

Commentary

CHARIS THOMPSON

GOD IS IN THE DETAILS: COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES
ON THE INTERTWINING OF RELIGION AND ASSISTED
REPRODUCTIVE TECHNOLOGIES

In this time when so many actions and events seem to be waiting to be interpreted as evidence of a global clash of civilizations between fundamentalists and modernists, good theoretical and empirical sense about the intertwinings of modernity and religion can be hard to come by. It is thus a particular pleasure to comment on the exceptional group of articles in this special edition on religion and reproductive technologies around the world. Religion is commonly equated with either the pre-modern or the faith-based, and as such is often taken to be in opposition to modern science, which is seen as a secular realm of empirical practice governed by this-worldly rationality. These essays, however, compellingly make the case that religion plays a productive part in reproductive technologies in many different national and religious contexts.

In these articles, religious belief often stands in official tension with the secular excesses of ex-vivo manipulation of human embryos, or with the hubris of tampering with so sacred an aspect of kinship and nationhood as reproduction. Just as importantly, religion also functions in the essays as a means for patients and practitioners to navigate technical procedures, helping doctors and patients to accept that the procedures sometimes don't work, appreciate the grounds on which such procedures might be permitted, and understand how technically assisted reproduction can sometimes be capable of reconstituting kin and nation. In short, religion frequently enters the lab and the clinic, through the words and actions of both patients and practitioners, in ways that make treatment possible.

Elizabeth Roberts' essay, "God's Laboratory: Religious Rationalities and Modernity in Ecuadorian In-vitro Fertilization," is a powerful exploration of the disjunction, or perhaps productive relation between, both science and religion, and official and popular Catholicism, in Ecuador. Roberts' article is exemplary in showing how the study of a scientific field can throw light on religion and nation. She builds up a portrait of a nation that is deeply Catholic at the popular level, where almost everyone proclaims their adherence to Catholicism and draws on religious understanding in everyday life, including in the clinic and the lab. Yet she also shows that Ecuadorians

shun many aspects of organized religion, including official stances against manipulating human embryos outside the body. She takes us into a world where we come to understand that embryos can be unceremoniously dumped in the trash at times, while appeals to religious figures to aid fertilization and implantation are common among patients and practitioners, and while the nation-state by and large stays out of the laboratory. Roberts could simply have described this phenomenon as a product of a country that is very religious but also has a stable separation of church and state. Instead, she goes one better, showing that reproductive technologies are one site where Ecuador realizes this separation between church and state, even while upholding its cultural identity as a deeply Catholic country. As a result, we learn about science but also about religion in Ecuador, and the unique way in which the two impact each other.

Aditya Bharadwaj's "Sacred Conceptions: Clinical Theodicies, Uncertain Science, and Technologies of Procreation in India," draws on his impressive ethnographic research on reproductive technologies in India's five major cities. Bharadwaj compellingly shows that Indian in vitro fertilization (IVF) is not simply partially disseminated, disenchanted Western IVF. IVF in the Hindu context is first and foremost an incomplete science, and treatment failure is to be understood as flowing from the fundamental incompleteness of the medical science of conception. In consequence, the very fact of the Hindu setting for IVF provides a theodicy whereby patients and practitioners can make sense of treatment inconsistencies and failures, and of their own suffering, because technology cannot guarantee the desired outcome. Bharadwaj explains that this role of providing a theodicy stemming from the incompleteness of science means that the kind of solace offered by invoking Hindu deities sometimes takes on a paternalistic, or parent-child, form. This potential to manage patient anxiety in the face of failure keeps patients coming back for more, while the incompleteness explanation for treatment failure means that patients often appeal to alternative medical and spiritual practices to help fill the gap, further "indigenizing" assisted conception in India.

In "Reproduction as Spiritual Kin Work: Orthodoxy, IVF, and the Moral Economy of Motherhood in Greece," Heather Paxson also drives a wedge between lived and official Church doctrine, and documents the use of the spiritual in explaining suffering. Her setting, Athens in the 1990s, is very different from either Ecuador or India, however, and so the similarities do not run that deep. Paxson pays particular attention to the gendered aspects of navigating infertility treatment in modern urban Greece. She shows that while male infertility is an attack on a man's virility, a woman needs not so much to conceive as to bear a child and raise one – in short, to be a mother – to live up to Greek ideals of womanhood. In a country with a low birth rate

(in part produced by high rates of abortion and subsequent infertility) and an aging population, where Greek Orthodox religion valorizes the Virgin Mary and motherhood, the elision between a moral desire to be a mother, religion, and nation is an over-determined narrative for women patients. Unlike their counterparts in other countries, women equate their quest to become pregnant using IVF with a spiritual path marked by women's suffering made manifest in the blood and pain of childbirth. Paxson's fascinating gendered account reconciles the Greek Orthodox Church's official disapproval of these technologies with the importance of spiritual beliefs and practices, such as pilgrimages and the appeal to Saints as intermediaries, to the women using the technologies. In the process, her account also makes sense of the subsequent passage of national legislation regulating medically assisted means of reproduction, despite Church opposition.

In "Making Technology Familiar: Orthodox Jews and Infertility Support, Advice and Inspiration," Susan Martha Kahn extends the ground-breaking work on the deep interrelations between the Israeli orthodox rabbinate and infertility doctors she began in *Reproducing the Jews*. In that book, she charted the work of many orthodox rabbis to construct clinical protocols for orthodox IVF patients that would ensure that their children be conceived in accordance with rabbinic directives and that the children be Jewish, even when gamete donation is involved. In this article, Kahn investigates the causal and therapeutic narratives of orthodox practitioners and patients as they figure in support materials for those suffering with infertility in a profoundly pronatalist community. Kahn finds that support networks teem with examples of causal language that combines technology and religion as strongly as does the regulative concordance between rabbi and doctor that she had earlier documented. Thus, the unusually tight and productive relation she had found between science and religion extends to the causal and therapeutic understandings of those technologies. Assisted conception involves God's helping hand as much as that of the technology, and one is to understand both successful and unsuccessful procedures in religious as well as technical terms. Religion and science in this case augment and necessitate one another, rather than being in contradiction.

Marcia Inhorn's splendid article, "Making Muslim Babies: IVF and Gamete Donation in Sunni versus Shi'a Islam," recapitulates some of her earlier work in Egypt, examining the roots in the 1980s of early Egyptian fatwas in support of reproductive technologies such as IVF, where the permissibility of IVF was tied to means of avoiding the sin of adultery. IVF in Muslim countries in the region became widely accepted as long as gamete or embryo donation or selling, or gestational surrogates, were not involved. While doctors and technicians were not seen as third, and hence, potentially

adulterous parties to the reproduction, other kinds of third parties were forbidden. Children conceived through IVF in the conventional manner would be good Muslim babies, serving a pronatalist religious and national sentiment. Inhorn's essay then illustrates a bifurcation between Shi'ite and Sunni Muslims since the late 1990s, with gamete donation being deemed permissible in some circumstances in an Iranian fatwa. Drawing on her recent fieldwork in Lebanon, Inhorn documents the ways in which this fatwa deems some gamete donation permissible by ensuring that neither the recipient patient nor the gamete donor stand in adulterous relations to one another or each other's partners during the time of treatment. Unlike Susan Kahn's work with orthodox Jews, which demonstrates that the gamete itself has to have purity of the right kind to pass on Judaism, Inhorn's shows that making Muslim babies with gamete donation requires that donors and recipients be the source of purity, rather than gametes, to pass on genealogical religion, paternity, maternity, and nation.

Finally, I turn briefly to findings from my own ethnographic work, to make the perhaps obvious point that it is not just in "non-Western" countries that these invocations of religion make the deployment of reproductive technologies possible.¹ While interviewing patients and doing ethnographic work in reproductive technology clinics for over a decade and a half, I found that the majority of cases I followed in the U.S. made no explicit appeal to religion, although most patients claimed religious affiliation. On the other hand, the incorporation of varying degrees of religious belief and practice into treatment was not rare. Examples ranged from invoking Mormonism as a grounds for giving up treatment (something IVF patients find very hard to do), to patients for whom a scientific means was justified by the religious end, all the way through a case where a couple involved a priest in their treatment so that the means as well as the end could accord with religious precepts. I also witnessed every kind of appeal to the particularly vexed religious-political question of the personhood of embryos, including a case in which a couple restricted their own treatment so as not to endorse a religious political agenda associated with embryo rescue, and one in which a patient denied herself the solace of a narrative of loss and mourning for a post-IVF miscarriage, so as not to have her beliefs accord with what she saw as a religious conservative cooption of fetal personification. As this array of appeals to religion shows, religion is alive and well here, too, in ways that throw light on, as well as themselves reflect, religion writ large in America.

In conclusion, I urge readers to read these articles side by side, for they represent a classic example of the whole being greater than the sum of its parts. The emphasis on religion in these essays adds immeasurably to our

understanding of reproductive technologies, helping us to see God in the details. In my own work, influenced by post-colonial theory, and through the brute force of fieldwork, both of which forbade taking scientific rationality as an unexamined category, I had come to understand that religion throws light on science in the predominantly Western contexts in which I have worked. Taken together, these articles have led me to a deeper understanding, namely, that exactly how this occurs varies greatly from place to place. This in turn suggests what is perhaps the greatest pay-off of these essays, the exciting idea that studying science in modern societies could be a wonderfully insightful way of understanding religion and nation.

NOTES

1. Thompson, Charis 2005. *Making Parents: The Ontological Choreography of Reproductive Technologies*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

CHARIS THOMPSON

Departments of Gender and Women's Studies and Rhetoric

Co-Director, Science, Technology and Society Center

University of California

3412 Dwinelle Hall, MC 1070

Berkeley, CA 94720

USA

E-mail: charis@berkeley.edu