bardos et al. 2015) showed that a majority (55%) of participants falsely believed that miscarriages make up less than 6% of all pregnancies; Jonah Bardos et al. "A National Survey on Public Perceptions of Miscarriage," *Obstetrics and Gynecology* 125, no. 6 (2015): 1313–20. This misperception was more common among men than women, and men were

Christian subcultures augment this silence—especially those that place the injunction to “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen. 1:28) at the center of their discourse surrounding marriage, family, sexuality, and reproductive choice. The felt violation of such norms when a woman’s pregnant body “malfunctions” often gives rise to feelings of shame, guilt, and self-betrayal—feelings amplified by neoliberal tendencies in both the religious and secular spheres to paint miscarriage as a *failure to (re)produce* for which the woman and her body are often made responsible.⁴ This is underscored by the fact that metaphysical questions concerning pregnancy and reproductive loss in Anglo-American philosophy have been hijacked by the abortion debate which, for all its good intentions, tends to implicitly reinforce the idea that a pregnancy which does not lead to the birth of a living human being is a *morally regrettable failure* on the part of the pregnant “caretaker” of the fetus.⁵

In what follows, then, I want to show how thinking more closely about pregnancy loss understood as a *grievable* (even if not always grieved) event can have a profound impact on the way we think about particular theoretical debates in Christian philosophy and provide opportunities for the discipline to put its skills to use in the development of helpful conceptual and hermeneutical resources for those grieving such losses.⁶ However, this will require seeking out and taking seriously the testimony of those who have undergone pregnancy loss, as well as getting clearer on how best to conceptualize pregnancy and its loss in the first place. I will thus begin by addressing the appropriateness of taking first-personal subjective testimony as a basis for “care-ful(l)” and “consider-ate” philosophical theorizing (Section 2), and I will go on to discuss how paying closer attention to

also 2.6 times more likely than women to falsely believe that lifestyle choice was the single most common cause of miscarriage, as opposed to genetic or medical causes.

⁴ Scuro, *Pregnancy ≠ Childbearing*.

⁵ This serves to add to the various *stigmata* that, via the debate on abortion, attach to women who miscarry. For example, the drug misoprostol and the surgical procedure of dilation and curettage (D&C), both common targets of the anti-abortion movement, are common treatments for miscarriage, since dead fetal tissue not expelled from the body can be life-threatening for a woman.

⁶ One might even see this latter task as an extension of the Christian injunctions to neighbor-love (Matt. 22) and the amelioration of suffering (Matt. 25).

pregnancy itself can lay the groundwork for what we might call a “philosophical theology of pregnancy loss” (Section 3). I will then look at one domain in which such a philosophical theology is sorely needed—namely, for the development of grieving rituals for pregnancy loss that are conceptually informed by philosophically adequate and theologically fitting models of God (Section 4)—and I will discuss how Christian philosophy might go about constructing such models (Section 5). Finally, I will explore how one kind of alternative model of God in particular—what I call a “gestational” model—might use the loss inherent to all pregnancy to tease out new ways of thinking about standard philosophical approaches to God (Section 6) and how the “grievous” experience of miscarriage can give Christian philosophers a better way of approaching Trinitarian theology (Section 7).

Before proceeding, a few qualifications are in order. First, it is important to remember that pregnancy loss is not always negatively-valenced for those who undergo it. Although it often elicits feelings of sadness and grief, this is by no means always the case, nor is grief the only appropriate emotional response to such loss. Historically speaking, miscarriage may even have been the best way for some women to *survive* their pregnancies,⁷ and (both then and now) such loss has sometimes been accompanied by feelings of relief or even a tempered joy.⁸ Therefore, a more comprehensive philosophical theology of reproductive loss than I can discuss here should be sensitive to the fact that such loss can involve many different kinds of responses.

Moreover, although I will sometimes refer to “women” or notions of “motherhood” as a basis for my reflections, I mean my thoughts to be inclusive of all persons capable of gestating a human being inside them. Likewise, I by no means intend to ignore the experience of non-pregnant persons whose concerns are relevantly tied to pregnant persons, though I will be focusing more closely on those bodies whose experience of loss is most immediate and “visceral.” Finally, I will sometimes use

⁷ Scuro, *Pregnancy ≠ Childbearing*, p. 212.

⁸ Shannon Withycombe, *Lost: Miscarriage in Nineteenth-Century America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2019).

more “clinical” terms like “embryo” or “fetus” and sometimes more “emotionally-charged” terms like “baby” to refer to what is lost. Different women characterize their losses in different ways, and the preferences of one need not reflect those of another. I will therefore use these terms as they feel right to me in context. I think it important to be permitted to speak personally in these matters, since if we who have lost pregnancies remain afraid to talk about our experiences and speak our losses back into being, we are unlikely to have an adequate testimonial basis from which to elucidate and critique more scholarly reflections when it comes to pregnancy loss.

2. Scholarly “Rigor,” Harmful Discourses, and Care-ful(l) Thinking

To some, the relevance of pregnancy loss to philosophical theology may be obvious. Yet in my experience, topics perceived as involving more “pastoral” concerns are often thought to be of less speculative interest. Moreover, in some academic circles, scholarly reflections that make explicit reference to the subjective experiences and interests of those pursuing them are still treated with suspicion or dismissed as lacking in “objectivity” or “philosophical rigor.”

On the one hand, I agree that, within the academic philosophical context, it is often necessary to abstract from particular cases, permissible to discuss hypotheticals that go beyond what is actual, and acceptable to defend views that have little potential for real-world application. On the other hand, those discourses that *do* appeal to autobiographical experience should not automatically be treated as less “rigorous” or “objective,” merely because they are personal and particular.⁹ As I have argued elsewhere, considering various particular experiential perspectives might actually lead to a *more* perspicuous and “objective” approach—a view from *somewhere*, as opposed to *nowhere*—that can serve as a more adequate basis for theorizing.¹⁰

⁹ Susan J. Brison, *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

¹⁰ Amber L. Griffioen, “Nowhere Men and Divine I’s: Feminist Epistemology, Perfect Being Theism, and the God’s-Eye View,” *Journal of Analytic Theology* 9 (2021): 1–25.

Additionally, there is sometimes an unfortunate failure in Christian philosophy to think carefully about the *perlocutionary effects* of particular discourses—i.e., the actual consequences a discourse has or may have on those implicated in or affected by the discourse.¹¹ I think philosophers have a duty to try to avoid putting forward theories that are likely to cause epistemic or moral harm to others, especially when those harmed belong to marginalized or underrepresented groups whose lived experience partially constitutes the data set for those discourses. Therefore, when it comes to issues regarding which we cannot easily divorce the systematic from the pastoral, as scholars responsible to a wider public we have a duty to proceed with both *caution* and *care*.

Quite obviously, this is the case with issues that have direct relevance to the experience of pregnancy loss, especially where such loss is lamented, grieved, and potentially traumatic.¹² From an epistemic standpoint, this minimally means taking seriously the testimony of these subjects and treating it as relevantly authoritative for the discourse. Morally and practically, it means that the activity of theorizing about pregnancy loss must fundamentally involve concern for those whose bodies have been the subjects of such loss. In other words, if we care to consider pregnancy and pregnancy loss in philosophical theology, it must involve engaging in *care-ful(l)* and *consider-ate* thinking.

3. The Germs of an Adequate Philosophical Theology of Pregnancy Loss

If we want to develop a both considered and *consider-ate* philosophical theology of pregnancy loss, we will need to think more closely about what we mean by terms like “pregnancy,” “conception,” “life,” and “organism.”

Take, for example, discussions concerning what happens to the “lost baby” in the afterlife. Many women speak of being “reunited” with their miscarried babies in heaven, but this seems to imply

¹¹ Amber L. Griffioen, “Therapeutic Theodicy? Suffering, Struggle, and the Shift from the God’s-Eye View,” *Religions* 9, no. 4 (2018): 99.

¹² On the trauma surrounding pregnancy loss, cf. Jessica Farren et al., “Posttraumatic Stress, Anxiety and Depression Following Miscarriage and Ectopic Pregnancy: A Multicenter, Prospective, Cohort Study,” *American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology* 222, no. 4 (2020): 367.e1–367.e22.

that there is some *independent entity* with which one could be reunited—one that is wholly distinct from the individual who gestates it. However, although many Christian scholars appear to treat it as such, a clear-cut distinction between the mother and the baby-in-utero is—whether from a phenomenological, metaphysical, or even biological standpoint—by no means a philosophical given. Certainly, sometimes part of what is mourned with respect to the loss of a pregnancy has to do with imagined counterfactual futures of a wholly independent (i.e., *birthed* and *living*) human subject and one’s future parental relationship with that subject. However, to place the locus of a mother’s grief solely on this aspect is to fail to make any distinction between the loss of a baby-in-utero and that of an infant, a child, or even the adult offspring of a parent. Indeed, despite all their similarities and the grief for lost futures that may accompany the death of any offspring, birthed or not, it is one thing to mourn the loss of something that was organically independent and already living outside of your own body and quite another to carry that death inside you in a way that involves the experience of a “loss of bodily integrity.”¹³ This “rupturing of the self,” as Serene Jones puts it, results from the “radical dissolution of the bodily borders that [...] give the self a sense of internal coherence”¹⁴—a phenomenological blurring of the lines between self and other that, I would argue, is actually symptomatic of pregnancy itself. There is also a radical difference in experience when your own body is caused, in one way or another, to *expel* this “not-wholly-other” in an act of “birthing death.”¹⁵

Phenomenological aspects aside, there might also be reason to suspect that independence claims regarding the fetus rest on a *metaphysical* confusion. For example, Elseijn Kingma has recently defended a *parthood* over a *containment* account of pregnancy. Arguing that a fetus is not only part of the internal environment of the gestating individual but also “hooked into” that individual metabolically, functionally, and topologically, Kingma claims this makes it more like a bodily part

¹³ Jones, “Hope Deferred.”

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Cf. Christy Angelle Bauman, *Theology of the Womb: Knowing God Through the Body of a Woman* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2019).

than a distinct and separate human being.¹⁶ While I am inclined to think that something like the parthood view is right, nothing I say here hinges on this account being the correct one. The point is only that it is necessary to have this kind of metaphysical conversation if we want to develop a meaningful Christian philosophical approach to pregnancy loss. It can also influence how we might understand analogies to pregnancy and birthing when approaching what I will below call “gestational models” of God.

Importantly, merely having some metaphysical account or other of pregnancy and miscarriage will not suffice. We must also pay attention to how social expectations, values, and structures shape our intuitions about and experiences of pregnancy. For example, many attitudes and assumptions about pregnancy are intimately bound up with deeply engrained teleological attitudes about *nature and naturalness* with respect to the sexed female body. Indeed, in many contexts, both sacred and secular, the woman who does not produce live offspring is considered somehow “unnatural.” However, in the Christian Bible infertility is often not only understood as *unnatural* but even as *supernatural*—a kind of “absence of blessing” commonly explained in terms of God’s having “closed” the womb of the woman in question.¹⁷ Furthermore, these “barren” women or their spouses usually end up receiving promises from God that they will, in fact, be divinely “blessed” with children. Indeed, the Scriptures almost exclusively present contemporary women readers with instances in which a desire for children is ultimately *fulfilled*, not where it is thwarted. The miscarriages, stillbirths, and other losses that women like Sarah, Rachel, Hannah, and Elizabeth likely endured are erased in favor of stories that narratively center the shame of not successfully producing male heirs. This ends up rendering the Christian script for miscarriage as largely co-extensive with a common Western neoliberal script that equates childbirth with output and productivity, at least insofar as it focuses its energies on the

¹⁶ Elselijn Kingma, “Were You a Part of Your Mother?” *Mind* 128, no. 511 (2019): 609–46.

¹⁷ Meg Warner, “‘Sing, O Barren One Who Did Not Bear’: Childlessness, Blessing and Vocation in the Old Testament,” *Modern Believing* 60, no. 2 (2019): 111–21.

possibility of a “successful” future pregnancy while silencing the *reality* of the experienced badness of past and present losses (exceptions being made for attributions of blame on one or more parent, not seldomly the woman). Indeed, in both scripts, miscarriage becomes, as Alison Reiheld has put it, a kind of *non-event*, one that both “is, and is not.”¹⁸

The view of pregnancy loss (and the woman who undergoes it) as an unnatural, dysteleological, non-event fails to see just how common miscarriage is and how much a normal part of the (remarkably inefficient) human gestational experience. For example, if we adopt the very modest estimate that 40% of all pregnancies do not result in a live birth, those Christian philosophers who assume that human life begins at fertilization will be forced to admit that upwards of *200 million* unbirthed human lives are lost each year.¹⁹ So perhaps we need to start thinking about pregnancy differently, in order to make room for the normalcy and naturalness of miscarriage. One example of how this can be done is provided by Jennifer Scuro in *The Pregnancy Pregnancy ≠ Childbearing Project*. Scuro rightly points out that although not all pregnancies carry the possibility of birth, they do all carry the possibility of miscarriage. When we understand pregnancy in light of the “the possibility of miscarriage *that follows all pregnancy*,” we see that pregnancy is essentially tied up with *existential risk*.²⁰ Not only does a woman risk literally losing her life (given the dangers involved in both giving birth to another human being and miscarrying one), she also risks losing her identity—and her very *self*—to that with which she is physiologically and emotionally bound up. In this sense, the bodily *host* of a fetus—the one whose womb is supposed to be “hospitable” to it—is simultaneously a *hostage*, regardless of how positively or negatively the woman feels about her pregnancy.²¹

¹⁸ Alison Reiheld, “‘The Event That Was Nothing’: Miscarriage as a Liminal Event,” *Journal of Social Philosophy* 46, no. 1 (2015): 9–26.

¹⁹ This estimate proceeds from a world population estimate in 2021 of 7.8 billion and a global birth rate of 17.873 per 1,000 people (<https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/WLD/world/birth-rate>).

²⁰ Scuro, *Pregnancy ≠ Childbearing*, p. 194.

²¹ Scuro, *Pregnancy ≠ Childbearing*, p. 207.

On Scuro’s approach, which seeks to decouple our notion of pregnancy from that of childbirth, what is common to *all* instances of pregnancy is the fact that they all eventually involve the *loss* of something that was, for a time, inextricably tied up with the pregnant person’s embodied self. That is, all humans who become pregnant will someday be postpartum, whether they have given birth to a live baby or not.²² The event that is most “natural” to pregnancy, then, is not necessarily childbirth; it is loss, expulsion, an *emptying out*. However, although this loss is inevitable, it is not something with respect to which the birthing body is wholly passive: It is always a *labor*, an existentially risky activity—and something that, if we take the parthood view of pregnancy seriously, involves a kind of paradoxical (and perhaps, put in theological terms, *kenotic*) emptying out of one’s own self. Yet, importantly, the “necessary labor” of this loss, or what Scuro fittingly calls *ontological griefwork*, “needs to be done and ought not be done by women alone.”²³ The development of a philosophical theology of pregnancy loss must therefore be a *communal* effort—one not just left to women, but one that nevertheless privileges their experiences and perspectives. Additionally, given that miscarriage is an essentially *bodily* event, any philosophical theology of pregnancy loss must take embodiment seriously. O’Donnell suggests, for example, acknowledging the woman’s body itself as both a “grave site” and a “theological landmark.”²⁴ As the former, the woman’s body marks the site of the death of the baby and, in some cases, represents the only grave a baby will have.²⁵ As the latter, it is “the site of unanswered theological questions and an incomplete rite of passage.”²⁶

With these considerations in mind, I now want to turn to a concrete pastoral task for a philosophical theology of pregnancy loss, one intertwined with conceptual work that I think Christian philosophy is especially suited to undertake.

²² Scuro, *Pregnancy ≠ Childbearing*, p. x.

²³ Scuro, *Pregnancy ≠ Childbearing*, p. xii.

²⁴ O’Donnell, “Reproductive Loss,” p. 153.

²⁵ O’Donnell, “Reproductive Loss,” p. 154.

²⁶ O’Donnell, “Reproductive Loss,” pp. 153–54.

4. A Christian Philosophy for Pregnancy Loss: Developing Informed Rituals

There are very few secular social scripts available to process pregnancy loss and even fewer religious ritual scripts available to those whose bodies have become gravesites. Addressing this lack is, I think, one of the main tasks for an embodied approach of the kind I envision. However, given that the experience of profound grief does not always track one's doxastic states, this might mean moving away from the overemphasis on belief and the cognitive in Christian philosophy. . For example, Tasia Scrutton has noted that even though the content of our cognitive belief-set often changes when we experience the loss of something we care about, it is oftentimes difficult for individuals to really *feel* the reality of the situation and to epistemically, affectively, and volitionally orient themselves according to it.²⁷ In the case of miscarriage, a woman might cognitively register (and even believe with 100% certainty) that the human being growing inside her has died, but she may not be able to experience this proposition *as real* or to re-orient herself in the world accordingly. This is particularly common in pregnancy loss. Not only does the body continue to behave as though it were pregnant, there is also no recognizable corpse to take leave of or to bury, perhaps because the fetus has become reabsorbed, or because the embryonic material is indistinguishable from the other material expelled by the woman during her miscarriage. Or, as in my own case, because the small clump of blood and tissue slipped too quickly into the irrecoverable depths of overly efficient German plumbing for me to fish it out of the toilet at 3am.

Scrutton goes on to discuss how religious ritual—especially insofar as it can be made sensorily rich, bodily, and embedded in narrative—can help to provide “experiential knowledge or understanding of the view of reality that truth claims [...] express more thinly.”²⁸ Yet this requires that there actually *be* bodily, sensory, and narrative rituals that can be publicly accessed and performed.

²⁷ Anastasia Philippa Scrutton, “Grief, Ritual and Experiential Knowledge: A Philosophical Perspective,” in *Continuing Bonds in Bereavement: New Directions for Research and Practice*, edited by Dennis Klass and Edith M. Steffen, 214–26 (London: Routledge, 2017).

²⁸ Scrutton, “Grief, Ritual and Experiential Knowledge,” p. 215.

Some churches and religious communities do offer short prayers or ceremonies on the occasion of miscarriage. However, these resources are few and far between, and most clergy “are either unaware, uncomfortable, or dismissive regarding the use of [the] minimal [liturgical] resources” that exist to address pregnancy loss.²⁹

Given their unavailability within the church, many Christian women have had to improvise their own rituals. Serene Jones writes about digging a hole with her friend who had miscarried, in order to bury a handkerchief containing a small bit of bloody tissue, the only thing left of the miscarried embryo.³⁰ For my part, every time I came from an ultrasound during my subsequent pregnancy, I visited the Konstanz Minster, lighting one candle in front of the “Man of Sorrows” for my embryo that died, one in front of the fifteenth-century Mary-and-child statue for the fetus that still lived in my womb, and one in front of the altar painting of Doubting Thomas in the hope of learning to fully trust my body (and the body of Christ) again. These rituals were meaningful for me because I could simultaneously do something with my body in a sensorially rich context in a sacred space that carried *sacramental weight*, especially for me (as I was married there). Still, I had to do it alone, and it didn’t feel like enough.

Can the development of more communally supportive mourning rituals be a task for Christian philosophy? I don’t see why not, so long as philosophers remain in conversation with clergy and the religious community, and especially with those who have experienced pregnancy loss. The models and narratives offered in such ritual contexts need to be systematically and theologically fitting so as to be capable of giving women a coherent theological “compass” for existentially orienting themselves with respect to their losses. Christian philosophers and theologians can therefore further contribute to the constructive development of models of God that better speak to pregnancy loss and show women that

²⁹ Millicent C. Feske, “Rachel’s Lament: The Impact of Infertility and Pregnancy Loss Upon the Religious Faith of Ordinary Christians,” *Journal of Pastoral Theology* 22, no. 1 (2012): 3.1–3.17 (3.10).

³⁰ Jones, “Hope Deferred.”

their pain is not invisible, their experiences not non-events. In fact, they might be surprised to find their own doctrines of God transformed by engaging in such communal “griefwork.”

In the remainder of this chapter, then, I want to briefly explore what such transformation might look like by focusing on what I call “gestational models” of God—i.e., approaches that conceive of God as *pregnant*. However, instead of placing birthing at the center of these models, I want to build instead on Scuro’s insight that all pregnancy involves loss. These types of models are thus intended not only to disrupt the masculinist and patriarchal characterizations of the divine often inherent in many Christian philosophical approaches but also to course-correct for feminist approaches to “Mother God” that implicitly suggest the woman who best “images” God is the one who “successfully” gives birth to a live, healthy human being. That is, I want to think about what it might mean to construct models of a pregnant God that make room for the naturalness of and grief involved in all pregnancy loss (whether via live birth or death)—and to situate them within the context of traditional approaches to God in Christian philosophy. I will suggest that such models are, for the most part, commensurate with these approaches and/or might even help us to better think them through to their logical conclusions.

5. Conceiving Alternative Models of the Divine

Just as in the natural sciences, which legitimately use models, idealizations, and other “felicitous falsehoods” to cultivate disciplinary understanding,³¹ I maintain that models of God need not be strictly speaking *true* to be epistemically valuable. Furthermore, I think that when we shift our philosophical focus from merely showing how it is that theistic *belief* of a certain kind could, under certain conditions, if true, constitute religious *knowledge*—and we focus instead on the cultivation of deeper

³¹ Catherine Z. Elgin, *True Enough* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017).

religious *understanding*—we might see how the construction, or even projection,³² of non-factive models of God can be epistemically valuable, both for us as theorizers and for religious practitioners “on the ground.”³³

The theist, of course, is likely to hope that some models of God *do* point beyond themselves to some greater reality—and theologians can argue about which models do so better than others. Important for our purposes is merely the point that good models of the divine need not match up one-to-one with reality to do their epistemic work. They can, for example, speak to the lived experience of certain human beings in ways that create opportunities for increased *resonance* and *participation*, which can open up space for new understandings of the “God that may be.”³⁴ They can also sometimes provide necessary *epistemic frictions*³⁵ to the status quo that can serve as a corrective for bias, hubris, or epistemic imperialism and make space for more fitting beliefs about God and our fellow human beings that standard approaches might occlude.³⁶ Even for those with more strongly realist intuitions than I who insist on the “metaphysical accuracy” of their models, there is still some reason to think that employing feminine-coded (or other kinds of non-masculine-coded) language about God is at least as metaphysically accurate as using masculine or patriarchal language³⁷ and potentially does less harm

³² Cf. Grace Jantzen’s claim that “it is urgently necessary for women to do some deliberate projecting of our own [...]”; Grace Jantzen, *Becoming Divine: Toward a Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), p. 89.

³³ Amber L. Griffioen, “Rethinking Religious Epistemology,” *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 14, no. 1 (2022): 21–47.

³⁴ Richard Kearney, *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001).

³⁵ José Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and Resistant Imaginations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

³⁶ Helen De Cruz, “Seeking Out Epistemic Friction in the Philosophy of Religion,” in *Voices from the Edge: Centring Marginalized Perspectives in Analytic Theology*, ed. Michelle Panchuk and Michael Rea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 23–46; Griffioen, “Therapeutic Theodicy?”

³⁷ Michael Rea, Michael Rea, “Is God a Man?” in *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Michael L. Peterson and Raymond J. VanArragon, Second Edition (Hoboken: Wiley, 2019), pp. 293–301.

than its patriarchal counterparts.³⁸ Whatever the case, if our models of God are to reflect how it is that human beings are made *imago dei*, then we should hope that they speak to *various* facets of human experience, including those of gestational persons, who make up a large portion of the human population. I therefore think that gestational models are, at least in some contexts, both theologically and epistemically appropriate, perhaps even called for (though we should obviously not think that the *only* appropriate feminine-coded models of God are those having to do with pregnancy, birthing, mothering, and caretaking).

With this in mind, let us now explore how a gestational model might fare on a few traditional, analytically-favored approaches to God's creative activity—especially when we take into account Scuro's insights about the risk and loss inherent to pregnancy and Kingma's parthood approach to the metaphysics of pregnancy. I again want to insist that I am not maintaining that any particular gestational model discussed here is, strictly speaking, *true*, nor even that the accounts of pregnancy and loss on which they rest are *correct*. Instead, I simply want to show how changing the way we think about pregnancy and miscarriage can transform the way we think about God (and vice versa), even within contexts already familiar to Christian philosophers. A future project for Christian philosophy will be to discuss the appropriate parameters of such accounts, to see whether and how they can be used as a corrective for standard approaches to God that have traditionally marginalized women's experience, and to reflect on whether and how such models can helpfully speak to those who have undergone pregnancy loss.

6. Gestational Models and Christian Philosophy

Let us begin with the favored approach of analytic philosophers of religion: classical "perfect-being" theism—which, in Christian philosophy, is usually shot through with a kind of (abstract) theistic personalism. On this approach, God possesses all the perfections—including agential traits like

³⁸ Kathryn Pogin, "God Is Not Male," in *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Peterson and VanArragon, pp. 302–10.

knowledge, power, and goodness—to an infinite or maximal degree. If we assume that risk is inherent to all pregnancy, then classical theism might appear *prima facie* hostile to gestational models of God, since God seems to risk virtually nothing by creating as they do: God knows how their creation would turn out were they to create, is powerful enough to bring that creation about, and cannot be changed or affected by anything that happens in it. Of course, although the classical view preserves what its proponents see as a “robust” sense of divine sovereignty, absolute dominion is not usually at the top of the list of divine attributes a feminist-friendly approach is concerned with preserving, given the problematic notions of power and submission that often accompany it, as well as the way it has been historically abused to justify and/or explain away all sorts of evils.³⁹

Still, if we think about risk as simply involving the *possibility of loss*, there might be a real sense in which classical perfect-being theists might be able to embrace a gestational model of the divine. However, they must be willing to part with the cherished metaphors of kingship, patriarchy, and dominance that often run implicitly through the traditional approach and allow for the (re-)drawing of a more “fertile” analogy between God’s creative and sustaining activity and the *actual biological parallels of generating life and holding it in existence* that occur in human pregnancy.⁴⁰ In so doing, we might be in a better position to see how God’s creative activity, too, centrally involves a kind of loss, as the very creatures created in the divine image “fall away” from their Creator. Whether we think of this as a sort of Platonist “falling” of immaterial human souls into corporeal bodies, a Neoplatonist “flowing out” of an overabundance of divine being or love, or a more Aristotelian “conception” springing forth from an act of divine causal knowledge, the image of pregnancy and loss seems eminently compatible with the “classical” aspect of classical theism. The gestational model is also clearly well-suited to the Biblical narrative of the Fall. For all these reasons, I think that engaging in

³⁹ Griffioen, “Nowhere Men and Divine I’s.”

⁴⁰ In this sense, the gestational model might actually be less figurative than the patriarchal approach and perhaps better thought of as *analogical* in something like the medieval sense.

some imaginative and earnest “play”⁴¹ with gestational models can actually help Christian philosophy, especially of the perfect-being variety, better trace the contours of its own views by providing different ways of “conceiving” the relationship between Creator and Creation.

If we follow Aquinas in assuming it is not possible for reason to determine whether the universe has a temporal beginning or exists from eternity,⁴² it will be fitting to propose gestational models for both. We can thereby imagine creation as either having been “birthed” *temporally* by the pregnant God into independent existence or as being *continually* “gestated into being” from all eternity by an ever-pregnant-and-laboring God. On the former construal, the universe has already been “bodied forth” by God’s pregnant self.⁴³ This work of love, however, is still what Scuro would call an *expellation*—a kenotic “divine-self-emptying” that gains the (wholly “good”) created world through a loss of both unity and, more importantly, *unification*. On this view, God’s kenotic emptying of Godself in birthing creation involves both the potential risk that humanity will go astray (which we do) and the actual loss involved in the umbilical untethering of unity into multiplicity, a common theme in medieval Neoplatonist cosmologies. The latter gestational view, according to which the universe exists from eternity, lends itself well to a kind of panentheism. Here, creation is more like the fetus than the birthed child. And we, as part of that creation, find ourselves always unborn, always dying *in utero* in Adam, always re-generated in the womb of that other unborn begotten Son, our Divine Mother Jesus (1 Cor. 15:22).⁴⁴ On this view, we are not merely *contained within* God’s body, we constitute *part* of it or are

⁴¹ Cf. Rachel Wagner, “The Importance of Playing in Earnest,” in *Playing with Religion in Digital Games*, ed. Heidi A. Campbell and Gregory P. Grieve (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2014), pp. 192–213.

⁴² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles. Book Two: Creation*, trans. James F. Anderson (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1976), p. 38.

⁴³ Cf. Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987).

⁴⁴ For Jesus as Divine Mother, see (among others) Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love: The Short Text (Translated from British Library Additional MS 37790)*, *The Motherhood of God: An Excerpt (Translated from British Library MS Sloane 2477)*, trans. and ed. Frances Beer (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1998), and Anselm of Canterbury, *The Prayers and Meditations of St. Anselm* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), “Prayer to Saint Paul.”

otherwise always already united with it, as on Kingma's account of pregnancy. What both of these accounts bring out, however, is the longstanding teaching of the Christian tradition that distance or separation from God just *is* death, one which is indeed grievable. The whole universe, then, might be fittingly thought of as—to again invoke Scuro—*God's ontological griefwork*.

In fact, we might find that adopting a gestational model of God can help us come to see that there is a sense in which Creation is always “grievable,” even where it is understood as something God wills to be and proclaims “good.”⁴⁵ I take it that some of the resistance to gestational models from the perfect-being theist camps (especially of the classical variety) will have to do with the idea that God's *losing* and/or *grieving* something is incompatible with either God's perfection. However, if loss really is *inherent* to pregnancy, then when the pregnant woman loses that good which she has generated and wholly desires to exist, her power is no more diminished than her inability to defy the laws of gravity. If anything, her grief is a *sign* of both her own love and her recognition of the goodness of what is lost. Just so with the pregnant God. We might say, to channel Hilde Lindemann,⁴⁶ that the pregnant God *calls us into relationship* with them and claims “It is good that you exist!” even if this vocation ultimately comes at a grievable price, namely, that of granting us our volitional (and perhaps even ontological) independence. This is the kind of agapic love that should be the centerpiece of a careful(l) and concerned Christian philosophy. Indeed, finding a model according to which God can grieve both *for* us and *with* us might help us develop a more humane response to the problem of evil than the traditional theodicies from the perfect-being camp have thus far been able to provide.

⁴⁵ A more cynical, deistic alternative might be to think of creation as God's “abortion”—a world expelled and left behind, except, perhaps, in the memory of a departed Deity who may or may not grieve it. Although this is a view many Christian theists will be inclined to reject, it is not without some Biblical precedent. For example, the flood narrative in Genesis 7 might speak for the idea that God might intentionally abort their own creation, while Paul's reference to himself as an abortion (*ἐκτρώμα*) in 1 Corinthians 15:8 points more to the imagery of miscarriage (spontaneous abortion).

⁴⁶ Hilde Lindemann, *Holding and Letting Go: The Social Practice of Personal Identities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

7. The Miscarrying Woman as Trinitarian Image

Although less “birth-centric,” the gestational models discussed above take as their paradigm pregnancies in which the fetus survives and/or is birthed. Before closing, I want to discuss one more sense in which the analogy of the pregnant God can be employed and which the woman who has experienced miscarriage is in a special place to both imagine and to image. Not only is this a model that a miscarrying mother can cleave to in her time of grief; it is one that might actually help Christian philosophy make headway on a topic it has struggled with from the very beginning—namely, that of the Trinity.

This approach is brought out by Serene Jones when she poses her version of a longstanding question in Christian theology in terms that might be familiar to those who have undergone miscarriages: “What transpires in the Godhead when one of its members [namely, the incarnated Christ] bleeds away?” She notes that theologians like Moltmann and Luther “have urged us to affirm that on the cross, God takes this death into the depths of Godself,”⁴⁷ but it is unclear what this is supposed to mean, and few theologians have provided adequate solutions. Noting that the tradition has basically “told us that at this point in the story, our language breaks down, and we must simply ponder the cross and its mysteries,” Jones wonders whether perhaps theology’s “imaginative resources” have not been hampered by the “morphological imaginations of its mostly male theologians.”⁴⁸ *Both* analytic philosophers of religion and feminist theologians have tended to miss “the rather ironic fact that the image that most effectively captures the nature of God’s redeeming grace is [...] an image of maternal loss.”⁴⁹ Indeed, it seems like the woman who has experienced a miscarriage or stillbirth is *especially positioned* to understand just how it is that “the living Godhead [can] hold death within it.”

⁴⁷ Jones, “Hope Deferred,” p. 242.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Jones, “Hope Deferred,” p. 243.

Like the woman who has miscarried, the living Trinity simultaneously becomes a—or perhaps *the*—central theological landmark in Christianity, precisely by becoming a gravesite.

The metaphysics of pregnancy also become relevant here. For example, whatever its moral status, the organismal status of a fetus in relation to its mother is extremely difficult to determine. Evolutionary and immunological accounts of organismality yield different answers,⁵⁰ as do the containment and parthood approaches to pregnancy. Kingma’s approach, as we have seen, characterizes the fetus as a part of the mother,⁵¹ whereas Hilary Yancey suggests that the mother is a part of the fetus.⁵² A particularly promising account by Anne Sophie Meincke proposes a *process* theory of organisms, which views the pregnant individual as a “bifurcating hypercomplex process”—one which is “neither two individuals nor one individual but something in between one and two.”⁵³ Some Trinitarian theologians might prefer a “both-and” formulation to a “neither-nor,” but understanding both what pregnancy actually is and what happens when a pregnant person miscarries might help us better understand what the Godhead is like, how death can occur within it, and how pregnant human bodies at their most vulnerable can nevertheless be powerful *specula* through which the divine reflects its Trinitarian image. In fact, however we answer the question concerning the mother-fetus relation, it might turn out that the Trinity is no more mysterious or contradictory than human biology.

I therefore submit that the further development of gestational models of God show promise for a care-ful(l) and consider-ate Christian philosophy of the future. First, it can provide a potential source for therapeutically valuable theologies that can inform rituals of grief surrounding pregnancy loss. Second, we have good reason to think that if we were to come to better understand the metaphysics of

⁵⁰ Jonathan Grose, “How Many Organisms During a Pregnancy?” *Philosophy of Science* 87, no. 5 (2020): 1049–60.

⁵¹ Kingma, “Were You a Part of Your Mother?”

⁵² Hilary Yancey, “Was Your Mother Part of You? A Hylomorphist’s Challenge for Elseijn Kingma,” *Quaestiones Disputatae* 10, no. 2 (2020): 69–85.

⁵³ Anne Sophie Meincke, “One or Two? A Process View of Pregnancy,” *Philosophical Studies* (2021).

pregnancy that make such states of life and loss possible, we might find the resources to better comprehend difficult aspects of Trinitarian theology—perhaps even in a way that would satisfy even the curmudgeonly philosopher who resists the idea that those deeply invested in a topic or relying on autobiographical experience can provide the kind of “abstract” and “rigorous” insights for which philosophical theology strives.

The fact that, 20 years after Jones penned her essay, we still have not made much headway in addressing pregnancy loss in Christian philosophy might be cause for cynicism. Moreover, it is grossly unfair that the labor of such an endeavor should fall to those who have undergone such loss, while others content themselves with “disinterestedly” making more minute argumentative moves from the armchair. At the same time, even if it is not *redemptive* for us, this endeavor can nevertheless be a form of *our* griefwork, just as writing this chapter has been a laborious-yet-cathartic act of griefwork for me. Socratic midwifery itself is an inherently risky enterprise, but if we can thereby assist in the germination and gestation of new approaches to very old problems, perhaps our endeavors can result in more than the mere “heartsickness” of grief, mourning, and “hope deferred”—contributing instead to cultivating the philosophical tree of life in community and solidarity with each other.

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