



“HE MADE ME DO IT.” CHRISTIANITY AND MATERNAL FILICIDE IN TEXAS

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Abstract

The purpose of this comparative and qualitative study was to examine four cases of religiously motivated maternal filicide in Texas for common themes related to patriarchal and religious oppression of women through Gender Performativity and Symbolic Order. A Postmodern Feminist framework showed a gap in research that explores how Christianity-based religious discourse and gender roles impacted mothers who committed filicide. Newspaper articles were coded for religious themes. Identified religious themes included God, commands from male deity, women as bad/flawed, secrecy, and female obedience and male authority. This research provides a unique understanding of the etiology of religiously motivated maternal filicide.

Keywords

Maternal Filicide, Patriarchy, Oppression, Feminist Criminology, Postmodern Feminism

Introduction

In 2001, Andrea Yates, a Caucasian, middle class, married mother, made national headlines in the United States (U.S.) when she killed all five of her children (Resnick, 2016). This crime horrified the country, enraged child advocates, and began a longstanding question: why would a mother kill her children? Since then, researchers have studied maternal mental health seeking to understand the motivation behind filicide. However, maternal filicide, or the act of a mother killing her own children, was not a new occurrence in 2001. In fact, it has been documented as far back as 38 AD and studied among researchers since the 1800s (Knabb et. al., 2012). The events that unfolded in 2001 made Yates a household name and it made maternal filicide front page news in America.

In the years that followed, other mothers committed religiously motivated filicide throughout the U.S. Yet, Yates was the most talked about, researched, and publicized. For many years, she became the face of postpartum mental illness and maternal filicide was consistently viewed as an individualized problem. Collectively, the American society seemed satisfied with the consensus that her crime was a byproduct of mental health, and Yates eventually faded from the news.

In the past thirty years, parents in the U.S. have committed filicide about 500 times every year (Orenstein, 2014). The U.S. Department of Justice reported in 2002 that twenty-two percent of murders were committed by a family member, and among that, six percent were sons and daughters murdered by a parent (U.S. Department of Justice, 2005).

By 2018, the FBI reported 139 children in the U.S. were killed by their mothers while 173 were killed by their fathers (DFPS, 2022). Additionally, the U.S. has the highest incidences of child homicide compared to any other developed country in the world (Morgan & Oudekerk, 2019). According to data collected by the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, in 2021, 88 children were killed by their parents, with mothers responsible for 53 of those homicides (DFPS, 2022).

In the U.S., women are responsible for forty-three percent of the deaths of children under the age of twelve who were killed by an identified person. Women also overwhelmingly kill very young children (U.S. Department of Justice, 2001). In 2001, the same year Yates killed her children, the U.S. Department of Justice released a report by long-time trauma experts David Finkelhor and Richard Ormrod. They noted that when women kill, they overwhelmingly kill children under the age of six and they are more likely to be labeled as mentally ill compared to their male counterparts (U.S. Department of Justice, 2001).

This study aimed to explore the way in which Western Christianity discourse impacted cases of religiously motivated maternal filicide in Texas. Beyond the individualized, medicalized view of maternal filicide, what more

could be learned by examining the phenomenon of a group of mothers who committed filicide for religious reasons? Is religiously motivated maternal filicide an individual problem among Western Christian mothers with mental illness? Or are there underlying societal factors that have yet to be examined? How might Western Christianity in the South impact already vulnerable postpartum mothers? How might gender roles and religious discourse rooted in patriarchy contribute to this crime? Finally, how do these factors intersect within Texas; the most powerful Bible-Belt state in the country (Wuthnow, 2014), that is also lacking in quality mental health resources (Mental Health Weekly Digest, 2022)?

Literature Review

Maternal filicide has been widely studied from a psychiatric perspective with most researchers citing maternal mental illness as one of the precipitating factors (Friedman & Resnick, 2007, Guileyardo et. al., 1999, Resnick, 1969, Scott, 1973). Resnick is credited as the first to create five categories of maternal filicide based on the mother's motivation. He postulated that mothers who kill their children fall into one or more of these categories: altruistic, acutely psychotic, accidental, unwanted child, or spouse revenge. Altruistic filicide may be a situation where a child is facing serious illness or disability and the mother believes death will end the child's suffering (Resnick, 1969). Altruism was also used to describe a mother who killed her child for religious reasons, often called religious delusions, where she believed she was saving the child's soul (Resnick, 1969). Acutely psychotic referred to a mother's experience with mental illness including command hallucinations (Friedman, et. al., 2009) and this category is likely to include mothers who killed their children in response to religious delusions. When filicide is a result of a parent's extreme anger at their spouse or partner, typically following infidelity or losing a child custody battle, it is considered spousal/partner revenge. Unwanted child motivation for filicide is marked by a parent viewing parenthood as limiting their social experiences, such as wanting to remarry or experiencing financial hardship (Friedman et. al., 2009).

In 1999, Guileyardo et. al., added sixteen subtypes of maternal filicide to the literature. These categories expanded on Resnick's motives to include mercy killing and violent outburst, among other situational factors. As recently as 2009, contemporary motives for maternal filicide expanded again to include fatal maltreatment, a catch-all concept for child abuse and neglect, which is the most common motivation for filicide (Friedman, et. al., 2009).

West (2007) examined characteristics to identify risk factors in future filicide offenders. Findings concluded that the average age of a mother who committed filicide was 29, the average of a victim of filicide was three, maternal psychiatric issues were common, two-thirds of the mothers were married, altruism was the most common motivation, and mothers attempted suicide after the filicide thirty-six percent of the time (West, 2007). West also reported that mothers were responsible for sixty-seven percent of filicides and they were diagnosed as psychotic fifty-four percent of the time. This, compared to fathers who committed filicide and were diagnosed with psychosis only thirty percent of the time (West, 2007).

Gender differences among filicide have been historically studied and found within the literature (Friedman & Resnick, 2007, Guileyardo et. al., 1999, Resnick, 1969, Scott, 1973, Silverman & Kennedy, 1998). Wilczynski (1991) reported that when women perform behavior that goes against their gender stereotype, society looks to pathology to explain their actions. For example, within the U.S., women are expected to have unique, strong instincts of protection and selfless love for their children. Therefore, when a mother commits the horrific crime of filicide, people are likely to look to mental illness to explain her actions (Wilczynski, 1991). Gender differences and gender roles are important considerations about why women who committed filicide are overwhelmingly labeled as mentally ill, yet many of the present-day conclusions on maternal filicide are based on original concepts that are at least 30 years old.

The literature has also remained consistent in attributing religiously motivated maternal filicide to mental illness, thus medicalizing the crime (Knabb et. al., 2012, Mason, 2021, McKee & Egan, 2013). Leading researchers in maternal filicide have remained consistent in their focus on medicalization of maternal filicide and acknowledged the lack of a unified theoretical approach to the topic (Camperino-Ciani & Foutanesi, 2012, Friedman, et. al., 2005, Friedman et. al., 2008, Friedman et. al., 2012, Resnick, 2006). Even within the multidisciplinary explanations of maternal filicide, researchers devalue the role of religious culture, discourse, and gender performativity despite emerging literature that explores the difficulty in assessing differences between religious belief and religious delusion (Bell, et. al., 2021, McKay and Ross, 2021, Sofou et. al., 2021). The problem with medicalization of crime is it ignores the contributing societal factors that are reinforced through social structures and the multi-systemic oppression of women throughout healthcare and some religious cultures. Based on the existing literature, it seems mothers who committed filicide can only fall into one of two categories: she was a bad mother, or she was crazy. To focus solely on this dichotomy is to ignore the complex and unique factors women face within society. It also limits maternal filicide to an individualized problem within a poorly run and funded healthcare system in the U.S. that oppresses women (Crear-Perry et. al., 2021, Fiscella & Williams, 2004).

The Role of Religion

Religion is identified as a motive when mothers are diagnosed with religious delusions before or after the filicide. According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, a delusion is a belief that is “unlikely,” “not keeping with the patient’s social, cultural or religious background” and “held with strong conviction despite evidence disproving it that is stronger than any evidence supporting it” and “it is central to the patient’s existence (Drake, 2023). Herein lies several concerns regarding the intersection of postpartum mental illness and Western Christianity: does this type of religious discourse support and reinforce delusions experienced by mothers who committed filicide? Diagnosing and differentiating between healthy religious belief and religious delusion is a long-standing difficulty within psychiatry (Anderson-Schmidt, et. al., 2019, Chandler, 2012, Mishra, et. al., 2018).

Religious delusions simply have the unique characteristic of being related to religiosity. Researchers McKay and Ross (2021) discussed that religious delusions “tend to reflect religious preoccupations of the culture at large” and “that cultural acceptance is a crucial marker of the difference between healthy and delusional beliefs.” Sofou et. al., (2021) reported a similar conclusion that a person’s “immediate social environment” and “beliefs and attitudes of the patient’s family environment” greatly influence the content within religious delusions.

Researchers have examined the presence of religious delusions within maternal filicide and found that they occur at a rate of about one case per one thousand births (Resnick, 2016, Terp & Mortensen, 1998). Knabb et. al., (2012) explored the role of religion within maternal filicides from a psychodynamic perspective, meaning their research was also through the lens of medicalization. Many researchers have concluded more study is needed on the etiology of religious delusions among women with postpartum psychosis (Cook, 2015, Friedman, 2012, Ramsauer et. al., 2019). Milia & Noonan (2022) recently examined maternal filicide and the psychiatric, social, and personal circumstances present among the offenders. However, this work also excludes a complete analysis of religious culture and discourse among postpartum mothers who committed filicide.

Western religion has been studied as a social structure within society made up of foundational dynamics that contribute to patriarchy and oppression of women. For example, feminist biblical researchers seek to understand the gendered power relationships that exist within western religious life such as male authority and female obedience. They seek to deconstruct these imbalanced relationships and empower women’s independence and leadership. They also emphasize that religion portrays women as unclean, immoral, and profane further contributing to the degradation of women (Erickson, 1992).

Ross (2019) postulated that religious organizations are often built on unregulated patriarchal power, and she explored how abuse can be grounded in theology. While Ross was clear that religiosity does not cause abuse, she was adamant that it was a contributing factor. Similarly, she concluded that power dynamics, blaming/shaming women, and demanding silence and obedience likely play a role in familial abuse (Ross, 2019).

The problem of patriarchy can be found in several examples by Ross, including the description of God as male. Ross concluded that religion upholds the ideals of men while it demeans women (Ross, 2019). This is meaningful in the study of Western Christian discourse, namely, the way in which women have been oppressed by male authority: first by their fathers and then by their husbands.

Postmodern Feminist Theory

Feminist theories “are concerned with interrogating and understanding the political, economic, and social inequalities between women and men” (Hare-Mustin, 2004, p.14-16). Feminists strongly believe that women’s lives have been “constricted and terrorized” under the rule of patriarchy, specifically “within societies organized by the supremacy of the male and the father” (Hare-Mustin, 2004, p.14-16). Therefore, according to feminist theorists, patriarchy underlies all forms of oppression, and the root of societal conflicts is male oppression of women (Mukhuba, 2016).

Feminist theories have been utilized previously to examine topics such as mothers with postpartum depression (Keefe et. al., 2018), maternal filicide (Mason, 2021), social constructs of motherhood (Mitchell & Davis, 2019), patriarchy, crime and justice (Chesney-Lind et. al., 2006), Male Symbolic Order (Mukhuba, 2016), and adolescent mothers (Kulkarni et. al., 2010).

Postmodern Feminists not only disagreed with the second-wave feminist perspective of a singular view of women in society (Chesney-Lind, 2006) but they also argued that women have different pathways to crime when compared to men (Carr & Hanks, 2013, Gueta & Chen, 2016, Maghsoudi et. al., 2018). These two ideas are fundamental in understanding that women are diverse with unique experiences and perspectives, and cannot be grouped into a singular, universal category (DeCoster & Heimer, 2021, Hare-Mustin, 2004; Mukhuba 2016), such as all women want to be mothers, or mothers never want to hurt their children.

Similarly, female criminal behavior is based on unique and diverse perspectives, experiences, and motivations (Carr & Hanks, 2013, Gueta & Chen, 2016, Maghsoudi et. al., 2018) that differ from men. In this way, it is crucial to understand the oppression and victimization of women, and how that creates a pathway to crime. Postmodern feminist theory serves to “open up space for alternative views and multiple perspectives, drawing attention to what has been neglected, silenced, or taken for granted” (Hare-Mustin, 2004, p.14-16). This researcher suggests all three factors are present in this study: Western Christianity culture that has neglected and silenced

mothers, and the conclusion that mental illness is the sole, socially accepted cause of religiously motivated maternal filicide.

Within Postmodern Feminist Theory are two concepts that have been integrated for this study: Gender Performativity and Symbolic Order. Judith Butler's Theory of Gender Performativity seeks to explain the way in which gender is a performance based on a process of "repeated acts and gestures." These specific repeated acts create and define the norm for one's gender (Stopworth, 2015, p.609).

Gender Performativity is deeply ingrained, and individuals are impacted by gender before knowing what gender means or its effects. Women's roles become their sense of identity and are rarely questioned or deviated (Ahmed, 2016). Gender performance is deeply rooted within Western Christianity where men are the authority in church and home, and women are expected to be obedient, submissive, and passive while being solely responsible for bearing and raising children.

Symbolic Order is based on the premise that the foundation of conflict in societies is the result of male oppression of women. Mukhuba (2016) utilized this concept to examine male symbols and their significance in literature, as well as their effect on society (Mukhuba, 2016). Symbolic Order implies that language can be used to regulate individual behavior within society, thus maintaining and perpetuating the oppression of people based on gender, class, color, and imperialism (Mukhuba, 2016).

This study utilized Postmodern Feminist Theory to examine four cases of maternal filicide in Texas for oppression of women and the way in which society regulates mothers through the use of religious language that perpetuates gender and social roles. This theory will provide a transformative and unique case analysis of mothers in Texas who committed religiously motivated filicide and identify common themes related to patriarchal and religious oppression of women through Gender Performativity and Symbolic Order.

Methods

Utilizing online newspaper searches through LexisUni and Newspapers.com, this researcher compiled a list of mothers in the U.S. who killed their children between 2000-2020. These cases were narrowed down to mothers in Texas who committed filicide reportedly due to religious motivations, resulting in four cases. The researcher selected case study as the methodology for this study due to the small number of cases and to gain a deeper understanding of this group of mothers within Western Christianity culture. Case studies are a common methodology and provide a deeper, more detailed examination of phenomenon (McKee & Egan, 2013).

Demographics of the offenders and their victims were documented by gathering data from newspaper articles.

	Case 4 Sanchez	Case 3 Schlosser	Case 2 Laney	Case 1 Yates
Date of Filicide	July 26, 2009	November 22, 2004	May 10, 2004	June 20, 2001
Offender Age	33	35	39	37
Offender Race	White	White	White	White
Marital Status	Unmarried	Married	Married	Married
City	San Antonio	Plano	Tyler	Houston
Number of Children	1	3	3	5
Number of Children Attacked	1	1	3	5
Number of Children Killed	1	1	2	5
Method of killing	Stabbing, dismemberment	Stabbing, dismemberment	Blunt force trauma with rock	Drowning
Reaction	Sister called 911	Called 911	Called 911	Called 911
Legal Sentence	Not Guilty by Reason of Insanity	NG by ROI	NG by ROI	NG by ROI
Victim Names and ages	Scott (3 weeks)	Margaret (10 months)	Joshua (8), Luke (6), Aaron (14 months) *	Noah (7), John (5), Paul (3), Luke (2), Mary (6 months)

*=survived

Table 1: Breakdown of Cases Utilized in This Study

The researcher utilized comparative analysis and content analysis to look for themes and commonalities between the cases through four rounds of thematic coding. These methods have been employed by previous researchers for similar topics of motherhood and filicide (Eriksson et. al., 2016, Kauppi et. al., 2008, McKee & Egan, 2013, Stanton & Simpson, 2006). After coding, themes were then grouped to show commonalities among all the four cases. Primary themes included in all four cases included: (1) God, (2) female obedience to male authority (3) secrecy, and (4) women as bad or flawed.

The postmodern feminist perspective provided a rich understanding of the role of patriarchy, oppression of women, gender performativity, and the significance of male symbols in Christian literature and its effects (Ahmed, 2016, Baber & Murray, 2001, Chesney-Lind et. al., 2006, Mukhuba, 2016, Stopforth, 2015). This type of oppression is especially impactful for mothers who were already vulnerable due to being postpartum and having a mental health diagnosis. The examination of male divinity, male authority, female sin, and female obedience and submission are crucial themes in understanding how patriarchy within Western Christianity enables and perpetuates the oppression of postpartum mothers in this case study. As the women in these cases demonstrate, their identity centered on obedience to male authority and seeing themselves as sinners, unclean, and trying to meet the societal expectation of good mothering.

Case Summaries

Case 1: Andrea Yates

The case of Andrea Yates is the most prolific and widely known case of maternal filicide in the U.S. On June 20, 2001, when she was thirty-seven years old, Yates drowned all five of her children in the bathtub in Houston, Texas. Her children ranged in age from six months to seven years (McLellan, 2006).

Yates had a long, documented history of mental illness. She never disclosed homicidal thoughts towards her children, but she made numerous suicide attempts and had a lengthy history of time in mental hospitals. Yates and her husband considered themselves devout evangelical Christians and actively read the Bible. Additionally, Yates' husband believed that the purpose of marriage was procreation, and often stated that God was in charge of how many children they had. Yates would later tell a jail psychiatrist the reason for her crime was to save her children from burning in hell (Cochran, 2022, Helling, 2022, McLellan, 2006).

Yates was initially found Guilty of Capital Murder and sentenced to prison for life. She was later granted a retrial, found Not Guilty by Reason of Insanity, and ordered to the state mental hospital. She has been at the hospital since 2005, and reportedly declines to be released every year (Cochran, 2022, Helling, 2022, McLellan, 2006).

Case 2: Deanna Laney

On May 10, 2004, thirty-nine-year-old homemaker and mother of three, Deanna Laney, killed two of her three children in Tyler, Texas. Laney and her family were active members at a Pentecostal Assemblies of God church. Church members later described Laney as someone who was in church every time the doors opened, and she often participated in prayer, cried at the altar, and had a literal interpretation of the Bible. Her husband stated that they lived according to scripture which included nightly bible readings and daily prayers (Dallas Morning News, 2014, Falkenberg, 2004, Los Angeles Times, 2004).

Laney had no known history of mental illness or interactions with CPS. However, weeks before the murders, she began hearing the voice of God, and he told her to kill her three children. She later told authorities she had done right by God's law, but she knew it was wrong by State law. She repeatedly struck each of her children in the head with a large rock, killing the two older boys. Her baby survived the attack but suffered severe traumatic brain injury and was left blind. Laney was charged with Murder, found Not Guilty by Reason of Insanity, and ordered to the state hospital. She was released from the hospital in 2012 (Dallas Morning News, 2014, Falkenberg, 2004, Los Angeles Times, 2004).

Case 3: Dena Schlosser

On November 22, 2004, a thirty-five-year-old wife and mother of three, Dena Schlosser, killed her ten-month-old baby girl in Plano, Texas. Schlosser experienced depression after the birth of her first two children, but she was employed, very involved in the community, and a member of the school Parent Teacher Association (PTA). The day after baby Margaret was born, Schlosser attempted suicide by slicing her wrists. She received medical care, was diagnosed with postpartum depression, and Child Protective Services (CPS) opened an investigation (Dallas Morning News, 2012, Heid, 2014).

Schlosser attended church services several times a week, repeatedly listened to audio tapes of the sermons, and stayed up nights reading the Bible. A few weeks before the murder, Schlosser said God told her to cut off her baby's arms, then cut off her own arms, legs, and head. Rather than reporting these statements to medical professionals or CPS, Schlosser and her husband prayed about the instructions from God (Dallas Morning News, 2012, Heid, 2014).

Schlosser was found Not Guilty by Reason of Insanity and ordered to the state mental hospital. Schlosser had no contact with her older daughters while in the state hospital, and interestingly, roomed with Andrea Yates. She was released in 2008 but readmitted in 2010 after a mental health crisis (Dallas Morning News, 2012, Heid, 2014).

Case 4: Otty Sanchez

On July 26, 2009, thirty-three-year-old Otty Sanchez killed her three-week old infant boy. She had a long history of mental illness and was previously diagnosed with Schizophrenia (KENS 5 Staff, 2010, Pettaway, 2022, Roberts & Weber, 2009).

Sanchez killed her baby with a steak knife and samurai sword. Most disturbingly, she dismembered and consumed parts of his body. Sanchez was heard in the background of the 911 call screaming, "I didn't mean to! He made me do it!" Sanchez would later tell police the devil told her to kill and eat her baby before the baby triggered the apocalypse (Pettaway, 2022, Roberts & Weber, 2009).

After the filicide, Sanchez was initially charged with capital murder and found competent to stand trial. However, three doctors determined she was insane when she killed her son. The court agreed to a plea of Not Guilty by Reason of Insanity and Sanchez was ordered to the state mental hospital (KENS 5 Staff, 2010, Pettaway, 2022, Roberts & Weber, 2009).

These four cases represent a single phenomenon: Texas mothers who committed religiously motivated maternal filicide. This phenomenon was explored through comparative study and content analysis utilizing a Postmodern Feminist Theory framework to search for commonalities and a deeper understanding of religiously motivated maternal filicide.

Results

Risk factors were identified and documented in Table 2.

Risk Factors	Case 4 Sanchez	Case 3 Schlosser	Case 2 Laney	Case 1 Yates
Religious* delusions	X	X	X	X
Isolation*	X	X	X	X
Homeschooling**	N/A	?	X	X
SAHM*	X	X	X	X
Religiously active***	?	X	X	X
Traditional roles***	?	X	X	X
No. of children	1	3	3	5
PP DEP dx**		X		X
PP Psychosis dx				X
Recent MH intervention**		X		X
On-going MH intervention***	X	X		X
Interrupted MH intervention***	X	X		X
Health Care Access***	X	X	?	X
CPS involvement**		X		X
Self-harm***	X	X		X
Household financial struggle		X		

*= present in all cases, ** = present in 2 of 4 cases, *** present in 3 of 4 cases

Table 2: Risk Factors, Situational Factors Collected from Media Articles

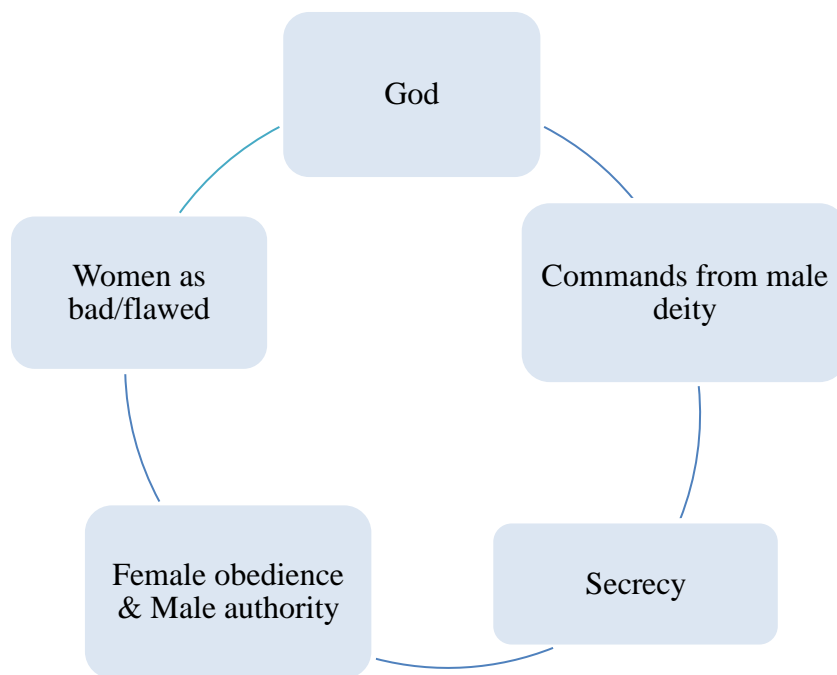
Risk factors included that all of the offenders experienced religious delusions, isolation, and were stay at home mothers. Seventy-five percent of the mothers also had the following factors present at the time of the filicide: religious practice, traditional gender roles, on-going mental health intervention, interrupted mental health intervention, issues with health care access, and self-harm. The researcher defined interrupted mental health intervention as the abrupt halting of psychiatric intervention including counseling, medication, and hospitalization. Findings regarding interrupted mental health intervention are presented in Table 3.

Religiosity	Case 4 Sanchez	Case 3 Schlosser	Case 2 Laney	Case 1 Yates
Offender Statements	<p>Devil made her do it.</p> <p>The devil was in her son.</p> <p>Son was going to be the apocalypse.</p> <p>Voices told me to eat his insides, I was a harlot, I committed adultery, there was a demon in my stomach.</p> <p>Killing baby would allow him to evolve and no longer be possessed.</p> <p>Told no one.</p>	<p>Told husband repeatedly: wanted to give baby to God.</p> <p>Stayed up nights reading the bible and that scared her.</p> <p>Ran from house screaming about demons.</p> <p>Delusions were a command of God.</p> <p>Attended church several times a week.</p> <p>Listening to church hymns when police arrived. (He touched me.)</p> <p>Prayed instead of seeking medical care after her suicide attempt day after baby's birth.</p> <p>Referenced a bible passage in which a woman promises her baby to God.</p> <p>Constantly spoke of Davidson to family, family said she was obsessed with him, sent tapes of his sermons.</p> <p>A little boy who asked her for water in 2004 was Jesus.</p> <p>God was going to cut off baby's arms and her arms, head and legs.</p> <p>Post-trial she said "I had delusions that were going on that I didn't understand but I believed them. I thought I was doing the right thing."</p> <p>Singing Christian hymns and talking to God.</p> <p>Saw a lion attack on TV and believed it was a message from God about the apocalypse. God commanded her to remove her baby's arms. Baby was destined to marry the pastor.</p>	<p>Obedied God and good would come from this.</p> <p>Children will be healed and will walk the earth.</p> <p>Divinely chosen by God just like Mary was chosen to bear Christ. She was chosen to kill her children.</p> <p>Chosen like Abraham, to prove faith to God</p> <p>God was speaking to her about the end of the world – told people at church.</p> <p>Smelled brimstone and saw signs in her children's feces</p> <p>Mary pondered the order silently, she must do the same.</p> <p>Carrying out a divine mission of the Lord's Will.</p> <p>It was right by God's Law and wrong by State Law.</p> <p>Awaited children's resurrection 6 days after murder.</p> <p>Voice of God came so strongly she turned around to see who was talking to her.</p> <p>Punished self (drank water from the toilet) when she had not carried out God's orders perfectly.</p> <p>God was testing her faith.</p> <p>To serve as witness after the world ended. Told God to finish the killing of the baby because she could not.</p>	<p>Save children from burning for eternity.</p> <p>7th Deadly Sin, children weren't righteous, they stumbled because I was evil. The way I was raising them, they could never be saved. They were doomed to perish in the fires of hell.</p> <p>If she killed them while they were still innocent they would go to Heaven and she would have defeated Satan.</p> <p>Turned self in because she thought her own death would fulfill biblical prophesy: if she was executed, Satan would also die.</p> <p>Believed her children's deaths would save their souls.</p> <p>She desired punishment for her sins as a mother.</p> <p>Have as many babies as God intended.</p>

Themes identified by researcher.	God, devil, sin, apocalypse, commands from God, possession, commands from devil, obedience, redemption, female sin, penance,	God, sin, apocalypse, commands from God, male authority, female submission and obedience, female sin, demons, strength of faith, divine, gender role of submissive woman	God, sin, apocalypse, Secrecy, obedience, commands from God, divine, faith tested, penance, gender role like Mary to obey commands	God, Satan, battle with Satan, male authority, obedience, female sin, penance, gender role of submissive woman, secrecy, female sin, Hell, burning, righteousness, possession.
Church beliefs	No media mention of religious beliefs or church membership	Water of Life Church, Doyle Davidson minister, on-denominational Christian church, ran daily cable tv show in several cities, Bible, exorcise the “Jezebel Spirit” out of women, mental illness is caused by demons, medicine is not needed if you have faith. Pastor testified, “mental illness is actually demon possession and cannot be cured with medication.” Pastor testified that he has “case demons out of parishioners and seen evil spirits including one 6 feet tall and 4 inches in diameter with a long pointy tail.” Pastor testified, “women must submit to husbands, are possessed by a Jezebel spirit.”	Prayer, weeping at the altar, reading the Bible. Assemblies of God church, Pentecostal Church, sang in choir. The end of the world was coming and needed to get her household in order Felt she and Andrea Yates were God’s only witnesses at the end of the world. Was in church every time the doors opened. Brother-in-law was minister at the church. Teach followers to be ready for Jesus’ return.	Devout Evangelical Christian Read Bible Michael Woroniecki (preacher) with newsletter “The Perilous Times”
Husband’s beliefs	N/A	Spanked her with a wooden spoon in front of children as punishment. Per her family, ruled home as a self-appointed prophet and apostle, did not tell others the minister preached that mental illness was caused by demons and that medication was not needed if you had faith, God brought you home, First person he called after murder was the pastor. Told CPS caseworker repeatedly, this is in God’s hands.	Knew she was filled with the Holy Spirit, devout Christian life, lived by Scripture including nightly scripture and daily prayers	Supported medical intervention and medication. Went against medical advice. Role of procreation in marriage God is in charge of how many children they have.

Table 3 – Data Used to Code for Religious Themes

These findings include two of the four offenders abruptly stopped psychiatric intervention due to religious reasons directly from their church or at the direction of their husbands. Another two of the four abruptly stopped psychiatric intervention due to an inability to pay for medication, though one of these decisions was the result of an insurance error.



Theme: Women as bad/flawed

This theme was found throughout all four cases as evidenced from offender statements. Specifically, Sanchez stated she was a harlot who committed adultery, a direct reference to Western Christianity discourse and the Ten Commandments. Yates referenced the Seventh Deadly Sin and referred to herself as a bad mother. Yates also spoke of a desire for punishment for being a bad mother and expected she would be executed for her crime. Laney described the need to punish herself for not following God's orders correctly (and did so by drinking water from the toilet). She also described being tested by God because her faith was not strong (Dallas Morning News, 2014, Falkenberg, 2004, Los Angeles Times, 2004). Schlosser followed her church leader's teaching closely, and he often preached that women had a Jezebel spirit that needed to be exorcized, mental illness was demon possession and the only cure for it was prayer, not medication.

Theme: Female obedience to male authority

Sanchez, Laney, Schlosser, and Yates all described orders from a male figure (God or Satan) that they had to obey. Laney, Schlosser, and Yates stated they were ordered to kill their children as a test of faith that required obedience. Sanchez stated that Satan made her kill her baby and she had to be obedient to save the world.

Yates further demonstrated this theme in her marriage. She reportedly no longer wanted to have sex with her husband because she feared getting pregnant and harming her children. When she discussed this concern with her husband, he reminded her that God was in charge of how many children they would have, and her role was to procreate within marriage (Cochran, 2022, Helling, 2022, McLellan, 2006). Despite Yates wanting to follow the doctor's orders not to get pregnant with her fifth child, and her own worry of harming her children, she obeyed this directive from her husband. Laney said she was commanded by God in the same way Mary was divinely chosen to give birth to the son of God. Laney reportedly believed she must carry out the divine mission commanded of her because it was God's will, and that was her role as a devout Christian woman. (Dallas Morning News, 2014, Falkenberg, 2004, Los Angeles Times, 2004). Sanchez reported a male figure, Satan, commanded her to kill her baby. In the 911 call made by her sister, Sanchez was heard screaming, "I didn't want to! He made me do it!" (Pettaway, 2022, Roberts & Weber, 2009).

Theme: Secrecy

None of the four mothers directly told anyone of their plan to kill their children. Laney said she pondered silently like Mary in the Bible and Schlosser told her husband she wanted to give their baby to God. Laney's husband walked in on her attempting to kill their infant but she lied to get him out of the room, and waited for him to fall back asleep before killing their two other children. Though Yates was under extensive psychiatric care and visits from Child Protective Services, she kept the details of her plan secret. Only after she was in jail did she reveal she was saving her children from burning in hell for eternity. Interestingly, Schlosser and her husband were also working closely with doctors and Child Protective Services but they did not tell others of their minister's belief that mental illness was caused by demons or that medication was not needed if a person had strong faith.

Theme: Conversations with God

Two of the four cases included mothers who reported auditory conversations with a deity they identified as God. These conversations were not described as prayers or feelings but as real conversations with a physical person they could see and hear in their presence.

In Schlosser's case, she reported numerous conversations in which God told her to cut off her baby's arms as well as her own arms, legs, and head or that her daughter was going to marry their pastor (Dallas Morning News, 2012, and Heid, 2014). Laney reported that God's voice was so strong and clear she turned around to see who was standing in the room. She also had conversations with God during the filicide, including telling God to finish killing her toddler, and that God could speak to her through visions and lightening (Dallas Morning News, 2014, Falkenberg, 2004, Los Angeles Times, 2004).

Discussion

This study aimed to examine four cases of religiously motivated maternal filicide in Texas for common themes related to Gender Performativity and Symbolic Order. Rooted in a Postmodern Feminist framework the researcher sought to analyze the way in which Western Christianity discourse perpetuated gender role performance, secrecy, and female obedience among postpartum women who committed filicide.

Consistent with Judith Butler's Gender Performativity, these mothers performed gender based on Western Christianity themes rooted in patriarchy, obedience, and shame that were also strongly reinforced by their husbands and male church authority. Yates' motivation was rooted in her shame as a bad mother whose children were not righteous. These beliefs were also reinforced through male authority in the lives of each offender, namely their husbands, church leaders, and deity. The gender role expectation of obeying orders and not questioning male authority can be seen in the way each of the offenders was compelled to follow orders to harm their children without question. In none of the cases, did any of the mothers report disagreeing with, arguing with, or questioning directives from male authority figures. If any of these four mothers questioned the directives they received from male deity, or felt they should not harm their children, gender performativity was a stronger factor.

Performing gender was a strong factor in these cases and reflected the importance of performing gender as a woman. Three of the mothers said they strongly identified with female characters in the Christian Bible who were chosen by God for secret missions. In the Christian Bible, God spoke directly to eight women, usually in the form of commands (English Standard Version Bible, 2001). Additionally, three of the four offenders were in marriages that upheld traditional gender roles in which women focus on mothering and caring for the home while husbands worked outside the home, earned the income, and were the heads of the household. Consistent with postmodern feminist literature, these findings show the way in which oppression makes mothering extremely difficult and reveals a more complex view on the way social structures, such as religion and health care, constrain motherhood (Keefe et. al., 2018).

Consistent with the theory of Symbolic Order, this study explored the way in which Western Christianity regulated postpartum mothers through language that perpetuated social roles of women. All four offenders' motivation was rooted in religious discourse found within Western Christianity in the English Standard Bible. Themes of good and bad, heaven and hell, obedience, being tested by God, proving one's faith, and the apocalypse are all concepts found within Western Christian culture in the U.S. (English Standard Version Bible, 2001). Specifically, Yates' motivation for filicide was based on Western Christianity biblical discourse: that she had committed the Seventh Deadly Sin because her children were not righteous and the only way to save them was to kill them. Yates demonstrated an important aspect of gender performativity and Symbolic Order because Western Christianity teaches that women perform their gender properly by following orders from male authority (Cochran, 2022, Helling, 2022, McLellan, 2006).

Dismantling this discussion from a medical perspective, religious delusions become expressions of religious culture that are consistent with the Symbolic Order. Specifically, conversations with God are commonly found within religious delusions but they are normalized and reinforced throughout Western Christianity. The religious expression of all four offenders reflected common religious concerns found within Western Christianity, and within the South, namely the end of the world, heaven and hell, being an obedient Christian woman, being tested, and proving one's faith to God. These findings are consistent with researchers who cite the importance of examining "cultural acceptance as a crucial marker of the boundary between healthy and delusional religious beliefs" (McKay and Ross, 2021). Similarly, researchers cite that the content of religious delusions "is significantly influenced by the patient's immediate social environment and the beliefs and attitudes of their family environment" (Soufou et. al., 2021). Therefore, it is of great value and importance to recognize that Western Christianity beliefs were strongly supported and reinforced among the offenders' immediate social and family environment.

Finally, a significant concern remains regarding the intersection of postpartum mental illness and Western Christianity discourse: all four offenders in this study were presented with evidence that supported what the medical community called religious delusions. Laney, Schlosser, and Yates were all active members of Southern

Christian churches that reinforced their beliefs. As the medical community defines religious delusion as a belief that is “unlikely” and “not keeping with the patient’s social, cultural, or religious background” this definition does not fit all four offenders in this study. Instead, the offenders had experiences and conversations that were normalized within their immediate families and religious culture. As the line between religious practice and criminal intent blurred for the postpartum mothers in these cases, there was not a strong opposing influence that would illuminate the dangers found within religious discourse and gender performativity. This researcher’s intent is not to argue against the existence of mental illness for postpartum mothers. It is to emphasize the intersectionality of mental illness and Western Christianity culture that reinforces female oppression, silence, and obedience to male authority. The data from these cases show the importance of recognizing the influence of Western Christianity among mothers who are diagnosed with mental illness, and the way one factor compounds the other. Solely medicalizing maternal filicide ignores the deeper societal issues experienced by the offenders in these cases, and it reinforces the perspective that maternal filicide is an individualized problem. The explanation that maternal filicide can only be explained from the dichotomous argument that a mother is either bad or crazy, needs to integrate an understanding of the societal factors that reinforce gender performativity and Symbolic Order.

Conclusion

This study aimed to examine four cases of religiously motivated maternal filicide in Texas through a postmodern feminist lens. Questions included the search for new, non-medicalized meaning on this phenomenon, is this specific type of filicide an individualized problem, how do gender roles and Western Christianity discourse interplay with maternal filicide motivation, and how do these factors intersect with mental health in the most powerful Bible-Belt state in the U.S.?

The results of this study can open the door to integrative perspectives on religiously motivated maternal filicide that may be integrated with psychiatric theories about religious delusions. This study can help practitioners and scholars consider the impact of Western Christianity discourse among individuals with mental illness and among mothers who follow a literal interpretation of the Christian Bible. This study supports researchers who argue that “while religion and religiosity are prominent in the lives of many psychotic patients, religious and spiritual issues may be overlooked and sometimes devalued by clinicians” (Soufou et. al., 2021:228). These same researchers also recommend “raising the awareness of mental health professional on issues of a religious and spiritual nature” (Soufou et. al., 2021:224).

This study also illuminates the idea that maternal filicide is not an individualized medical problem. As found in these four cases, the offenders were deeply influenced by their immediate familial and religious beliefs and practices, and in three of the four cases, the offender’s religious culture reinforced and supported their beliefs, they were isolated, in marriages with traditional gender roles, and performed their gender by obeying male authority and bearing children. As prominent researchers in the field of filicide have stated, theory integration is needed regarding this phenomenon (Camperino-Ciani & Foutanesi, 2012, Friedman, et. al., 2005, Friedman et. al., 2008, Friedman et. al., 2012, Resnick, 2006). This researcher agrees that only through theory integration can scholars fully examine maternal filicide inclusive of micro and macro influences.

This study can also provide insight for researchers, practitioners, and Child Protection investigators who engage with high-risk postpartum mothers. Given that none of the mothers in this case study reported their homicidal intentions, the research indicates that self-report should not be the only factor used to determine children’s risk of harm or a mother’s treatment compliance.

This study is not without weaknesses, including the small number of cases examined and the examination of media articles as they are influenced by the political perspective of each media outlet and limited in details. While this researcher sought to maintain objectivity, their own bias may have contributed to findings and analysis. Finally, utilizing criminal case files and medical records for each case would also strengthen the findings of this study.

These four cases represent a single phenomenon: Texas mothers who committed filicide for religious reasons. One aspect of this phenomenon reflects women performing gender based on a Western, Christian religious culture that perpetuates their oppression, isolation, shame, and obedience. When viewed through the lens of Postmodern Feminist Theory, these cases reflect the way in which Western Christianity utilizes language and patriarchy to perpetuate the oppression of women at their most mentally and socially vulnerable through Symbolic Order and Gender Performativity. As this phenomenon will continue to be examined all over the world, this study shows that the integration of postmodern feminist thought and religious discourse are important considerations worthy of theory integration.

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