

## Matters of Life and Death

### The Middling Way as a New Buddhist Humanism?

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William R. LaFleur. *Liquid Life: Abortion and Buddhism in Japan*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992. xviii + 257 pages.

Helen Hardacre. *Marketing the Menacing Fetus in Japan*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997. xxii + 310 pages.

**T**HE LAST FIFTEEN years have witnessed a growing interest on the part of Western scholars (as well as Japanese scholars and Buddhists) in the practice of *mizuko kuyō*, particularly as it relates to aborted fetuses. We now have two excellent books on the subject, William R. LaFleur's *Liquid Life* and Helen Hardacre's *Marketing the Menacing Fetus in Japan*. The reasons for the interest in *mizuko kuyō* are not obscure. In the United States as well as in parts of Europe, abortion has been a major topic of scholarly, political, and religious debate. The practice has also quite naturally attracted the attention of those with both theoretical and existential interest in the issues of gender, sexuality, and the body. Rarely has a topic in the study of Japanese Buddhism engaged so many in such a variety of ways. While addressing an intrinsically important topic, these two books also provide an opportunity for reflecting a bit on the relation of descriptive and normative concerns in the study of Buddhism.

While it can be questioned whether a purely descriptive, value free approach is ever possible, it is clearly difficult to maintain a position of neutrality when dealing with the range of issues related to abortion. *Liquid Life* goes beyond the bounds of a descriptive approach to enter into evaluative, normative, and moral arguments about particular religious orientations and practices.

LaFleur even goes so far as to champion a Buddhist view of issues related to abortion, sexuality, and world population. LaFleur's work here, I would suggest, is indicative of a growing trend in Buddhist scholarship in the United States, a trend on the part of some scholars to more openly bring Buddhist values to the fore. Representing a more critical appraisal of the practice of *mizuko kuyō*, *Marketing the Menacing Fetus* also goes beyond the bounds of the descriptive. Both works raise a number of related issues: Is a descriptive, value free approach to religion possible? Is the distinction between descriptive and normative approaches at all meaningful and useful? How is the move from descriptive to more normative issues to be negotiated?

The cover of *Liquid Life*, which displays a photo of a number of small statues of Jizō serving as memorial offerings for the spirits of *mizuko*, suggests the sort of incongruous feelings that many non-Japanese feel when first encountering the practice of *mizuko kuyō*. The Jizō in the center of the photo wears a badge reading "Let's see E.T." Foreigners who have lived in Japan for a time delight in explaining to uninitiated visitors that these often cutely dressed and equipped statues are linked with the spirits of dead children and, more likely than not, the spirits of aborted fetuses. As is suggested by the "Let's see E.T." badge here, foreigners generally feel a sweep of conflicting and incongruous reactions ranging from pathos to humor.<sup>1</sup> While Japanese are more likely to point to the splendors of Buddhist art and architecture as somehow emblematic of Japanese Buddhism, more and more non-Japanese have come to see *mizuko kuyō* as an index to the religious sensibilities of Japanese Buddhism. Photos of *mizuko* Jizō have even become emblematic of religion in contemporary Japan.<sup>2</sup>

The questions raised in the Preface to *Liquid Life* suggest the scope of the book: How have Japanese religious traditions, and particularly Buddhist traditions, perceived abortion? How is the Buddhist proscription on taking life related to or reconciled with the practice of abortion? How do Buddhists relate their ethical ideals with the practical problems of everyday life? How might an examination and reflection on Japanese Buddhist conceptions and practices help Americans rethink, if not solve, their abortion dilemma? This is

<sup>1</sup> The cover photo is prominently displayed in the following brief reviews: *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 20, 1993; Nick Bradbury, *Far Eastern Economic Review*, March 11, 1993, p. 37 (the same review also appears in *The Toronto Star*, February 13, 1993); *Asiaweek*, April 28, 1993, p. 18; and Christopher Perrius, *Mangajin*, no. 27, June, 1993, pp. 16-18.

<sup>2</sup> A photo of *mizuko* Jizō graces the cover of Mark R. Mullins, Shimazono Susumu, and Paul L. Swanson, eds., *Religion and Society in Modern Japan* (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1993).

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a relatively short book which covers a lot of ground both historically and in terms of the issues it raises. LaFleur offers more than a descriptive study of religion and abortion in Japan; he compares Buddhist and Christian perspectives throughout and explicitly relates the Japanese case to the political and religious debate, controversy, and even violence which have surrounded the issue of abortion in the United States in recent years.

Only one of the reviewers of *Liquid Life* has explicitly noted that LaFleur combines here description and analysis with normative concerns. Richard Fox Young appreciatively notes that *Liquid Life* "is not a product of scholarship fastidiously disengaged from the temporary North American debate on abortion" and "is moderated by a straightforward distinction between detached, objective analysis and a mode of reflection more personally engaged and subjective."<sup>3</sup> While LaFleur does not always offer extended argument for his value judgments, he does locate himself in an intellectual tradition (the tradition of American pragmatism as developed in the work of scholars such as Richard Rorty and Jeffrey Stout) which is more than merely subjective and allows one to at least partially understand the intellectual framework and assumptions from which LaFleur makes his judgments.<sup>4</sup>

Only the barest of overviews of the book is needed here.<sup>5</sup> Part One of *Liquid Life* focuses mainly on medieval Japan and attempts to uncover the cosmology, symbolic structures, and metaphors which shaped medieval Japanese understandings of life and death, of passages between other worlds and this world, and thus also of fetuses, children, and the aged. The term "*mizuko*" is thus seen to embody cosmological references; it reflects notions that there is not a sharp demarcation between life and death, that fetuses and children are not quite fully human and thus might be "returned" (rather than simply "killed") for possible future rebirth, etc. These notions are suggestively compared throughout with Christian notions to argue that the lines between life and death are configured differently in the West and in Japan. While this analysis of medieval Japan has drawn appreciative comments from almost all reviewers, some have raised questions about LaFleur's application of these concepts to later periods of Japanese history.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Fox Young, *Monumenta Nipponica*, vol. 48, no. 4 (Winter 1993): 529-31.

<sup>4</sup> *Liquid Life*, p. 212.

<sup>5</sup> The following reviews offer basically appreciative summaries of the book: Mark Archer, *Sunday Telegraph*, January 24, 1993; Donald Richie, "Abortion Opens a Window on Culture," *Japan Times*, March 16, 1993; William E. Deal, *Japan Foundation Newsletter*, vol. 21, no. 3 (November 1993): 28-30; Nitta Mitsuko 新田光子, *Shakyō to shakai* 宗教と社会, vol. 1 (1995): 105-9; and Kathleen Morikawa, *Asahi Evening News*, April 1-2, 1995.

Part Two offers an overview of historical problems and issues relating to abortion from the Edo period up to the present. It is LaFleur's analysis of the Edo period, however, which has generated the most critical comment. LaFleur analyzes here a "debate" about *mabiki* (a term usually embracing both infanticide and abortion). Though using somewhat different arguments, both Confucian and Kokugaku scholars attributed positive religious value to fecundity and produced explicit attacks, which were in tune with government policies to increase the population, on the practice of *mabiki*. Though attacked by both Confucian and Kokugaku scholars, Buddhists remained relatively silent. LaFleur reads this silence as indicating that Buddhist monks and intellectuals took a pragmatic approach, recognized the dilemmas people faced, and thus condoned or were "soft on" the practice of abortion.

At another level, LaFleur argues that the leveling off of population growth in Japan from roughly 1721 to 1846 can, to a significant degree, be accounted for by the practice of *mabiki*, a practice engaged in not just because of factors such as famine but also out of a desire to preserve a certain standard of living. In terms of the larger argument of the book, LaFleur suggests that the Japanese case shows that an acceptance of abortion does not lead down a slippery slope to the moral degradation of the family and society. Abortion has coexisted with strong family values in Japan, and might even be understood as having contributed to family values.

LaFleur's reading of the Buddhist "silence" in the Edo period has drawn considerable questioning and criticism. While commending LaFleur for drawing attention to the debate about *mabiki* (a topic he claims Japanese scholars have not paid sufficient attention to), Shimizu Kunihiro argues there is simply not enough evidence to make clear the Buddhist position and its relation to abortion in the Edo period. In this view, "silence" is not to be interpreted.<sup>6</sup> George Tanabe has also offered a spirited attack on this portion of the argument. Tanabe raises questions about LaFleur's reading of the evidence, presents some counter evidence, and suggests also that Buddhism, by definition, can only be against abortion.<sup>7</sup> Tanabe here implicitly evokes a normative, orthodox Buddhism which renders the practice of many Buddhists non-Buddhist. Those interested in evaluating these criticisms may also consult LaFleur's own response and Tanabe's counterresponse.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Shimizu Kunihiro 清水邦彦, "水子について," *Hikaku minzoku kenkyū* 比較民俗研究, no. 9 (March 1994): 172-80.

<sup>7</sup> George Tanabe, *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, vol. 21, no. 4 (Summer 1994): 437-40. A shorter version of Tanabe's review may also be found in *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, vol. 28, no. 2 (Summer 1994): 374-75.

<sup>8</sup> William R. LaFleur, "Silences and Censures: Abortion, History, and Buddhism in

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Questions have also been raised about demographic and statistical evidence. As noted, LaFleur argues that the leveling off of population growth between roughly 1721 and 1846 can be largely accounted for by the practice of *mabiki*. Shimizu suggests that famine, epidemic, and infant mortality had a larger role to play here than LaFleur allows. Noriko Tsuya raises similar reservations, suggesting that famines and epidemics had significant roles to play and that regional studies of population in Japan indicate that Malthusian factors, such as famine and epidemics, were often involved.<sup>9</sup> Both have also suggested that greater attention needs to be given to regional variations within Japan. In a largely appreciative review, William Wetherall has also raised questions about LaFleur's analysis of changes in the rate of abortion in postwar Japan.<sup>10</sup>

Questions have also been raised about LaFleur's analysis of Buddhist attitudes to abortion in contemporary Japan. While also questioning LaFleur's reading of the Buddhist "silence" during the Edo Period, Ian Reader has concentrated his criticisms on LaFleur's analysis of Buddhism and abortion in contemporary Japan.<sup>11</sup> For the most part, Reader simply asks for more evidence. Reader complains, for instance, that LaFleur offers little about the attitudes of Buddhist temples today, hardly discusses the views of the various Buddhist sects, has not conducted interviews of people going to temples and engaging in *mizuko kuyō*, and does not back up with data his claims that some temples are accommodating parishioners demands for *mizuko* rituals. Kawahashi Noriko has also questioned whether the symbolic logic of *mizuko* rituals that LaFleur has extracted from textual sources actually corresponds to the lived experience of women, especially since his study did not include interviews with women who participated in such rituals.<sup>12</sup> Save for interviews with women who have undergone abortions and participated in *mizuko kuyō* rituals, LaFleur does offer at least some evidence regarding all of the above. Work does remain to be done, however, in amplifying and testing the preliminary interpretations LaFleur has offered here.

The above criticisms of *Liquid Life* relate fairly clearly, for the most part, to problems of description, evidence, and analysis and do not directly engage

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Japan: A Rejoinder to George Tanabe," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, vol. 22, nos. 1-2 (Spring 1995): 185-96. Tanabe's counterresponse, "Sounds and Silences: A Counterresponse," may be found in the same volume, pp. 197-200.

<sup>9</sup> Noriko O. Tsuya, *Contemporary Sociology: A Journal of Reviews*, vol. 23, no. 1 (January 1994): 28-29.

<sup>10</sup> William Wetherall, *Times Literary Supplement*, September 10, 1993.

<sup>11</sup> Ian Reader, *Journal of Japanese Studies*, vol. 21, no. 1 (1995): 195-200.

<sup>12</sup> Kawahashi Noriko 川橋範子, *Kōryō joshi tandai kenkyū kiyō* 光陵女子短大研究紀要: *Cross Culture*, vol. 13 (March 1995): 371-78.

normative issues. As suggested earlier, LaFleur explicitly engages normative issues and makes value judgments. At one level, LaFleur's engagement of normative issues is rather modest; he simply suggests that consideration of the ways in which the problem of abortion has been conceptualized in Japan might be of significance for developing positions on abortion in the United States. Many reviewers have welcomed this aspect of LaFleur's work. At another level, LaFleur clearly takes a position against what he understands as the fecundist position, any position which attributes a religious value to fecundity in and of itself. LaFleur's adoption of pragmatism seems to work at a number of levels here: it allows for the recognition of Buddhism as being pragmatic, allows for the engagement of Japan as having something to teach, and serves to ground a position in the debate about abortion.

As already suggested, the move from a descriptive to normative approach is not without difficulties. The problem and one possible solution is clearly illustrated in an article by R. J. Zwi Werblowsky on *mizuko kuyō* which preceded the publication of *Liquid Life*.<sup>13</sup> Werblowsky is clearly opposed to the practice of *mizuko kuyō* in all of its forms and identifies some of the factors enabling the rise of this "new religion" as the greed of the "gynecologist mafia" and some Buddhist institutions, and the total lack of any theory of social practice within Buddhism.<sup>14</sup> At one point, Werblowsky poses a dilemma.

The above excursus was in every sense a derailment—mainly because a historian of religion is not supposed to give free rein to his sarcasms, to ridicule belief in souls or the offering of prayers "for the quick and the dead" (including *mizuko*), to preach secularism, or to present one religious attitude as superior to another. On the contrary, he is professionally committed to an understanding of, and sympathy for, all that moves human beings at the deepest level of their experience. But sometimes derailments have their uses.<sup>15</sup>

Werblowsky recognizes here that the sympathetic, value-free stance of the historian of religion or religious studies scholar does not allow him to make

<sup>13</sup> R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, "Mizuko Kuyō: Notulae on the Most Important 'New Religion' of Japan," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, vol. 18, no. 4 (December 1991): 295–354.

<sup>14</sup> One review of *Liquid Life* actually presents LaFleur as saying basically the same thing as Werblowsky, that Buddhism and the medical establishment in Japan are fundamentally corrupt, and reads more like a summary of Werblowsky than a review of LaFleur. Thomas Crump, "Floating it away," *London Review of Books*, October 7, 1993, p. 7.

<sup>15</sup> Werblowsky, p. 329.

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any value judgments even though he clearly feels moved to make judgments. Werblowsky seems to solve the dilemma by recognizing the historian of religion's disciplinary restraints but deciding to simply go ahead and say what he wants to say. There is little in the way of intellectual grounding offered for his judgments aside from some references to human rights, Freud, and the superiority of counseling to Buddhist ritual.

The questions of whether, how, and on what basis to criticize religious practices also emerges, though often implicitly, in LaFleur's work and the response to it. LaFleur himself clearly disapproves of entrepreneurial temples which seem to be engaged in frightening women with tales of *tatari* in order to instill feelings of guilt and increase the demand for their often expensive rituals. No argument is presented here and perhaps none is needed; only one reviewer raises an issue here. While conceding there is some manipulation, Reader accuses LaFleur of assuming, like the mass media, that the new temples established for the practice of *mizuko kuyō* are manipulating and exploiting people. This not only fails to consider "the strong feelings" priests of such temples might have but also "presents a rather derogatory picture of those who go to temples to do *mizuko* services."<sup>16</sup> The implied moral stance here is that scholars of religion should not write anything to offend the feelings or sensibilities of members of religions they write about. More characteristic is the response of Kawahashi who criticizes LaFleur not for making a value judgment here but for not stressing enough the negative aspects of *mizuko kuyō*. It is difficult to please everyone.

One of the more interesting and valuable of LaFleur's arguments involving normative issues concerns the notion of guilt. He argues that some feelings of guilt may have a positive moral value.<sup>17</sup> LaFleur's argument is of value because it serves to highlight what appears to be a wide spread normative assumption that guilt is bad. It is refreshing to hear someone argue that a degree of guilt may not be all that bad. While some base their opposition to *mizuko* practices on the presence of guilt, none of the reviewers engage LaFleur's argument here.<sup>18</sup> Kawahashi implies, for instance, that *mizuko* practices are bad to the extent that they involve the presence of guilt and gives some interesting examples of contemporary Buddhists working to alter *mizuko* rituals so women are not made to feel guilt. Kawahashi's article also illustrates how the aca-

<sup>16</sup> Reader, p. 199.

<sup>17</sup> *Liquid Life*, p. 154.

<sup>18</sup> Based on his experience reading messages to *mizuko* written on *ema* Reader does question, however, whether women involved in *mizuko* rituals actually feel much guilt and fear towards *mizuko*.

demical discussions of Buddhism are beginning to influence the practice of Buddhism.

Tanabe, Reader, and Kawahashi all charge LaFleur with giving insufficient space to the "voices" of Buddhists, particularly those of Buddhist women. Other reviewers, however, have praised the book for bringing the voices of women to the surface.<sup>19</sup> At one level, the call for more voices is simply a call for more evidence. The metaphor of "voice" is now, however, a very popular one and the use of it carries moral overtones. To fail to give sufficient attention to the voices of "others" (particularly outsiders and the marginalized) is to participate in systems of oppression. While the term "voice" is often part of a well articulated theoretical position, it has also come to be wielded in an almost amuletic fashion requiring little explication. In and of itself, the mere presence of "voices" does little to resolve larger issues.

The term "voice" also figures in a recent, valuable article by Elizabeth Harrison which engages LaFleur's work, though only briefly in a footnote. Harrison explicitly opposes the blanket, critical attacks on *mizuko kuyō* by the Japanese mass media, academics, and feminists.<sup>20</sup> She also opposes LaFleur by reading him as arguing that "women perform the practice out of guilt over their abortions, making them ready prey for the abortion business."<sup>21</sup> Though acknowledging the existence of exploitative practices at some temples, Harrison opposes these positions because they refuse to sufficiently acknowledge women's voices and the active role women sometimes take in the construction of some *mizuko* rituals. Harrison then presents two detailed, fascinating case studies of women who were actively engaged in initiating such rituals. While not directly engaging normative issues, Harrison's main point seems to be that approaches viewing all women engaged in *mizuko* rituals as being manipulated simply misconstrue the reality of women's lives and rob, indeed, at least some women of their integrity.

A response to Harrison's article, however, clearly articulates a strong normative position. Igeta Midori criticizes Harrison for naively seeing autonomous agency in the action of some women involved in developing *mizuko* rituals, and opposes not only all practice of *mizuko kuyō* but Buddhism in

<sup>19</sup> See here the following appreciative reviews, one in a Buddhist and the other in a feminist journal: Yvonne Rand, *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*, vol. 2, no. 3 (Spring 1993): 93-95, and Ann Waltner, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 21, no. 3 (Spring 1996): 759-62

<sup>20</sup> Elizabeth Harrison, "Women's Responses to Child Loss in Japan: The Case of *mizuko kuyō*," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, vol. 11, no. 2 (Fall 1995): 67-94.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74, n. 8.



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general for manipulating women by fostering guilt.<sup>22</sup> Though not clearly developed in such a short space, Igeta at least alludes to and evokes a feminist theory of society which values individuality and self-determination and aims at the “deconstruction” of culture and society. This is very clearly a theoretical position which is willing and able to offer value judgments on many, if not all, social practices, religious and otherwise, and does not shrink from making what might be taken as “derogatory” comments about the beliefs, practices, and “voices” of others.

In *Marketing the Menacing Fetus in Japan*, Helen Hardacre provides the most comprehensive study to date of *mizuko kuyō* in contemporary Japan. Though presenting her study as largely complementary to that of LaFleur, Hardacre's work differs in significant ways. In contrast to LaFleur, Hardacre places more emphasis on the discontinuities between present and past and on the variety of practices existing in the present. Drawing on traditions of feminist scholarship, Hardacre attempts to trace the different meanings attached to abortion in the context of changing sexual, ritual, and social practices involving the negotiation of power between men and women. Hardacre argues that the practice of *mizuko kuyō* is largely a creation of the 1970s. While LaFleur locates positive value in some aspects of the ideas and practices surrounding *mizuko kuyō*, Hardacre finds little if any value in the contemporary practice.

The first three chapters of *Marketing the Menacing Fetus* provide an analysis of the practice and conceptualization of abortion from the Edo period up to the present.<sup>23</sup> Chapter 1 presents the reproductive life as having been subjected to processes of deritualization and then medicalization. Hardacre argues that pregnancy and childbirth in the Edo period were linked with pollution beliefs, served as a rite of passage for women, and were supervised by midwives who had a semi-religious status and function. While infanticide and abortion were opposed by the government, the practices were widely tolerated and did not draw extended criticism by religious institutions. Hardacre finds little evidence, however, for the ritualization of abortion itself and for key elements of contemporary *mizuko kuyō* such as the belief in the spirits of aborted fetuses as being vengeful or malevolent. An examination of legends concerning Yūten Shōnin (1637–1718) reveal some of the Edo “common sense” about men and women involved in abortion. The tales concerning abortion made use of the stock types of the Callous Man and the Foolish Woman and

<sup>22</sup> Igeta Midori, “A Response,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, vol. 11, no. 2 (Fall 1995): 95–100.

<sup>23</sup> For a more detailed overview of these chapters, see my review in *Monumenta Nipponica* 55, no. 2 (1997): 283–86.

directed criticism at both men and women. The rise of the Meiji state witnessed an ongoing process of deritualizing reproduction, the passage of laws opposing abortion and infanticide, and the gradual incorporation of the activities of midwives into the state bureaucracy. In the postwar period an increasing medicalization of the reproductive process and the role of midwives completed the deritualization of the reproductive process.

Chapters 2 and 3 provide a more detailed reading of the practice and conceptualization of abortion in the postwar period as they relate to economic developments, government policies, and changes in the relation of men and women. Of particular importance here is Hardacre's analysis of the "*mizuko kuyō* boom" which developed in the mid-1970s. This boom was marked by the appearance of a group of spiritualists tending to diagnose women's suffering as being the result of malevolent *mizuko*, the emergence of an understanding of the fetus in a fetocentric fashion (as having an existence independent of the mother and which seems to have been encouraged by fetal photography), a sensationalized treatment of both of these developments in the mass media, and the emergence of an "occult boom" and New New Religions embracing pessimistic views compatible with the notion of malevolent *mizuko*. As opposed to earlier periods, the issue of abortion tended to be individualized with primary responsibility being put on the woman.

Hardacre also argues that *mizuko kuyō* is a minority practice and has been subject to serious study and moral debate in Buddhist communities in Japan. Most Japanese and established religious institutions took a negative view of the *mizuko* boom. According to a 1986 survey, only 46% of religious institutions practiced some form of *mizuko kuyō*. Hardacre also argues that only 15–20% of women having had abortions seem to have participated in rituals memorializing the fetus in some form. Chapter 3 provides an analysis of eight narratives (five by women, three by men) which illustrate some of the ways abortion is part of the sexual negotiations and erotic exchanges between men and women. Published as part of a book opposing efforts to limit access to abortion, these accounts also document conceptualizations of abortion having nothing to do with the assumptions of *mizuko kuyō*. Much of the study of the practice in Japan, including that undertaken from a Buddhist perspective, has been highly critical.<sup>24</sup>

In many ways, the most exciting part of this book is the concluding two chapters which examine how *mizuko kuyō* is practiced at Buddhist, Shugendō, and Shinto sites. A general pattern emerges here of women approaching religious institutions, mostly Buddhist, for ritual services after having

<sup>24</sup> See here the extensive bibliography contained in *Marketing the Menacing Fetus*, pp. 266–67, notes 6–11.

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been inspired by spiritualists and the media. Many Buddhist temples simply refuse to perform ritual services for *mizuko*. Others try to accommodate the requests of parishioners in some fashion, and yet others clearly develop *mizuko* rituals to exploit the economic opportunity. While Harrison has argued for the positive value of women's efforts here, Hardacre views almost all *mizuko* practices as misogynist and manipulative.

Though Hardacre does not highlight this point, these cases studies might well be read as moral dramas, as accounts of the moral dilemmas faced by Buddhist priests and other religious leaders. Hardacre suggests how many Buddhist priests and temples are caught in the interplay of a variety of often incompatible factors—the desire on the part of religious figures and spiritualists without an institutional affiliation for a stable base of clients, both positive and negative reactions to the sensationalized accounts of the dangers of *mizuko* in the mass media, sincere efforts on the part of women to come to terms with the traumas provoked by experiences of abortion, the recognition by some Buddhist priests that *mizuko kuyō* has little textual precedent in canonical Buddhism, the need of some economically weak temples to attract new paying clients, attempts by some to promote local tourism/pilgrimage and local businesses, and the need to hide or mute *mizuko kuyō* practices because of negative reactions by some parishioners.

There is clearly a normative dimension to Hardacre's analysis. The practice of *mizuko kuyō* is characterized throughout as misogynist, as being fueled by media sensationalism, as tending to place sole responsibility on individual women, as being cultivated by some institutions and religious figures for largely economic reasons, as reflecting a pessimistic and fatalistic religious outlook, and as often contributing to or manifesting a less than equal relation of men and women. Hardacre does not, however, develop at length the normative vision underlying these judgments. To note this point is not to deny that Hardacre handles the materials and issues here with great care.

In his own review of *Marketing the Menacing Fetus*, LaFleur not only highlights (perhaps overly so at places) the differences between his work and Hardacre's but also argues that normative concerns lead Hardacre to misconstrue the data.<sup>25</sup> LaFleur questions both Hardacre's argument that a fetocentric position developed only recently in Japan and her conceptualization of abortion in which the fetus is granted no independent existence apart from a woman. Though there is room for debate on Hardacre's position here, LaFleur reads Hardacre as adopting a position of "feto-negationism" in contrast to feto-centrism. An unambiguous denial of independent existence to the

<sup>25</sup> William R. LaFleur, "Abortion, Ambiguity, and Exorcism," *The Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, vol. 5 (1998) (an electronic journal found at <http://jbe.la.psu.edu/>).

fetus has been, of course, part of arguments in North America for the right of abortion. In contrast, LaFleur insists on the ambiguous status of the fetus as is reflected in the term "*mizuko*" itself. As part of his counterargument, LaFleur asks why rituals have been performed for *mizuko* in the past if there was not a conception of *mizuko* having at least some degree independent existence prior to the appearance of the fetocentric position.

As suggested at the outset of this review, studies of *mizuko kuyō* raise a perennial issue in the study of Buddhism and religion itself, the relation of what might be termed descriptive/analytic and normative concerns. As witnessed in the development of the history of religions (and more recently religious studies), the study of religion in the modern period has advanced in large part by taking a neutral, "objective" stance to religion with an emphasis, to borrow a term from Paul Ricoeur, on the hermeneutics of recovery. The major objective has been to free the study of religion, particularly non-Christian religions, from the normative concerns of both theology and philosophy (Christian or otherwise) and later to oppose what were seen as reductive social scientific approaches engaged in the hermeneutics of suspicion. If there was an explicit value orientation in the study of religion, it was that there was value in attempting to bracket one's own commitments in an effort to understand non-Christian religions such as Buddhism in their own terms. Bracketing one's own value orientation, whether one was Christian or Buddhist, became the price for participating in the scholarly academic study of religion.

As Werblowsky makes clear with disarming honesty, a topic such as *mizuko kuyō* poses a dilemma for scholars oriented towards the hermeneutics of recovery. Though it is hard to imagine a topic in the study of religion which does not raise normative issues at some level, the practice of *mizuko kuyō* so clearly raises moral issues directly concerning people throughout the world that the issues cannot simply be bracketed away. How have those who have written on *mizuko kuyō* responded to the dilemma posed by Werblowsky?

Most have followed traditional patterns in responding to this dilemma. One response has been to simply state that there are parts of *mizuko kuyō*, such as its entrepreneurial aspect, that one finds repugnant and then to go on to present a largely descriptive account of *mizuko kuyō*.<sup>26</sup> This simply enacts rather than engages the dilemma. Another response is to simply adopt an established normative position from within a religious tradition. This is the position taken by many Japanese Buddhists writing about *mizuko kuyō* as well as by Tanabe

<sup>26</sup> See, for instance, Hoshino Eiki and Takeda Dōshō, "*Mizuko Kuyō* and Abortion in Contemporary Japan," in Mullins et al., *Religion and Modern Society in Japan*, pp. 171-90.

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in his review of LaFleur.<sup>27</sup> Yet another approach, as seen in several of the reviews of LaFleur's book, is to appeal with little argument to at least implicitly normative notions such as "voices" or a condemnation of guilt. A related approach is to adopt a theoretical approach embodying normative judgments. In recent years, many scholars of religion and Buddhism have adopted normative positions derived from the varieties of Neo-Marxism, critical theory, feminism, or cultural studies. This approach is illustrated by some Japanese feminists such as Igeta who condemn *mizuko kuyō* as part of a larger system of oppression directed against women in Japan. Most often a theoretical framework embodying normative positions is cited but not argued. Hardacre, for instance, grounds her approach in traditions of feminist scholarship but presents no explicit discussion of the assumptions or value orientation of those traditions.

The approach taken by LaFleur differs from all of these options. LaFleur's work might be viewed, indeed, in relation to the vision of a new humanism Mircea Eliade proposed almost forty years ago in the lead article of the inaugural issue of the journal *History of Religions*.<sup>28</sup> In this essay, Eliade envisioned a new humanism, based on the researches of the history of religions, which would allow the religious and cultural values of Asia and "primitive" peoples to challenge and enrich the cultural and religious life of the West.

But if the peoples of the West are no longer the only ones to "make" history, their spiritual and cultural values will no longer enjoy the privileged place, to say nothing of unquestioned authority, that they enjoyed some generations ago. These values are now being analyzed, compared and judged by non-Westerners. On their side, Westerners are being increasingly led to study, reflect on, and understand the spiritualities of Asia and the archaic world. These discoveries and contacts must be extended through dialogues. But to be genuine and fruitful, a dialogue cannot be limited to empirical and utilitarian language. A true dialogue must deal with the central values in the cultures of the participants.<sup>29</sup>

Clearly presented as a form of humanism, what Eliade was envisioning here was something different than the interreligious dialogue which has prolifer-

<sup>27</sup> For a bibliographic survey of works in Japanese on *mizuko kuyō*, see Hardacre, *Menacing Fetus*, p. 7, notes 6-11.

<sup>28</sup> "History of Religions and a New Humanism," *History of Religions* 1 (1961): 1-8.

<sup>29</sup> Mircea Eliade, "A New Humanism," *The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), p. 2 (a slightly expanded version of the original essay).

ated in recent years. Unlike Werblowsky, Eliade also envisioned the history of religions as leading to a dialogue or debate about normative issues. Not a few of Eliade's colleagues and students over the years have expressed uncertainty over just what it was Eliade was envisioning in this essay. For others, such as LaFleur, Eliade's essay was one of the reasons they were drawn to the study of the history of religions.

At least part of LaFleur's argument is built on endorsing a Buddhist view of things which is linked to recent works in the tradition of American pragmatism. LaFleur is concerned here not just with the practice of *mizuko kuyō* but with Buddhist evaluations of the human reproductive process in general. In particular, LaFleur is concerned with suggesting that at least some aspects of the Buddhist tradition represent a position which might be opposed to what he has called the fecundist position. As represented by some Confucian and Shinto thinkers of the Edo period and some Catholic thinkers in the contemporary period, the fecundist position attributes positive religious value to the reproduction of human life. In contrast to this position, LaFleur presents Buddhism as having offered an anti-fecundist position and as providing resources for developing an anti-fecundist position which would be of value in addressing contemporary problems, such as overpopulation, and would not necessarily be a position limited to committed Buddhists.

For the most part, however, LaFleur is not concerned with championing a Buddhist view in any straightforward sense but with extracting some general principles from Buddhist examples.<sup>30</sup> Throughout *Liquid Life* and his review of Hardacre, LaFleur compares concepts and practices in Japanese Buddhism with concepts and practices in North America as a way of exposing Western assumptions and suggesting alternative ways of approaching the problem of abortion and public moral debate in general. In his review of Hardacre, for instance, LaFleur questions Hardacre's criticism of Japanese Buddhist leaders for not taking a clearer moral stance on the practice of abortion. LaFleur suggests that Hardacre's position here reflects an assumption, perhaps derived from Christianity, that religious leaders should take a firm position of moral leadership. LaFleur argues both that Buddhist clergy have rarely exerted such strong moral leadership and that there is value in the refusal of such leaders to take an unequivocal moral stance on complex matters. Through the ambiguity it generates, such a refusal allows for a considerable amount of freedom and responsibility on the part of laity and also serves to avoid a polarization

<sup>30</sup> Compare here Galen Amstutz's stimulating critical history of Shin Buddhism which concludes with a relatively straightforward assertion of Shin Buddhist values. Galen Amstutz, *Interpreting Amida: History and Orientalism in the Study of Pure Land Buddhism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997).

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of moral debates. LaFleur does not address here, however, the possible downside of ambiguity nor engage those, such as Ōe Kenzaburō, who argue that an overfondness of ambiguity lies at the heart of many of the social, political, and moral problems plaguing contemporary Japanese society.

Importantly, LaFleur also might be read as developing and advocating a particular style of moral argument and thought. Following Jeffrey Stout's application of Claude Levi-Strauss's notion of the *bricoleur* to the problem of moral reasoning, LaFleur analyzes aspects of Japanese moral reasoning about abortion as "moral *bricolage*."<sup>31</sup> LaFleur locates in the Japanese tradition, in other words, a non-dogmatic style of moral reasoning which he links with American pragmatism and advocates as a way of avoiding polarized moral debates. In his review of Hardacre (where, somewhat ironically, he sometimes polarizes the differences between himself and Hardacre), he thus advocates "a middling way"—which is not necessarily Buddhist—between the feto-centric and feto-negationist positions.<sup>32</sup> The notion of "moral *bricolage*" also serves as a sort of bridge in at least three senses: it is a concept used to analyze Buddhist moral reasoning, provides a link between some forms of Japanese moral reasoning and developments in American pragmatism, and seems to provide LaFleur with a method for moving from descriptive to normative concerns. This last point, however, is not explicitly developed in *Liquid Life*.

A problem and approach related in some ways to those of LaFleur can be seen in some of the articles in a recently published conference volume on Buddhism and ecology.<sup>33</sup> In the Series Foreword, Tucker and Grim clearly state a normative judgment and intent; the earth is facing ecological crisis and it is inevitable that people "will draw on the conceptual resources of the religious traditions of the world" in an effort to construct a "more effective environmental ethics."<sup>34</sup> In the same way that LaFleur draws on Buddhism without necessarily arguing for a Buddhist position, Tucker and Grim also envision the world's religions as providing resources for constructing an environmental

<sup>31</sup> *Liquid Life*, p. 12. Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics after Babel: The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988).

<sup>32</sup> While the term "middling way" has been dropped from the final version of LaFleur's essay, I believe it captures his understanding of the positive value of the ambiguous stance taken by many Buddhist (particularly Japanese Buddhist) leaders on many moral issues.

<sup>33</sup> Mary Evelyn Tucker and Duncan Ryūken Williams, eds., *Buddhism and Ecology: The Interconnection of Dharma and Deeds*, Religions of the World and Ecology Series, eds. Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim (Cambridge: Harvard University Center for the Study of World Religions, 1997).

<sup>34</sup> p. xix.

ethic without that ethic necessarily being tied to a particular religious tradition or even being religious. The approach taken here might well be analyzed as a version of LaFleur's notion of moral *bricolage*.

As Duncan Ryūken Williams notes in his introduction, the participants in the conference included both "scholars of Buddhism and environmentally engaged Buddhists" (with some individuals, of course, being both). The essays in the volume include both descriptive and normative dimensions. And while suggesting how Buddhist ideas and practices might provide resources for responding to the environmental crisis, there is little in the way of idealized apologetics for Buddhism and a good deal of confrontation with the fact that Buddhism has served at times to work against environmental concerns in Japan and elsewhere. The lead essay by Lewis Lancaster also self-consciously reflects on the difficulties of what might be termed "moral *bricolage*," the difficulties involved in attempting to draw on Buddhist ideas and practices from the past to inform contemporary concerns. There are also recognitions throughout the volume of the difficulties of combining descriptive, historical studies and normative concerns.

There are, I think, positive signs here. At least a notable number of Buddhist scholars, be they Buddhist or not, seem to be willing and even eager to begin stepping across the line that scholars such as Werblowsky have drawn between history of religions and more normative concerns. There is nothing particularly new, of course, in venturing across this line in and of itself; the line has a long history of being wittingly and unwittingly crossed. What is noteworthy here is the degree of self-consciousness that some of these efforts involve. Not reducible to traditional Buddhist apologetics, LaFleur's effort is of particular interest. One might even ask whether LaFleur's notion of moral *bricolage* might form a sort of Middling Way for relating descriptive and normative concerns in the study of Buddhism and religion itself. It would be of great interest if LaFleur, having come this far, would go on to even more explicitly address the question of the relation of history of religions and normative concerns.<sup>35</sup> Perhaps embedded in his work on *mizuko kuyō* is one method by which historians of religion might negotiate a move towards normative concerns.

<sup>35</sup> There is a tradition of historians of religions explicitly engaging the issue in the latter stages of their careers. Towards the end of their careers, both Joachim Wach and his disciple Joseph M. Kitagawa (who was in turn one of LaFleur's teachers) turned their attention to normative issues.