Japanese Journal of Religious Studies 1995 22/1–2

Silences and Censures: Abortion, History, and Buddhism in Japan

A Rejoinder to George Tanabe

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A CRITICAL REVIEW, if carefully argued, can bring into relief the true issues of a debate. George TANABE'S review in the *JJRS* of my *Liquid Life: Abortion and Buddhism in Japan* (1994) does not, unfortunately, let that happen. Because the *JJRS* has done more than any other journal to focus attention on the question of religion and abortion in Japan, and because the issue is deserving of further examination, I have requested from the editors this space to respond to Tanabe and clarify the state-of-the-question. My hope is not simply to defend my study but to suggest some reasons why he and I presently see the matter so differently. The piece is organized into three sections, in which I comment on misrepresentations of what I have tried to do; on "silences" in the history of morality (or, alternately, on what constitutes evidence in studies of that history); and on gender-specificity as it relates to these questions.

On the matter of misrepresentations, I need to reject two things imputed to me by Tanabe. The first is that I blithely fudge the difference between abortion and infanticide. In his second paragraph, after suggesting that *Liquid Life* mistakenly represents Buddhism as having a "sensible, socially enlightened view," Tanabe continues:

> Indeed, (LaFleur's) argument goes beyond abortion to include infanticide as well—readers who discern a significant difference between the two might take pause when they see Buddhism used to justify the smothering of a newborn child. (p. 437)

This is one of the places where Tanabe confuses a descriptive statement for a prescriptive one. My observation that in medieval and early modern times the notion of "returning the child" was used to cover

both abortion and infanticide does not mean I regard the difference between the two as negligible. On the contrary, careful readers of *Liquid Life* will note that it is precisely the difference between infanticide and abortion that is indispensable to my discussion of what has been happening in Japan over the past few centuries. I refer to this history as evidence of a nation going *up* the so-called "slippery slope" (LaFleur, p. 204 ff). That is, in Japanese history the incidence of infanticide dramatically decreased, to a point where abortion became the main means of birth control. Subsequent to that, in a process under way today, the practice of abortion appears to be gradually receding due to the wider use of contraceptives. This whole argument would make no sense if I were not, in fact, among those who *do* "discern a significant difference between" infanticide and abortion. To suggest otherwise, as Tanabe does, is academic dirty pool.

The other misrepresentation is Tanabe's imputation to me of the view that Buddhism is proabortion: "If Buddhist celibacy is anti-natal," he writes, "does that make Buddhism *pro*abortion? LaFleur clearly thinks so, though he argues that the support was clandestine" (p. 439). I did write that there appears to be a historical reluctance within Buddhism to go the fecundist route and I also noted that there is a detectable tendency in Japanese Buddhism to describe abortion as a matter of "suffering" (*ku*) for both the woman and the fetus rather than as a "sin" (*tsumi*) on the part of the woman. But I surely did not write or even imply that Buddhism as a tradition, or that Buddhists as individuals, are *pro*abortion. To be "pro" anything is, at least by the light of my dictionaries, to advocate and work for the expanded presence of some entity or practice. In America, of course, persons in favor of allowing legal and physical access to abortion are often portrayed by their opponents as being *pro*abortion, but I was, frankly, surprised to see Tanabe painting with that wide, defamatory brush.

Behind these misrepresentations lies a core difference between Tanabe's approach and my own. Tanabe's entire review is shaped, I suggest, by the problematic premise laid down in his opening sentence: "Religion and abortion do not mix, as even a glance at the heated debate in America shows" (p. 437). The implicit analogy to the immiscibility of things like water and oil is inapt. Religion and abortion, I would counter, at least today cannot avoid mixing—simply because abortion poses one of our deeper human dilemmas. The mixture occurs because in many instances the very same women who have had abortions are also persons who, because they are religious, seek to bring that painful, sometimes guilt-inducing, experience into some kind of connection with their commitment to a religion, be it

Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism, or whatever.

To assume that it is apodictically true that "religion and abortion do not mix" may be a good way to begin the construction of a logically consistent moral posture, and Tanabe achieves that level of consistency. It is also, however, to make oneself ready, as he apparently is, to declare as categorically "un-Buddhist" any attempt by Buddhists to find within their tradition resources that might give women who have had abortions some reason to think that their dilemma and suffering can be addressed by the compassion mechanisms of their religion.

It is one of the points of *Liquid Life*—and, to my knowledge, of all other studies of this question—that, for millions of Japanese women (and their men when they are willing to become involved), Jizō and the *kuyō* connected with this bodhisattva almost invariably serve as the place where abortion and religion do meet and mix. Individuals and institutions may see this particular way of bringing religion and abortion together as unhealthy or even as ethically compromising,[1] but I have not before encountered a claim quite like Tanabe's and it puzzles me.

If taken as a descriptive statement, his "religion and abortion do not mix" is patently untrue—at least for Japan. Therefore, since his addition of "...as even a glance at the heated debate in America shows" seems to translate what happens in America as the specific aperture through which we can glimpse a generalizable rule, I am forced to conclude that he intends a normative statement. That is, the "new civil war" over abortion into which American society has been plunged is taken to show that there necessarily has to be a fundamental incompatibility between religion and abortion. The former ought, he implies, to have no truck with the latter—except perhaps to censure it absolutely.

Tanabe deserves credit for consistency. He follows through by apparently regarding as "un-Buddhist" anything that differs from the categorical rejection of abortion as a sin, even though expressed via the words or actions of a self-declared Buddhist. Thus any language or action that would depict abortion as other than "murder," a term to which he repeatedly returns, would be an evasion of the truth through what he calls "mere euphemisms" (p. 438). This rejection of anything smacking of circumlocution makes things clear and simple. The decks get cleared. Worthless verbiage is washed overboard.

[1] Abuses by entrepreneurial, *tatari*-employing temples are discussed in my book, but in even greater detail in Werblowsky 1991. Jōdo and Jōdo Shinshū, as Buddhist denominations, have shown the most resistance to this practice. However, as I discuss in *Liquid Life*, individual priests feel the pressure of parishioners to provide *mizuko kuyō* and often acquiesce.

From its opening pages my study focused on what happened *after* a person—and especially women pregnant when not wanting to be so—heard the first precept about not taking life. Tanabe declares that anything that people did with language about the "return" of a fetus was "a palliative to make the act more acceptable, but that language was not Buddhist" (p. 439). In a similar way he easily dismisses the deep nexus between the bodhisattva Jizō and women who have had abortions as being no more than "the popular side of this important deity" (p. 440). For Tanabe, apparently, Jizō's "popular side" is not something that people are permitted to take as a *Buddhist* resource in dealing with an issue such as abortion. People and the "popular side" of religion also, apparently, ought not to mix.

Where does this come from? I suggest it is a direct result of the way in which studies of Buddhism in Japan have been bedeviled since the Meiji era by the intrusion of sectarian agendas aimed at cleaning out the "folk" and "popular" stuff so that the moral high ground of Buddhism in Japan might stand forth unencumbered. The result has far too often been twisted history or, at least, a stance in which the vast domain of popular Buddhism in Japan is deemed unworthy of attention. This was the central point of the late Gorai Shigeru's sustained scholarly critique of the way in which many Japanese Buddhologists, hoping to bring their nation's Buddhism into alignment with the putative Pali "original," ignored and denigrated Japanese "popular Buddhism" as inauthentic.

That, I admit, is why I worry about what is bound to happen to history when Tanabe sets out the way he does. The it's-time-to-clean-house agenda seems implicitly operative. It depicts as "un-Buddhist" those ideas and conceptions that seem "mixed" or deviant. And that normative program will, I fear, repeatedly get in the way of descriptive accuracy. By comparison, Sasaki Yasuyuki and seven colleagues (1982) get things correctly, I think, in their depiction of the understanding of childbirth and child-death in medieval and early modern Japan. Because Tanabe charges me with having spun similar things out of thin air, there may be value here in providing a translation of just a bit of what Sasaki and his colleagues have written:

> Although people then viewed a child as a "gift" and a blessing from forces beyond those of human understanding, they did not see it as something created, as in Christianity, by a peerless and absolute deity. Rather to them it was, like what is harvested from the realm of vegetation, a boon or benefit received from what they called *ten* 天 (that is, nature)—although in this case the meaning of *ten* was surely not limited to what that term

> signifies in Confucianism. Both coming alive and dying were not seen as something that happened only one time for one person. Rather this was a context in which a natively Japanese view of nature based on symbol-imbued meditations on the ongoing cycle of four seasons was combined with influences from continental ideas about reincarnation or transmigration. This made for a a concept of constant comings from "the world over there" (the world of kami) to "this world here" (the world of *hito*) and likewise of goings from this world to that world. These changes were just like those of the seasons. Becoming alive came about because something died and death was negated through birth. Life and death were mutually complementary and only together made for a complete whole. This was a world in which these things were deeply connected in this fashion. (Sasaki et al. 1982, pp. 43–44)

Buddhist theories of transmigration (*rinne*) and the observation of certain natural processes fuse here. One could, of course, dismiss this as a misunderstanding of what *real* Buddhism is, but then one would probably have to jettison most of the history of Buddhism in Japan as wrongheaded delusion as well. The cost is considerable.

In his effort to define *the* normative Buddhist teaching on abortion, Tanabe makes much of the Edo-period *ema* in a Chichibu temple that depicts a woman who turns into a demon by smothering a child. Although in my book there is a discussion of such votive pictures (pp. 122–26), I should have been more explicit about the significance of the fact that such *ema* appeared in Buddhist temples *at exactly the time* when political authorities, worried about a leveling off of population growth, were trying to crack down on abortion and infanticide.

The timing of this sudden spate of anti-*mabiki* votive pictures should not be seen as insignificant. It irrupts as a sudden voice in what had been a sustained silence on this question within the world of Japanese Buddhism. Surely before the late Edo period women in Japan had had abortions and midwives had carried out acts of infanticide.[2] But within the voluminous writings of Japan's Buddhists in all the centuries prior to the late Edo there is a surprising inattention to these two activities.

[2] See Sasaki et al. 1982. The exact degree to which infanticide contributed to the period of so-called "population stagnation" remains a matter of debate and investigation among demographers. A recent essay critical of the regnant hypothesis argues that "there is little doubt that infanticide and abortion were practiced by some groups of villagers in some areas, but it is very difficult to know how widespread they were" (Saito 1992, p. 375). I am grateful to Henry D. Smith for calling this essay to my attention.

Tanabe faults me for my interest in "silences," but I would insist that the historian—especially if he or she is interested in the history of moral questions—must pay attention to the presence of a silence when it comes at a time when one ordinarily would have expected voices. Sometimes the fact that nothing is being said says something. There is a difference between silence about automobiles in the sixteenth century, when such things simply did not exist, and silence about abortion at a time when the practice surely did exist and one might have expected moral discourse to have addressed it. At this stage in our research I know of no proof that medieval Buddhist clergymen—men who had plenty to say about a variety of things—were ever seriously concerned about abortion as a flagrant violation of Buddhist norms. Lacking such evidence, I hold it is not improper to refer to what we have here as a case of unconcern, a centuries-long "silence" that is not without significance. My research, especially when seen in the context of Kuroda Hideo's scholarship on the life-cycle concept in medieval Japan,[3] suggests that the absence of clerical voices censuring abortion is a vocal silence; it says that abortion was at least then something that even male clerics—perhaps even because some were the cause of pregnancies—were quite happy to ignore.

Things changed dramatically in the late Edo period. *Liquid Life* demonstrates that it was precisely then that Kokugakusha and Confucianists were attacking Buddhists for being insufficiently fecundist—at a time when reproduction was being depicted as a mode of production and when being less than maximally reproductive was interpreted as an implicit refusal to show concern for the nation's welfare. Celibate Buddhist monks, wrote the Kokugakusha Miyahiro Sadao, were by their nonreproductivity setting exactly the wrong kind of example. Even their patriotism was questioned.[4]

Given the fact that Buddhists were being pressured on precisely this matter at precisely this time, we have good reason, I would argue, to be just a bit suspicious about why it is that there is a sudden spate of *mabiki*-condemning votive pictures in Buddhist temples. It seems fairly clear that the Buddhists' long silence on this matter had been noticed—noticed, moreover, by ideologically unfriendly people with considerable power to do damage to Buddhist institutions. We need not be surprised, then, if we see certain temples scurrying to prove to everyone, their critics especially, that Buddhists were not in fact winking at the practice of *mabiki*. *Ema* were trotted out to serve as evidence.

[3] See specifically his analysis of the medieval "lifecycle" in KURODA 1986, pp. 185–213 (discussed in LAFLEUR, pp. 34–37).

[4] In his *Kokueki Honron* of 1831, as translated in LAFLEUR 1992, pp. 110–11.

In their effort to prove that they were adequately nationalist in their reproductive policies, the monks of late Edo seemed quite ready, at least if we can judge by the *ema* they approved, to countenance a literal demonization of those women who took recourse in *mabiki*.

In this late-Edo policy switch on the part of Japan's Buddhists I see a parallel to an occurrence in American history. Research by James C. Mohr (1978) shows that prior to the 1840s the Protestant clergy paid virtually no attention to the fact that many women in their parishes were having abortions—referred to then as the medical correction of "irregularity" in a woman's menstrual cycle. Fears, however, of a demographic crisis—specifically, a lowered birthrate among upper-class Protestants precisely at a time when Catholics were arriving in ever greater numbers from Europe—forced an end to this considerable stretch of silence. A practice that had been implicitly condoned by never being mentioned quickly became the focus of a new public and pulpit discourse about morality. Fecundist programs were in put into place and the censure of abortion was begun.

My point is that matters of moral sensitivity, moral priorities, and even moral inattention are matters possessing *histories*. And changes in historical circumstance are bound to show up not only in what is emphasized in religious ethics but also in what is *de*emphasized (through silence or backburner treatment). There were times in the history of Japanese Buddhism when no monk was supposed to have a wife; that time came and went. There was also an epoch when fisherfolk were excoriated for killing fish (and thereby murdering ancestors who had been reborn as fish); fisherfolk later became solid parishioners, assured that they could envision a future in the Pure Land rather than in hell. Likewise it was only after the year 1945, in response to a certain historical situation, that antiwar stances by Japanese Buddhists become pronounced. It seems clear that the level of enthusiasm shown for various moral prohibitions shows undulating patterns. I find it, therefore, not at all peculiar that abortion would be virtually ignored for centuries as an issue by Japan's Buddhists but later would become rather important, at least to some.

The need to remain true to the course of historical change and maintain a healthy skepticism of efforts to pinpoint a timeless position of genuine Buddhism makes it impossible for me to do the kind of thing Tanabe does when he writes: "There may indeed have been Buddhists who clandestinely condoned abortion, but the...evidence shows that Buddhism was explicitly against it" (p. 439). I see no way of proving that a unitary, transcendent Buddhism detachable from flesh-and-blood Buddhists and from the vagaries of changing valorizations

has ever existed. I do not know how Tanabe finds it—except by insisting that long spates of silence do not count, that the gender of those who censure abortion is irrelevant, and that the specific historical context of the appearance of *ema* and other condemnations needs no attention.[5]

What we need now are more studies that investigate and compare how the various communities and populations within the Buddhist world assessed, and continue to assess, the morality of abortion.[6] My book—which was not intended to be definitive—should have more forcefully pursued an active comparison of data and positions. Even at that, however, I think it moves farther in that direction than does Tanabe, who seems to hold that the matter is settled, that the position of religions in general and of Buddhism in particular is unequivocal censure of abortion, and that any language other than "killing" and "murder" to depict it constitutes mere "euphemism." To do that, however, he sometimes resorts to means that are more wily than skilful. At one point he deliberately and inexcusably truncates a quotation to make it say the opposite of what its author intended. Quoting from my translation of a writing by a Buddhist woman, Tanabe writes:

> The only voice representing modern Buddhism in *Liquid Life* is that of Ochiai Seiko,[7] who clearly states, "We who are Buddhists will hold to the end that a fetus is 'life.' No matter what kinds of conditions make abortion necessary, we cannot completely justify it." (p. 440, quoting LaFleur 1992, p. 170)

Cutting off the quotation from Ochiai at this point makes it appear that as a Buddhist she condemns abortion—supporting, that is, what Tanabe wants to present as the unambiguous position of Buddhism.

Readers ought, however, to look at what Ochiai really says. In *Liquid Life* the sentences by Ochiai that come immediately after the portion surgically lifted out of its context by Tanabe are the following:

[5] Even in more recent decades the issuing of explicit statements on this issue is historically conditioned and in response to real or potential criticism. As noted by Ann Brooks, an announcement in opposition to abortion by the World Buddhist Conference in 1978 was in response to recent descriptions of Japan as a "haven for abortions" (1981, p. 137).

[6] R. E. Florida has shared with me his fine introductory overview (1991, pp. 39–50). A volume in the process of being edited by Damien Keown will compare how abortion is viewed from a variety of perspectives identified as Buddhist. Surely, too, the awaited volume by Elizabeth Harrison and Bardwell Smith, based on their extensive interviews, will tell us much about what Japanese people think about *mizuko kuyō*.

[7] This, as a matter of fact, is decidedly not the "only voice of a modern Buddhist" in my book. My quotation from Ochiai follows on the heels of ones from Fujiyoshi Jikai, Hanayama Shōyū, Hiro Satchiya, Matsubara Taido, Iizawa Tadasu, and Matsunami Kōdō.

> But to us it is not just fetuses; all forms of life deserve our respect. We may not turn them into our private possessions. Animals too. Even rice and wheat share in life's sanctity. Nevertheless as long as we are alive it is necessary for us to go on "taking" the lives of various kinds of such beings.
>
> Even in the context of trying to rectify the contradictions and inequalities in our society, we sometimes remove from our bodies that which is the life potential of infants. We women need to bring this out as one of society's problems, but at the same time it needs to be said that the life of all humans is full of things that cannot be whitewashed over. Life is full of wounds and woundings.
>
> (Ochiai quoted in LaFleur 1992, p. 170)

It should, I think, be clear from this that Ochiai's perspective is strikingly different from what Tanabe represents it to be.[8] Although Buddhists by precept are committed to respect for all forms of life, Ochiai goes on to say, "As long as we are alive it is necessary for us to go on 'taking' the lives of various kinds of such beings." Although Ochiai is critical of *mizuko* rituals (or, at least, the notion of retaliatory fetal souls), she hardly seems to be someone ready to issue a categorical condemnation of abortion.

Finally, any study of what religious communities are saying about abortion must, at least today, take the gender-specificity of the speakers into account. Because male voices have overwhelmed those of women on almost every issue throughout the history of Buddhism, it is not surprising that it is males whose words have come down to us on the subject of abortion as well. Buddhist womens' silence—or could it more accurately be called silencing?—again presents us with one of those cases where the absence of a voice may, in fact, say a great deal. This, too, is one of the times when the *reasons* for an absence deserve to be examined.

What makes this need all the more pressing is the fact that in the Buddhist world statements by women on matters such as abortion

[8] I also have difficulty with the way Tanabe, citing Brooks, makes it appear that the Japan Buddhist Federation's position on abortion stops with the statement, "Life is there from the moment of conception and it should not be disturbed (since) it has the right to live" (p. 440, quoting Brooks 1981, pp. 133–34.) Did Tanabe not notice a few pages later that Brooks represents that same federation as agreeing that "Buddhists in general have not voiced any criticisms regarding this issue" and as explicitly stating that, although Mahāyāna Buddhism advocates respect for life, it also "teaches that it is inevitable for man to sacrifice some forms of life in order to protect and nourish himself" (p. 137)? I lack access to the original Federation document that is being cited, but here, too, it strikes me that Tanabe, by a surgically extracted quotation, misrepresents an equivocal statement as if it were unequivocal.

(statements that have become more frequent in recent decades) are often quite different from those of authoritative males. In Thailand, where the Buddhist community of monks has considerable influence, and where legal abortions are rare and dangerous illegal ones common, a clear voice in favor of having less restrictive moral criteria for Buddhist laypersons than for those of world-renouncers is that of a woman, Professor Siralee Sirilai of Mahidol University in Bangkok. Making such a distinction, she states, will have an impact on how the morality of abortion is perceived (FLORIDA 1991, p. 43).

There are in Japan now, I think, positive signs that at least some male monks are trying to listen to what women have to say on this issue. One Japanese woman scholar tells me through correspondence that at a discussion of her review of *Liquid Life* (KAWAHASHI 1995) at a meeting of people affiliated with Sōtō Zen, there were visible differences of opinion among the male monks present. One stated categorically that women commit sin when they take the decision about abortion into their own hands. An older monk, however, suggested that *Liquid Life* gets things right by suggesting that the tradition allows Buddhists to think of abortion in terms of suffering (*ku*) rather than in terms of sin (*tsumi*).

Tanabe's summary charge is that my study comprises a piece of "intellectual *bricolage*" to justify abortion and is not true to the evidence of what "modern women think about the subject" (p. 440). If I were to counter—somewhat embarrassedly, I admit—with reviews and with private statements of appreciation of the book by women, Tanabe would, I suspect, dismiss these in much the same way that he shrugs off the words of a young Japanese woman who had good things to say about *Liquid Life* to him. That is, he would imply that such women are merely naive, taken in by "elegant arguments" and by the fact that the book "says what so many people want to hear" (p. 437). Tanabe wants to play tennis with the right to put up the net after he takes a shot, and put it in the place where he wants it. My book does not match what "modern women think about abortion"—except for when it does, but that happens only because it says "what they want to hear."

What people "want to hear" is not, however, always simply an index to their moral weakness—and dismissible as such. In some domains there are clear correlations between what humans are currently thinking and what they find pleasure in hearing. I suggest, therefore, that we males should be attentive to the amount of overlap between what "modern women think about the subject of abortion" and what those same women "want to hear." An unwillingness to attend and respond positively to both of these things is precisely what males in positions of

religious authority can no longer afford to show.

If *Liquid Life* serves as a fillip for wider discussion and further research, one of my intentions will have been realized. The remaining questions and problems are multiple. Certainly, there are persons in Japan who advocate a full secularization of the issue, insisting that abortion should be not only readily available to women but also a religion-free matter.[9] Among those who do not wish to see such a sharp dissocation, there are many who insist on the need to criticize real abuses and to monitor excesses on the part of entrepreneurs in the *mizuko kuyō* business. At the same time, however, there is interest outside of Japan in a judicious borrowing and adaptation of the practice of *kuyō*. At least one American theologian, having conducted field research in Japan that revealed fascinating differences between the positions of Japanese and American bishops on abortion, states concerning *mizuko* rituals: "...even among the pro-life Western and Japanese people with whom I spoke in Japan, I found strong support for the incorporation of such rituals in Christianity and Roman Catholicism in particular." He tentatively suggests that Catholics in America might profitably explore the possibility of using something comparable to *mizuko kuyō*, noting that "...such rituals and practices might lead to compassion and pragmatic compromise in the public as well as the private areas of our lives" (Chamberlain 1994, p. 16). To say the very least, comparative research on this topic and discussion of it seem not only very important but may move in quite fascinating and unexpected directions.

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[9] The most prominent and vocal advocate of this position has been Ōta Tenrei, a physician. See Ōta 1967 and 1982; LaFleur 1992, p. 162, includes a translation of an excerpt from his work and there is a discussion of it, pp. 191–97. See also Amemiya 1995.

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