

REVIEWS

William R. LAFLEUR, *Liquid Life: Abortion and Buddhism in Japan*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992. xvii + 257 pp. Hardcover, US\$24.95. ISBN 0-691-07405-4.

Religion and abortion do not mix, as even a glance at the heated debate in America shows. At issue is the question of whether abortion constitutes murder or simply an act of justifiable termination. This and other issues are addressed in William LaFleur's *Liquid Life*, a book that is certain to win an enthusiastic reception, not only because it treats a topic of widespread concern but also because it says what so many people want to hear: that there is a religion—an ancient Asian tradition—supportive of abortion and consonant with certain modern Western liberal values.

Written in part to explain how Japan has avoided polarizing its society over the issue of abortion, *Liquid Life* argues that Japanese Buddhists have devised a religious view that can accept the termination of fetal life even in the face of Buddhism's denunciation of killing. The elegant arguments and persuasive insights are likely to convince even the Japanese—as a young Japanese woman said to me after reading the book, "It never occurred to me to look at abortion and Buddhism in this wonderful way." In LaFleur's hands, Buddhism is made into perhaps the only religion with a sensible, socially enlightened view of abortion. Indeed, his 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.

This is not an easy feat to pull off, since Buddhist teaching—as LaFleur recognizes—explicitly condemns killing and thus, one would generally think, abortion. But what if abortion and infanticide are construed to be something other than killing? LaFleur argues that Japanese Buddhism has done just this. Borrowing from Jeffrey Stout and his study of Claude Lévi Strauss's notion of the *bricoleur*, "an odd-job expert who can create something impressive and eminently useful out of leftover bits and pieces," LaFleur describes the fashioning in Japan of a "moral *bricolage*": a "doing of ethics by putting together bits and pieces into an acceptable—and *useful*—assemblage" that serves as "the intellectual and cultural bridgework between early Buddhism's precept against killing and the conscience of the contemporary Japanese woman who has an abortion and still wishes...to think of herself as a 'good' Buddhist" (p. 12). *Liquid Life* shows, in short, how one may abort life without thinking that one has committed the sin of killing.

The first step in this moral *bricolage* is to present the very notion of life as liquid. *Mizuko* 水子, literally "water-child," is the term used in modern Japanese to refer to aborted fetuses. Perhaps the most brilliant part of the book is LaFleur's description of the fluidity of life as it flows into a fetal being undergoing a process of "densification" that, if continued to term, results in birth. In this scheme birth represents a movement from the world of the gods and buddhas into the world of humans; the opposite process, death, can

therefore be seen as a “thinning” and return to the divine (pp. 33–34). The important thing here is that this is a process with no fixed points, making it impossible to say exactly where life begins and where it ends. The ambiguity is crucial, for if conception produces a water-child that is “suspended in water,” “still unformed,” and is not yet a “discreet entity” (p. 24), then the densification process may be stopped prior to the undefined point at which life has clearly come into being. To abort a water-child is to interrupt its densification, turn it around, and send it back to the divine world, where it can await a future birth. An aborted fetus “is not so much being ‘terminated’ as it is being put on ‘hold’, asked to bide its time in another world” (p. 27). To abort is thus not to *kill*, but to *return* a life to an ever-living limbo.

Given the historical acceptance of abortion and infanticide in many cultures, it is not surprising that these practices should have appeared in Japan as well. What *is* surprising is LaFleur’s assertion that the unspoken rationale for them comes from Buddhism. Citing CHIBA and ÔTSU’s reports that rural people speak of “‘returning’ the unborn” and “the ‘return’ of the *mizuko*” (1983), LaFleur rejects the possibility that these may be mere euphemisms and insists that the language of the common folk is tied to Buddhist teachings through a “curious wedding” (p. 26). The connection between the two is far from obvious, however, and LaFleur presents not a single bit of evidence that this “wedding” does, in fact, exist. Where then is the *Buddhist* voice that says that abortion and infanticide involve a benign return of the child to the world of the gods?¹

As LaFleur himself acknowledges, explicit evidence for such a position cannot be found. But, he continues, the very search for such evidence is misguided, since the religious view he is speaking of is not tied to the physical events of birth and death but is linked instead to the socializing process. This shift in attribution is, he warns, one that modern Westerners—or even modern Japanese—find difficult to understand. But it is there nevertheless, working subconsciously or semi-consciously: “Even when a person may not be fully conscious of such things, this socio-religious framework still informs social understanding” (p. 39). Given the lack of overt evidence, LaFleur must rely on an analysis of Buddhist silence to support his claim that “more or less clandestinely in the Edo period and much more openly in the second half of the twentieth century, Japanese Buddhists have shown a tendency to condone not only contraception but abortion as well” (p. 117).

Thus in characterizing as “soft” the Buddhist position on *mabiki* 間引き (which in his usage covers both abortion and infanticide), LaFleur argues that “to the extent that Buddhists had such a position in the Edo period, they appear to have avoided saying so in print” (p. 105). The Edo-period “abor-

¹ Unlike LaFleur, Chiba and Ôtsu are quite clear on the difference between the Buddhist and Confucian attitudes on the one hand, and the attitudes of the common folk on the other. The common language was not always impregnated with Buddhist meaning, and the Buddhists were clear in their condemnation of abortion and infanticide. They argue that it was in the regions where Buddhist influence was weak that abortion and infanticide were accepted without moral condemnation. They also say that the leveling of the population curve in the Edo period was due not to abortion and infanticide (as LaFleur claims) but to epidemics and other causes. Abortion and infanticide, they claim, were practiced only in times of famine.

tion debate” he describes is as curious as the above-mentioned “wedding,” since he presents on one side the hard voices of Confucian and Shinto critics of *mabiki*, but on the other side not a single Buddhist voice supporting the supposedly “soft” position. LaFleur’s logic is not clear, but he apparently assumes that if a critic like Miyahiro Sadao attacks abortion and Buddhism in the same text, then Buddhists must have supported abortion. The point of Miyahiro’s attack, however, was that Buddhist celibacy and abortion were both denying the country of needed progeny; the “trajectory in Buddhist thinking” that Miyahiro’s diatribe supposedly clarifies is that “religion and fecundity are not connected” (p. 115). If Buddhist celibacy is anti-natal, does this make Buddhism pro-abortion? LaFleur clearly thinks so, though he argues that the support was clandestine.

But did Edo-period Buddhism really approve of *mabiki*, and is it really so hard to find explicit statements on the subject? We have, for example, a large Edo-period *ema* 絵馬 known as the “Kogaeshi no ezu” 子返しの絵図 [Illustration of returning a child], found at Kikusui-ji 菊水寺 in Chichibu. At the bottom right is a picture of a beautiful woman smothering a child; to her left is the same picture, but with the woman clearly depicted as a demon. Above the latter picture is written, “The state of mind of a person who returns a child”; the accompanying text says that since the woman is killing (*korosu* 殺す) her own baby she would have little difficulty in killing the children of other people. The pamphlet that elaborates on the *ema* repeatedly calls the “returning of children” a frightful sin, a heartless act that even animals would not engage in. It ends by saying that this message “is preached in temples everywhere,” and warns people that they will reap the karmic consequences of their acts. Those who have already committed the sin of “returning” a child “should apologize to their murdered children by reciting the *nenbutsu*, *daimoku*, *darani*, or sutras” (BUKKYŌ BUNKA KENKYŪKAI 1981, pp. 36–39).

Written by a Buddhist priest, the message is explicit: returning a child is murder. As LaFleur says, the language of return was a palliative to make the act more acceptable, but that language was not Buddhist. In the Buddhist view to return a child was to liquidate life; to abort was *ko-oroshi* (dropping a child), a term LaFleur hardly discusses. This is the language of termination, expunging, killing, and murder. The provision for ritual services allowed people to admit guilt and atone for their sins, but it was not intended to condone the return of children.² There may indeed have been Buddhists who clandestinely condoned abortion, but the above evidence shows that Buddhism was explicitly against it.

That, as some modern Japanese feminists see it, is the problem with Buddhism. Buddhism is not only anti-abortion but hypocritical in its provision of *mizuko kuyō* 水子供養, the ritual services for the aborted child. Far from seeing these ritual services as a means for dealing with guilt, MIZOGUCHI Akiyo (1991), for instance, criticizes *mizuko kuyō* for being precisely the instrument that creates the guilt in the first place and perpetuates male control over women. Just as the voices of Buddhists are scant in *Liquid Life*, so are those of

² For a description and interpretation of this *ema*, see BUKKYŌ BUNKA KENKYŪKAI 1981, pp. 29–39.

contemporary Japanese women, who have much to say about Buddhism and abortion. The only voice representing modern Buddhism in *Liquid Life* is that of Ochiai Seiko, who clearly states, “We who are Buddhists will hold to the end that a fetus is ‘life’. No matter what kind of conditions make abortion necessary we cannot completely justify it” (p. 170). The Japan Buddhist Federation concurs, declaring that “life is there from the moment of conception and it should not be disturbed [since] it has the right to live” (cited in BROOKS 1981, p. 133). LaFleur nevertheless persists in his claim that “the Buddhist posture permits—and even encourages—language about the fetus as human life in some sense but refuses to draw the conclusion that, therefore, abortion is disallowed” (p. 196).

LaFleur’s description of Jizō’s 地蔵 association with women and children is incontestable, and gives proper due to the popular side of this important deity. Drawing on the work of Yuasa Yasuo, LaFleur makes the good point that the revenge (*tatari* 祟り) sought by the still-living spirits of the dead children derives from the pain of having been abandoned, a pain expressed in no uncertain terms in the hymn about the Riverbank of Sai. This pain can be ameliorated only by the loving embrace of Jizō. The hymn, though it may not contradict LaFleur’s theory of return and recall, certainly presents another understanding: Jizō adopts the abandoned children as his own since they refuse to return to parents they now resent. LaFleur notes the element of parental guilt in the hymn, but does not follow up on the implication that they may have felt themselves guilty of killing their own children.

LaFleur has pasted together possibilities and silences to create a masterful piece of intellectual *bricolage*, one that will prove useful for those in search of a religious justification for abortion or even infanticide. Beautifully written, *Liquid Life* is persuasive on its own terms but is simply not true to the evidence on what Japanese Buddhists and modern women think about the subject.

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