

Joanna Krotofil

Institute for the Studies of Religion
Jagiellonian University in Kraków
joanna.krotofil@uj.edu.pl
ORCID: 0000-0003-2308-5329

Dorota Wójciak

Doctoral School in the Humanities
Jagiellonian University in Kraków
dorota.wojciak@uj.edu.pl
ORCID: 0000-0002-9114-9331

Dagmara Mętel

Unit of Community Psychiatry
Jagiellonian University in Kraków
dagmara.metel@uj.edu.pl
ORCID: 0000-0002-5036-9821

THE VIRGIN MARY IN THE NARRATIVES OF CONTEMPORARY CATHOLIC AND MUSLIM MOTHERS IN POLAND

Matka Boska w narracjach współczesnych matek katolickich i muzułmańskich w Polsce

Abstract. In this paper, we demonstrate how the figure of the Virgin Mary functions as an important element of the lived religion of contemporary Catholic and Muslim mothers in Poland. Based on the analysis of in-depth interviews and observational data we argue that the figure of Mary is recognized as a religious ideal and a role model by mothers identifying with both religions. We trace similarities and differences between Catholic and Muslim mothers in their reflexive

engagement with ideas, symbols, and prescriptions attached to Mary and discuss how they reinvent the figure and ascribe it with personalised meanings: embrace some of the traditional attributes of Mary, challenge, and contest others, and construct new meanings firmly embedded in their daily life mothering experiences.

Keywords: Virgin Mary; lived religion; Catholic mothers; Muslim mothers, motherhood, mothering

Streszczenie. W artykule przedstawiamy, w jaki sposób figura Maryi – matki Jezusa - funkcjonuje jako ważny element religii przeżywanej wśród współczesnych muzułmańskich i katolickich matek w Polsce. Opierając się na analizie wywiadów pogłębionych i danych obserwacyjnych dowodzimy, że Maryja uznawana jest za religijny ideał i wzór do naśladowania zarówno przez matki wyznające Islam, jak i matki katolickie. Śledzimy podobieństwa i różnice w refleksywnym zaangażowaniu wyznawczyń obu religii w idee, symbole i nakazy związane z Maryją oraz omawiamy, w jaki sposób religijne matki konstruują tę postać na nowo przypisując jej spersonalizowane znaczenia: przyjmując niektóre tradycyjne atrybuty Maryi, kwestionując lub odrzucając inne, a także tworząc nowe znaczenia mocno osadzone we własnych codziennych doświadczeniach macierzyńskich.

Słowa kluczowe: Maryja Matka Jezusa; religia przeżywana; matki katolickie; matki muzułmańskie; macierzyństwo; opieka macierzyńska

Introduction

Historically, Mary has been a prominent figure for Polish Catholics and to this day remains one of the most influential cultural models of femininity and maternity, and a significant object of recognition, rejection, or resignification in public and private spheres. Anna Niedźwiedź observes that “Marian devotion practiced in contemporary Poland, diverse, rich, and manifold requires special research approach” and proposes to look more closely at „how” the Mother of God (Matka Boska) is lived by individuals for whom she is an important figure, or becomes one on some

occasions” (2014: 337). In this paper, following Niedźwiedź’s suggestion, we analyse how young Catholic and Muslim mothers negotiate their relationship with Mary. Placing our research within the framework of lived religion (Ammerman 2015), we look at the ways in which religious ideas, symbols, or prescriptions directly impact individual mothering practices. Our study demonstrates that Marian devotion typically associated with village inhabitants and the older generation of Catholics in Poland is firmly present in the daily lives of Polish women of reproductive age, regardless of their location and religious adherence. In the following discussion we trace how Mary is being reinvented by young Catholic and Muslim mothers who ascribe this polyvalent figure with personalised meanings: embrace some of the traditional attributes of Mary, challenge and contest others and construct new ones firmly embedded in their everyday life mothering experiences.

The engaged Catholic mothers in our study by their religious affiliation and the fact that they are raising children with no disabilities and live in heterosexual marriages represent the mainstream way of mothering consistent with the dominant interpretations of the figure of Mary and its secular counterpart, *Matka Polka*. By bringing Muslim mothers into this research we intended to include a group that is transgressing this hegemonic model of motherhood. As these women are often socially constructed as religious “Others” and traitors of the nation and Christian faith (Abdallah-Krzepkowska et al. 2023) their mothering is difficult to align with the notion of meaningful participation in the Polish national community shaped by nationalistic and Catholic ideas (Hryciuk and Korolczuk 2012). However, all Muslim mothers who participated in our research have been raised in the sociocultural context saturated by Catholic symbols, beliefs, and practises and are familiar with them. Although conversion is marked by disruptions and breaks with some religious and cultural practices, studies show that converts to Islam strive to maintain biographic continuity and bring significant images and symbols of their past into consonance with the new religion (in Polish context, see Krotofil et al. 2022). We assumed that in this process, the figure of the Virgin Mary, also recognized in Islam, does not necessarily lose its importance, but becomes a subject

of careful renegotiation. In the following discussion, we highlight some similarities and differences between Catholic and Muslim mothers actively shaping their relationship with Mary.

Marian devotion in Poland and the relevance of Mary as a maternal figure in Catholicism and Islam

The great importance of Marian devotion is considered a distinctive feature of Polish Catholicism. In Poland, Marianism, usually ascribed to the so-called “folk-type religiosity” and collective religious practices, was also popular among the most prominent hierarchs of the Church. Brian Porter-Szűcs (2011) indicates, for example, that Primate Wyszyński and Pope John Paul II were intensely committed to the Virgin Mary and quite likely intentionally blurred the boundaries between a systematized official Marian theology and popular syncretic, heterodox devotion which flourished among lay believers.

Among the diversity of meanings attributed to Mary in Polish culture throughout history, two motifs became dominant: Mary as a militant, authoritative Queen inscribed in Polish national mythology and Mary as a model of passive and silent femininity. From the turbulent 17th century and through the loss of Polish sovereignty in the 18th century and its aftermath, the militant image of Mary, the Queen of Poland, played a particularly important role. The nineteenth century brought a shift towards a more domesticated, maternal image of Mary. This change coincided with apparitions in La Salette, Lourdes, and Fatima, and in more than four hundred locations in Poland, where Mary usually manifested herself as a gentle, patient, and humble mother, rather than the almighty queen. Porter-Szűcs illustrates the process of assigning stereotypically maternal features to Mary with an example of a Marian textbook by Father Walczyński (1910) who devoted a separate chapter to each of the virtues he believed the Virgin exemplified: humility, meekness, obedience, suffering, a love of prayer, modesty, good intentions, and persistence in virtue (Porter-Szűcs 2011: 375). Later, Mary, as the ideal of the submissive

wife and mother has been reproduced in the writings of John Paul II, who wrote in *Redemptoris Mater*:

Women, by looking to Mary, find in her the secret of living their femininity with dignity and of achieving their own true advancement [by cultivating female virtues, such as] the self-offering totality of love; the strength that is capable of bearing the greatest sorrows; limitless fidelity and tireless devotion to work; the ability to combine penetrating intuition with words of support and encouragement (John Paul II 1987).

By emphasising her maternal role from the Christocentric perspective, official Catholic teaching places Mary in a position where she cannot be framed as an autonomous figure and downplays her agency (Adamiak 1997). While feminist theologians have been developing alternative interpretations of the figure of Mary, these debates are very little known in Polish Catholic circles.

Although the stories told about Mary in the Quran correspond to biblical stories, the Islamic text contains different details regarding her life. She is the only woman mentioned by name in the Quran and is considered “the highest of women both in this world and in Paradise” (Saritoprak 2019: 8), however, there is an ongoing debate among Islamic scholars whether Mary, being so exceptional, can be considered a model for devout Muslim women (see, for example, Chudy 2020; Mirza 2021). While some authors see similarities between Catholic and Islamic depictions of Mary as a figure which is not perceived in her own rights but rather as secondary to Jesus (Mroz 2019), others argue that Mary in Islam is invested with a considerable amount of agency (Jardim 2014). In popular discourses, the Virgin Mary has been used to express antagonism between Christians and Muslims in Europe (Jansen and Kühl 2008). The authors note, however, that Mary can also be seen as a uniting symbol and the “bridge builder” (Mroz 2019), as exemplified by the Marian pilgrimage sites visited by Muslims.

Researchers of lived Catholicism and Islam in contemporary cultural contexts note the importance of Mary for many religious women who find her relevant and inspirational in their individual lives (see, for example,

Chudy 2020; Schleifer 1997, Kuźma 2008). There is, however, very little research on the reception of Mary through the experience of mothering in the lives of religious mothers.

Mothering and the dominant ideologies of motherhood in Poland

In our analysis, we use the distinction between motherhood and mothering, which was introduced by Adrienne Rich to demonstrate the difference between an institution of motherhood, as a set of the dominant social ideas about mothers and their duties, and the everyday practice of caring for children (1976).

Historically, the dominant representation of the institution of motherhood in Poland was embodied by the figure of Matka Polka (Polish Mother), the ideal of a strong mother devoted to her family and the nation, and responsible for the cultivation of the Polish national identity of her children. Although she is considered a secular counterpart of the Virgin Mary and had some characteristics of Mary the Queen of Poland, the empowering potential of this latter figure was appropriated by the national cause. The figure of Matka Polka as a martyr and a national hero shaped the ideas about motherhood in Poland long after the country regained independence in 1918. Over time, the vision of motherhood as a constant devotion and hard work for a higher cause was normalized and Matka Polka became synonymous with the “common” or “typical” Polish mother - a woman who puts the needs of her husband and children above her own (Imbierowicz 2012). Today, however, the figure is increasingly becoming an object of contestation, as contemporary mothers try to distance themselves from this ideal and construct their identity in opposition to it and for this reason, the myth of Matka Polka needs to be considered together with another dominant model of mothering, namely the cultural model of intensive mothering. Sharon Hays describes it as “child-centred, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labour-intensive and financially costly” (1996: 8). The author argues that the principles of intensive mothering urge a mother to respond patiently to all physical

and emotional needs of the child. This requires her constant presence and copious amounts of time and energy devoted to mothering. Supported by selected elements of psychological theories, intensive mothering places enormous responsibility on mothers and instills a sense of guilt in them for the slightest negligence.

Dominant ideologies of motherhood described above shape the lived experiences of mothering in Poland regardless of mothers' religious commitment. Embedded in cultural and political constructions, mothering is harnessed by competing visions of society. This is very apparent in the current political climate in Poland where women's reproductive rights are being restricted (Szalewa 2017), and the experiences of thousands of mothers who do not comply with normative motherhood are marginalized. At the same time, mothering constitutes a contested terrain (Glenn 1994), a practice through which these constructions are being contested and reshaped (O'Brien Hallstein 2010). In the following part of the paper, we trace how this is effected through the renegotiation of the relationship with the Virgin Mary.

Methods

The findings presented here are based on in-depth interviews completed between January 2021 and September 2022 with 47 Catholic and 19 Muslim mothers and two moderated group interviews with religious mothers of the Catholic faith. We also conducted regular participant observation of meetings for mothers at Catholic parishes and gatherings for women organised in a mosque. The interviews were based on a topic guide which included themes such as the experiences of pregnancy and childbirth, the impact of early mothering on religious practices, the ways of dealing with everyday difficulties in maternal practice, and religious and non-religious role models for mothers. The researchers also followed the narratives of the study participants in accordance with the methodological principles of the understanding interview (Kaufmann 1999). The observational data was used to corroborate the results obtained from the

analysis of interviews. All respondents provided informed consent to participate and the study was reviewed by the university's Ethics Committee (221.0032.4.2021).

Our participants were between 22 and 43 years old and were mothers of young children: only five women had any child older than six, and 24 women gave birth to their first child not longer than 3 years before the first interview.

We sampled mothers in rural and urban locations, including women with a high level of cultural capital. Two-thirds of the participants had higher education and more than half of our participants lived in cities with over 100,000 inhabitants, 11 women lived in smaller towns, and 19 mothers lived in the villages. The latter group consisted exclusively of Catholics, as we were unable to sample Muslim mothers living in rural locations. All respondents were raised in Poland, however, twelve Muslim participants lived abroad¹ at the time of the data collection.

The Catholic and Muslim participants were diverse in terms of the intensity of religious engagement and practice. In both groups there were women belonging to religious groups and organizations, as well as women who openly distanced themselves from such activities. All Muslim mothers were converts to Islam who had been raised as Catholics, but their path to Islam and previous experiences of „being Catholic” varied significantly. Ten participants converted to Islam at least 10 years before the date of the interview, four participants converted between 3 to 10 years ago, and the remaining five converted less than 3 years before the date of the interview.

The quotations in the text below are marked with pseudonyms followed by a letter in a bracket indicating the respondent's religious affiliation: (C) for Catholic mothers and (M) for Muslim mothers.

¹ We consider these women as belonging to the category “mothers in Poland”. None of the mothers excluded the possibility of returning to Poland in a due course, some of them explicitly declared that they were staying abroad temporarily. All women maintained multiple transnational connections with the country of origin.

Results

The Virgin Mary as a religious ideal of mother, the myth of Matka Polka and the ideology of intensive mothering together coproduce the institution of motherhood in the Polish socio-cultural context. The set of role models, norms, and responsibilities these cultural constructions instill in women is navigated in the mothering practices in diverse ways which reveal that motherhood, as an institution, and mothering, as an embodied practice, are deeply intertwined in individual experiences of religious mothers. The Catholic and Muslim mothers we interviewed engaged with the figure of the Virgin Mary on three interrelated planes. Firstly, they applied the figure of Mary to their own mothering experience by recognizing it as a religious ideal and a role model for mothers. They affirmed, rejected, or renegotiated the image of the Virgin presented in the Bible and the Quran and indirectly referenced a wide range of meanings ascribed to Mary in Catholic and Muslim theology and Polish popular culture. Secondly, our participants turned to Mary for support in everyday maternal difficulties. This was especially present in the narratives of Catholic women who addressed Mary in their prayers. Finally, the mothers from both religious groups reinvented the figure of Mary by aligning stories about the Mother of Jesus with their own embodied experiences.

Mary as a role model for mothers

Many Catholic and Muslim mothers in our sample identified Mary as the most obvious religious role model and often spontaneously referred to her when asked about the relationship between mothering and religion. Izabela (C), for example, reflected: “Is religion telling me or helping me be a good mum? Well, I have two thoughts. The first one is that for sure somewhere, I want to be like Mary, the Mother of God. I wanted to be a good mother”. Similarly, Renata (M) stated: “I think that Jesus’s mother, peace be with him, is the kind of person who can be a model of being a mother and being a person devoted to God.” By recognizing Mary as

a role model for mothers our participants reproduced the perspective of religious authorities², but, as we will demonstrate, they ascribed varying importance to it.

Most of our participants indicated that the Bible or the Quran were the most important sources from which they gathered knowledge about Mary. However, many mothers identifying with both religions felt that there was a scarcity of information about Mary in the Bible. Krystyna (C) pointed out that “we cannot learn much about Mary from the Bible”. Anita (M) observed: „I learned more about Mary from the Quran than from the Bible. That’s when I understood a bit what kind of person she was”. In the narratives of religious women, quranic and biblical stories had a mythological status manifested by the fact that every detail related to Mary found in these scriptures had a great significance. On the other hand, the many gaps and blind spots in Mary’s story presented in the holly texts constituted an opportunity to construct individual interpretations of her femineity and motherhood.

Mothers who indicated that Mary remains an important role model for them very often tended to highlight the hardships she experienced, which sometimes constituted a basis for imagining the Mother of Jesus as a woman who embodied strength and perseverance. Antonina (M), for example, stated: “Mary’s parenting was difficult from the beginning, but she excelled in this role of being the mother of a prophet, especially a prophet who was born without a father. That’s why, I think, she’s such a good example”. By highlighting the missing father, this mother incorporated Mary into a more inclusive model of motherhood, which does not marginalise single mothers. A similar reinterpretation of Mary, as representing mothers who are discriminated against, can be traced in Anita’s (M) narrative, who said: “Mary is a role model because she experienced discrimination. She had to hide to be able to give birth to this child”.

By pointing out Mary’s attitude towards maternal hardships, other participants highlighted not only her strength and agency, but also reproduced

² Anna Szwed’s research shows, for example, that Polish Catholic priests considered Mary as a main role model for women (2015: 245), which indicates that this is a perspective present not only in abstract theological considerations, but reproduced at the parish level.

the ideal of a mother who endures difficulties without complaint, as exemplified by Blanka's (C) narrative:

Mary is a space of meekness and ineffability. There are things that happen, but you have to keep them in your heart (for yourself). These things I will not be able to go through on my own. And Mary was in the same situation. How to keep it to yourself? How can I live knowing that as a woman, as a mother, I will never be hundred percent understood?

The depiction of Mary as a quiet, calm and silent caregiver was one of the most widespread clichés in our data. However, the acceptance of these traits was often accompanied by a declarative rejection of the category of sacrifice. It is possible that, associated more with the somewhat outdated figure of Matka Polka than the Virgin Mary, sacrifice is too far removed from the picture of a mother promoted by the ideology of intensive mothering. Parenting guidelines embedded in this ideology urge mothers to master the skills of controlling their emotions, as manifesting struggle may have a negative impact on the mental condition of the child. The strong negative stereotype of a mother-martyr suffering and sacrificing for the offspring, but at the same time instilling a sense of guilt in the child, does not fit with the contemporary ideal of a "good mother".

Some Muslim participants in our study discursively decentred the figure of Mary as a single model for all women. For example, Maja said:

This does not mean that the path of every woman in Islam should be family and motherhood because I also have other examples: the first Muslim women of the first years of Islam. The first martyr, a person who died in Islam, was a woman! There are various roles that a woman can play if she has vision and skills.

Another Muslim mother, Wioletta, contrasted Islam with Catholicism in this context:

There are many more of these female role models in Islam than in Catholicism, where we in fact, only have Mary, or some later saints

who somehow also died a miserable death. But in Islam there is a wide range, if we want to choose, we can choose.

As these examples illustrate, many convert mothers engaged in dialogue with their Catholic background when speaking about Mary and challenged patriarchal clichés which they were keener to locate within their previous confession, rather than Islam. Some Muslim women directly challenged the stereotype of Islam as a religion particularly hostile to women, portraying them as oppressed and domesticated women, severely restricted by their caring responsibilities (on this topic see, for example, Terman 2017). In this process, they highlighted the differences between images of Mary in Catholicism and Islam. Wioletta (M) stated that “in Catholicism, Mary was just a mother for Jesus, she did not do anything else. In Islam she did more.

The Catholic participants who distanced themselves from the figure of Mary, as a role model for mothers did this in a different way. They recognised the figure of Mary as part of the official Church teaching but admitted that they did not engage with it. Lidia (C), for example, argued: “I am not deeply religious in the Polish-Catholic-Marian way, I have a problem [with this]. And saint mothers, you know, it is very difficult to find a woman, a saint model to apply in everyday life”.

Although the image of Mary, as living among people in the present time and sharing their material realities, concerns, and struggles, has been identified as an important aspect of Polish folk culture in the past (Sokolewicz 1988) and contemporary popular culture (Draguła 2018), this theological-ly unorthodox construction was absent in our data. Contrary to the idea of the physical proximity of Mary, some mothers participating in our study reflected on how distant Mary was to them: “Well, a distant role model, but a distant, distant sacrum you can look at and admire, but I don’t feel it is close to me, that I am similar”, said Barbara (C). For mothers who spoke about the distance, it was enhanced by the distinctive features of Mary that set her apart from other believers. One of those features was the perceived lack of embodied experiences in the life of Jesus’s Mother who “is exempt by special privilege from intercourse, from labour, and from other physical processes of ordinary childbearing” (Warner 2013:

195). Another example of the mismatch between the ambiguous experiences of ordinary mothers and the portrayal of Mary's mothering given in religious sources related to the special status of Mary's child makes her task easier. Barbara (C), for example, noticed: "I don't feel it in everyday life, because raising one saint son... and raising three normal children is... For me, this is some madness, on an everyday basis, not so much peace, composure". Anita (M) considered teaching her daughter about Islam one of her most important tasks and was not confident that she would succeed. She felt that Mary was exempt from this struggle, as according to the Quran: „Jesus knew everything from the very beginning, from his crib.”

Although many of our participants noted some disparities between Mary's mothering and their own experiences, they looked for different ways of reconciling their own practices with the religious ideal. Importantly, mothers who strived to fulfil the ideal related to Mary not only as a role model but also turned to her for support in achieving this goal.

Support from the Virgin Mary in everyday mothering

Most of the Catholic and Muslim participants in our sample felt that they built a closer relationship with Mary based on the similarities of experiences as mothers. Sabina (C), for example, said: “for sure, [Mary] is now closer than some time ago. Some time ago she was so abstract, I wasn't able to place her. Now, from this [new] perspective of being a mum, she is someone close to me”. For some Catholics, this community of maternal experiences with Mary, combined with her status as a saint, became the basis for creating a bond based on daily support and care. Ada (C) said in this context: “I always [go] to Mary, in the most difficult moments I ask for help. Because who will understand a mother if not another mother”.

The prayers addressed to Mary by our Catholic participants reveal the challenges inherent in applying the category of agency to women engaged in religious practices (Maahmood 2005; Kościańska 2012). While the religious mothers in our study did not necessarily challenge the institution of motherhood, they actively looked for support in fulfilling the mothering ideal

shaped by religious and intensive mothering ideologies. Jagoda (C) said: „During my entire pregnancy, from the moment I learned I was pregnant I entrusted [it] to Mary and now I am praying to her to teach me humility, gentleness, and calmness”. Another participant, Monika (C), who had problems with the bedtime routine of her child, said “when I put her [daughter] to sleep I always pray the rosary, because for me it is difficult [practice] (...). This is a good practice, it takes my motherhood closer to Mary’s motherhood. It sheds some light on these struggles”. Prayers in difficult moments brought relief to mothers, but at the same time encouraged them to experience difficulties in silence, as exemplified by Cecylia’s (C) practices. This mother showed one of us the icon of Our Lady of Silence on which Mary covers her mouth with her finger. Cecylia placed the icon in her bedroom, because, as she assured us, it helped her calm down: “I also pray for the gifts [my children] need. For sure my patience and calmness are among them. I always pray separately for those to Mary. I found her [the icon] somewhere and she calms me a lot.” As these examples illustrate, although praying is not accounted for by the progressive feminist project of women’s emancipation and the corresponding idea of agency, it constitutes an important source of empowerment for religious women (see also Kościańska 2012).

Praying to Mary was a practice that distinguished Catholic and Muslim mothers, as it was not permissible for the latter group. As Magdalena (M) highlighted: “[in Islam] nobody prays to Mary, here we pray for her, but to God”. Although this approach excludes an important dimension of a relationship with Mary, some Muslim mothers interpreted it as a way of shortening the distance between them and the Mother of Jesus. As Mary was no longer a religious figure they prayed to, they were able to place her and themselves as being “on the same level in the eyes of God”.

The reinvention of Mary in the mothering experience

By reproducing religious discourses (through their affirmation, rejection, or negotiation), mothers very often linked them with their own experiences and thus co-created the figure of Mary. This process was facilitated

by the ahistorical character of this figure, the silences and omissions in religious sources the mothers filled with their own experiences.

Although the life of the biblical Mary can be placed in the historical context of two millennia ago, as the socio-cultural conditions change, so do the ways the maternal experiences of the Virgin Mary are imagined. A striking example of making a connection between the experiences of biblical Mary and those of a modern woman exposed to the technological advances of biomedicine is the story told by Barbara who early on in her pregnancy discovered during an ultrasound scan that she was carrying twins and likened the moment to The Annunciation:

I was stressing out, so we went to a random doctor (...) and it turned out that we were expecting twins, which came to me as a shock. It was certain because you could see perfectly well two little, simply two... This is when I understood how the Virgin Mary ran in a hurry through the mountains to Elizabeth to tell her that she was expecting. [...] It was such a shock and I felt such joy and energy and... disbelief. But I could run, shout to everybody and laugh. Like what? Twins? How is this possible? And now I understand why Mary runs, in a hurry, through the mountains (Barbara).

Some Muslim mothers made a similar connection between the stories about Mary they found in the Quran and their own embodied maternal experiences. Urszula (M), for example, linked her understanding of good labour and some of her birth experiences with the Quranic description of Isa's (Jesus) birth: 'The story of Miriam during birth, (this is) what scientists confirm today. The way she delivered Prophet Isa, now they have evidence that this is an easier way, better for a woman, the position (the fact) that she ate so much'.

Another mother, reflecting on Mary's mothering, spoke of the acceptance of her son's mission, and foregrounded the acceptance of a child's autonomy and freedom infused with very modern ideas of parenting, rather than sacrifice and suffering (see, for example, gentle parenting in Ockwell-Smith 2016):

The Mother of God, we know very little from the Bible how the raising [of a child] was going, but I like her very much. When Jesus was a grown-up, she did not interfere in his life, she did not tell him what to do, but she said 'do what he says'. I like this. Maybe this is why I highlight this because my parents still treat me like a child (Krystyna, C).

This construction of Mary's attitude towards her son allowed Krystyna to distance herself from „old fashioned” parenting based on a high level of parental control. For her, letting a child choose their „own way” was a central element of good practice. Thus, by constructing a personal relationship with the Mother of God, Krystyna was able to maintain her Catholic identity and apply religion to her mothering, despite her conflicting feelings about the Church, hierarchs, and what she experienced as a superficial religiosity based on local customs.

Some mothers in our study spoke directly about being negatively affected by the conflicting expert advice they received from multiple sources. Izabela, a mother who tried to reconcile the image of a “good mother” represented by the calm and quiet Virgin Mary and the high standards promoted by the ideology of intensive mothering reproduced by popular media felt that she was not able to realize this ideal:

I wanted to be like the Mother of God, I wanted to be this good mother, I wanted to be this ideal mother. And perhaps this is also a bit of a problem because I could never be this ideal. I could never do [things] in such an ideal way that the Mother of God was doing them and this may be causing, at least in me... When I had a problem somebody gave me this advice: “What would the Mother of God do in your place?” And this worked in me for some time, I was trying to restrain my choleric character, to become a quiet, calm mother which I am not. And it was difficult for me, it was a negation of who I am.

Elżbieta Adamiak notes that although many women associate Mary with “positive religious experiences” such as closeness, care and warmth, the Mother of God in Catholic theology and tradition can also be the source of “the negative experiences of many women bending under the unattainable

ideal forced on them” (1999: 265). However, although Izabela felt she would not be able to imitate calm and quiet Mary, she still worked to develop these traits and prayed for them, while at the same time developing a more selective approach to what she considered good mothering practices. This example illustrates that a subjectively perceived failure to apply the religious model of mother to individual practice does not have to result in the rejection of the figure of Mary. The selective approach to features ascribed to the Mother of Jesus allowed many mothers to apply religious ideas, symbols, and prescriptions attached to Mary to their own mothering practice in a reflective way and to modify it through positive identification with the figure.

Conclusions

The results of our study demonstrate that the Virgin Mary remains important to many young Polish mothers. The polyvalence of the figure and the consequent interpretative pluralism allows Catholic and Muslim mothers to engage with Mary as a role model, reflectively apply many elements of the model in their mothering and renegotiate the religious model and the meaning of some mothering practices. Thus, the figure of the Virgin Mary is an important element of their lived religion and remains central to connecting personal stories with the grand narratives of their respective religions.

For many religious mothers, the figure of Mary represents high expectations placed on women by the institution of motherhood. The image of Mary completely devoted to God, obedient and silent is affirmed, rejected, or renegotiated but for most mothers serves as a means for the cultivation of self-discipline. At the same time, prayers addressed to Mary help many mothers striving to meet the requirements shaped by the religious ideal and the ideology of intensive mothering.

Many contemporary religious mothers feel the need or obligation to actively and reflectively shape their relationship with Mary in individual practices rather than through collective Marian piety. The mothering practice is given a new meaning through insightful engagement with the

figure of Mary and at the same time facilitates the renegotiation of the role model represented by the Mother of Jesus. For some mothers, the inclusion of the figure of Mary in everyday maternal practices combined with its active reinvention is a response to the struggles they experience rather than a passive internalization of an ideology disciplining them and subordinating their efforts to the patriarchal order.

The experiences of mothers who reproduce and internalize the ideal of a humble, quiet, and radically child-centred mother should not be understood solely as an expression of women's subordination. Academics dealing with the ambivalence of motherhood and mothering from the feminist perspective postulate the reinvention, not the rejection, of the patriarchal constructions of care, sacrifice, passivity and other categories that created a traditional ideal of women's obedience and dependence and the idea of reclaiming them for the mothers' own interests (see, for example, Van Nisterlooi 2015). Our participants effect this by reflexive application of the religious ideal into everyday mothering practices and its creative reinvention. The official Christocentric interpretation is shifted in the process and Mary is reconstructed in the matricentric framework, which has the potential to give new meaning to care and caring person's attributes, one that serves and empowers mothers (O'Reilly 2019).

As the comparison between Catholic and Muslim mothers reveals, there are many similarities in the way the two groups engage with the figure of Mary, as a role model for mothers. Although by the conversion to Islam Muslim mothers acquire access to different religious sources and consequently have more discursive tools for de-centering the figure of Mary, most of them preserve a strong relationship with the Mother of Jesus. These findings support Helen Kupari's hypotheses about the life-long character of some important religious idioms in the lived experience of individuals (2016). The blurring of religious boundaries indicates that the strong lines drawn between Catholics and Muslims in public discourses are not fully reproduced in the experiences of individual Muslim and Catholic mothers who relate to Mary in diverse and creative ways.

Acknowledgments

This work was supported by the National Science Centre, Poland, under Grant 2019/35/D/HS1/00181.

References

- Abdallah-Krzepkowska B., Górak-Sosnowska K., Krotofil J., Piela A. (2023) *Managing spoiled identity: the case of Polish female converts to Islam*. Leiden, Boston: Brill
- Adamiak, E. (1997). *Błogosławiona między niewiastami. Maryja w feministycznej teologii Cathariny Halkes*. Lublin: Katolicki Uniwersytet Lubelski.
- Adamiak, E. (1999). *Milcząca obecność: o roli kobiety w Kościele*. Warszawa: Biblioteka Więzi.
- Ammerman, N. (2015). Lived Religion. In: R. A. Scott, S. M. Kosslyn (eds.), *Emerging Trends in the Behavioral and Social Sciences*, 1–8. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons. doi: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198792550.013.30
- Chudy, S. X. (2020). The Virgin Mary: Bridging Muslims and Catholics. *The Journal of Social Encounters* 4(2), 34-41.
- Draguła, A. (2018). Od kapliczki do mody. Obraz Maryi w kulturze współczesnej. *Colloquia Theologica Ottoniana* 2, 43-64.
- Glenn E.N. (1994). Social constructions of mothering: a thematic overview. In: E.N. Glenn, G. Chang & L.R. Forcey (eds.), *Mothering: Ideology, Experience, and Agency*, 1-29. London and New York: Routledge. doi: 10.4324/9781315538891
- Hays, S. (1996). *The cultural contradictions of motherhood*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Hryciuk R., Korolczuk E. (2012). Wstęp: Pożegnanie z Matką Polką?. In: R. Hryciuk, E. Korolczuk (eds.), *Pożegnanie z Matką Polką? Dyskursy, praktyki i reprezentacje macierzyństwa we współczesnej Polsce*, 7-24. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego.
- Imbierowicz, A. (2012). Matka Polka w defensywie? Przemiany mitu i jego wpływ na macierzyństwo polskich kobiet. *Ogrody Nauk i Sztuk* 2, 430-442. doi: 10.15503/onis2012-430-442.

- Jansen, W., Köhl, M. (2008). Shared symbols: Muslims, Marian pilgrimages and gender. *European Journal of Women's Studies* 15(3), 295-311.
- Jardim, G. (2014). *Recovering the Female Voice in Islamic Scripture: Women and Silence*. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing.
- John Paul II. (1987). *Redemptoris mater. On the blessed virgin Mary in the life of the pilgrim church*. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana.
- Kaufmann J-C. (1999). *Das verstehende Interview. Theorie und Praxis*. Konstanz: Universitätsverlag Konstanz
- Kościańska, A. (2012). Twórcze odgrywanie Matki Polki i Matki Boskiej. Religia a symbolika macierzyńska w Polsce. In: R. Hryciuk, E. Korolczuk (eds.), *Pożegnanie z Matką Polką? Dyskursy, praktyki i reprezentacje macierzyństwa we współczesnej Polsce*, 147–161. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego.
- Krotofil J., Piela A., Górak-Sosnowska K., Abdallah-Krzepkowska B. (2021). Theorizing the Religious Habitus in the Context of Conversion to Islam among Polish Women of Catholic Background. *Sociology of Religion* 82(3), 257–280. doi: 10.1093/socrel/srab002
- Kupari, H. (2016). *Lifelong Religion as Habitus: religious practice among displaced Karelian Orthodox women in Finland*. Leiden, Boston: Brill.
- Kuźma, I. (2008). *Współczesna religijność kobiet: antropologia doświadczenia*. Wrocław: Polskie Towarzystwo Ludoznawcze.
- Mahmood, S. (2005). *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. doi: 10.2307/j.ctvct00cf
- Mirza, Y. Y. (2021). The Islamic Mary: Between Prophecy and Orthodoxy. *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 23(3), 70-102.
- Mroz, K. (2019). Mary the Bridge Builder: Rethinking Patriarchal Portrayals of Mary in Islam and Christianity. *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies* 42(3), 1-19. doi: 10.1353/jsa.2019.0016
- Niedźwiedź, A. (2014). Od religijności ludowej do religii przeżywanej. In: B. Fatyga, R. Michalski (eds.), *Kultura ludowa. Teorie, praktyki, polityki*, 327-338. Warszawa: Instytut Stosowanych Nauk Społecznych.

- O'Brien Hallstein, D. L. (2010). The intriguing history and silences of 'Of woman born': Rereading Adrienne Rich rhetorically to better understand the contemporary context. *Feminist Formations* 22(2), 18-41.
- Ockwell-Smith, S. (2016). *Gentle Parenting Book*. New York: Hachette.
- O'Reilly A. (2019). Matricentric Feminism: A Feminism for Mothers. *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement* 10(1/2), 13-26.
- Porter-Szücs, B. (2011). *Faith and fatherland: Catholicism, modernity, and Poland*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Rich, A. (1976). *Of woman born: motherhood as experience and institution*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Saritoprak, Z. (2019). Mary in Islam. In: C. Maunder. (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Mary*, 93-103. Oxford Handbooks Online. doi: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198792550.013.30
- Schleifer, A. (1997). *Mary the Blessed Virgin of Islam*. Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae.
- Sokolewicz, Z. (1988). Matka Boska w polskiej kulturze ludowej XIX i XX w. Wybrane kwestie źródłowe i zarysowujące się pytania. *Etnografia polska* 32(1), 289-304.
- Szelawa, D., (2017). *Prawa reprodukcyjne w Europie i w Polsce. Zakaz, kompromis, czy wybór?*. Warszawa: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.
- Szwed, A. (2015). *Ta druga: obraz kobiety w nauczaniu Kościoła rzymskokatolickiego iw świadomości księży*. Kraków: Zakład Wydawniczy "Nomos".
- Terman, R. (2017). Islamophobia and media portrayals of Muslim women: A computational text analysis of US news coverage. *International Studies Quarterly*, 61(3), 489-502. doi: 10.1093/isq/sqx051
- Van Nisterlooi I. (2015). *Sacrifice: a care-ethical reappraisal of sacrifice and self-sacrifice*. Leuven: Peeters.
- Warner, M. (2013). *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.