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Abortion, Ambiguity, and Exorcism

A review essay based on Helen Hardacre's
Marketing the Menacing Fetus in Japan

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[The print version of Professor LaFleur's review article will appear in a forthcoming issue of the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*.]

In Japan abortion was legalized during 1947-48 at a time when General Douglas MacArthur, as head of the largely American occupation of that country after World War II, was its de facto ruler. Abortion continues to remain legal there and even today there is no strong public demand for its re-criminalization. Nevertheless, persons who have had abortions but believe that a fetus has more value than merely disposable matter may act on that belief, most commonly by making a ritual apology to the spiritual aspect of the fetus — referred to as a *mizuko* or “child of the waters.” Most, but not all, such rituals, called *mizuko kuyō*, are performed at Buddhist temples, at Buddhist household altars, and at roadside shrines with primarily Buddhist connections. Within the past few decades new, entrepreneurial “temples” with shaky credentials and suspect motives have been cashing in on this practice.

It is important to note that persons in Japan who do not share this view of things are in no way compelled to perform this wholly voluntary ritual. Law does not enter the picture other than to protect the right to act upon personal beliefs. It protects both the right of one person to believe a fetus to be no more than disposable matter and that of another to hold it to be an entity to which an apology is due. That same law protects also those who use private media to claim that a *mizuko* might even retaliate from the “beyond” against the persons who under normal circumstances would have been its parents. Such beliefs may not be imposed on others. Many of those writing on this topic have questioned what may be venality and manipulation in organizations making this more extreme claim.

R. Zwi Werblowsky, an occasional student of Japanese religions, went farther and wrote a scathing attack on the practice of *mizuko kuyō* across the board, claiming that it has been nothing more than a scam from beginning to end. And now, in *Marketing the Menacing Fetus in*

Japan, Helen Hardacre, while offering far richer documentation than Werblowsky, has given us a study which, in essence, makes much the same claim. Her work is also explicitly designed to challenge things written by some of us working earlier on this topic. She deplores the whole idea of post-abortion ritual, writing a book to disabuse us of the notion that there could possibly be anything of value — even of the heuristic type — in the trajectory taken by Japanese religions and society in these matters.

The issues Hardacre raises are important, not just for an understanding of Japanese religion but because of what they may tell us about the state of our own debates in North America. By this I mean not only our debates about abortion but also about religion, especially as expressed in societies different from our own. Her book is full of rich data, the record of some fascinating interviews she conducted, and a vigorous attack on the abortion rituals. She makes these points from an explicitly feminist perspective. And since she also writes some appreciative words about my own study (LaFleur 1992), I might seem an ingrate by focusing as much as I do here on criticisms of her book. Although she calls our two books “complementary,” Hardacre also notes that hers “differs [from mine] in significant respects” (p. 8). Of that difference I have no doubt, and here I will try to draw out its implications.

It may be time to acknowledge that those of us who self-identify as historians of religions now differ deeply on matters of method and value-assessment. Some of us were trained to take the *verstehen* mode as constraining us to watchdog our own impulse to offer critiques of religions outside the “West.” An eagerness, however, to be sensitive to cross-cultural political, ethical, and ideological issues now inspires other historians of religions to hold that one ought to criticize false belief and “bad” religion wherever these show up. Clearly the international scope of the feminist movement has been a major catalyst for this change — even if not all feminists will agree with Hardacre’s views on this matter. Her book, however, is a salient example of this newer direction among historians of religion and deserves attention for that reason alone. I stress

this importance even though I will here conclude that there is something surprisingly “old” and deeply problematic in that approach.

Here, then, I argue against her method, in part because it draws her into making some serious empirical mistakes. Moreover, because the ethical dimension of abortion is so deeply contested in our own society, this provides an apt place to explore these issues. Since Hardacre’s book deals with abortion, its definition of this key term merits a close look. In a programmatic statement that had clearly shaped the book’s perspective from the outset, she writes:

Contraception and abortion are viewed in this book as sexual practices arising from a man and a woman’s sexual negotiation and erotic exchange. The partners practice and interpret contraception and abortion within a context of expectations about their future relationship (p. 102).

This statement, with its emphasis on the word “sexual,” is crucial for understanding both Hardacre’s book and why I think it flawed. Here, it needs to be noted, not only contraception but abortion too is described as having to do solely with a man and a woman and, more specifically, with the power plays going on between the two of them.

This, then, is a description of abortion which refers only to “sexual politics.” In other words, the fact that there is an embryo or fetus involved has been simply erased from the picture. Even those of us who object to the religious right’s unrelenting references to the fetus as a “baby” will tend to balk at a definition of abortion that denies the existence of an entity that we think necessary to call at least a “fetus” or an “embryo.” It may have an ambiguous status, but it is decidedly not unreal. People may argue about what is taken away in an abortion but common sense tells them that something has been removed from a woman’s body. That is, one need not have anything even close to a theological notion of soul-infusion to recognize a serious problem in Hardacre’s definition.

The absence of any mention of an embryo or fetus is surely no oversight. Where does this non-reference come from? Hardacre clearly

is reacting to the large degree to which, especially in American society, manipulated images of the fetus figure in the anti-abortionists' campaign to re-criminalize abortion. Then, without mentioning that America differs from Japan, where there is no significant interest in re-criminalizing abortion, she creates the impression that her book's multiple references and graphic illustrations show that the American and Japanese data are merely instances of the same phenomenon and that, if anything, the Japanese materials show an even more deplorable pattern of manipulating women's lives through representations of the fetus. But does not the fact that in Japan this is not aimed at making abortion unavailable or illegal have to be factored in?

Hardacre implies that the only alternative to taking the fetus as fully human is to regard it as having no connection to human existence whatsoever. There is another option, however, one which may be both more accurate and more useful, namely that of seeing the fetus as an ambiguous entity, neither exactly human nor adequately rendered as a mere thing. What interests many of us in the Japanese case is that in Japan, at least by persons wanting to bring religious values into the equation, the fetus is described largely in terms of this ambiguity.

Hardacre misses this crucial nuance, and this leads her to overlook the fact that her central charge against fetocentrism simply does not apply to the very Japanese materials she studies. She writes that "Fetocentric rhetoric asserts the idea of fetal personhood, the proposition that the fetus has the same moral value as a human being. It treats the fetus as a baby from the moment of conception and attributes to it the full spectrum of human rights" (p. 3). The society imagined and targeted here, however, differs greatly from the Japanese, which is strongly disinclined to say that the fetus possesses "the full spectrum of human rights" or to classify abortion as the killing of what has "the same moral value as a human being." Significantly, the pickets, the placards, the clinic-burnings, and the doctor-stalking do not show up there.

Is there something wrong, we need ask, in every attempt to imagine or represent a fetus? In order to do battle against what is called

“feto-centrism,” is it not counter-productive to use language which seems to imply a position chargeable as “feto-negationism”? Definitions or descriptions of abortion in which the fetus itself is not referred to at all have become problematic, even for many of us who insist upon the need to keep abortion legal in the United States. Laura M. Purdy writes in a work which forcefully defends a woman’s right to abortion:

Now it may well be true that a patriarchal lens colors our view of pregnancy, obscuring the fact that fetuses are part of women’s bodies. However, it does not follow that diverse interests cannot coexist in one piece of flesh. Consider Siamese twins: the surgery necessary to separate them may mutilate or kill one or both. Do we really want to say that the loss is an illusion, that there can be no conflict of interests here? (Purdy 92)

Purdy does not step away from the ambiguity, writing that “...the fact of being one flesh now does not preclude two different fates” (Purdy 92).

If I understand this correctly, Purdy gives us reason to assume that in pregnancy there is some kind of “two-ness” in the “oneness” of a woman’s body and that, especially as the pregnancy moves forward in time, this two-ness-in-oneness becomes physiologically patent. Fetal movement and a fetal heartbeat occur apart from the woman’s volition. That is, a kind of two-ness and an ambiguity enter into things even without the introduction of fetal photography or sonar monitoring. This ambiguity is there even without the introduction of philosophical, theological, or ideological notions. It appears to be intrinsic to the physiology of pregnancy.

Hardacre assumes otherwise, seeing the experience of two-ness stemming not from physiology but from ideology, especially that linked to religion. That is, what Purdy refers to as “diverse interests...in one piece of flesh” are understood as entering into existence as an awareness only if and when an ideological overlay has been added. This assumption forces Hardacre to try to determine when such unnatural, intrusive, and ideological manipulations show up as datable changes within his-

tory. Her initial chapter, “Reproductive Ritualization before Mizuko,” attempts this probably impossible feat. Its failure comes from depending too much upon the drawing of a sharp distinction between the “pre-modern” (roughly equated with the seventeenth to mid-nineteenth centuries), when the only ritual taken into account was that which bound a woman to her midwife so that they might give “birth as a pair” (p. 54) and then the ruination of this in the twentieth century, first by male medics intruding into the birth process to displace the midwives and then, more recently, by Buddhists and others concocting the *mizuko* rite for aborted fetuses.

Central to this scenario wherein women, formerly in an “active” mode, were forced into “a passive position in relation to the physician” (p. 54) — and, by implication, to the clergy as well — is Hardacre’s claim that she can fix the date for the invention of *mizuko kuyō*, the Japanese ritual for fetuses, and that it is very recent indeed! This, a point on which she wants to set straight “Western writers frequently creat[ing] the impression that *mizuko kuyō* dates from time immemorial,” (p. 7) suffers both from a misstatement of our difference and from a sometimes self-contradictory interpretation of diverse data.⁽¹⁾ She claims that “It is a distinctively contemporary phenomenon. *Mizuko kuyō* arose in the 1970s, not as an unmediated expression of popular sentiment about abortion, but as the product of an intense media advertising campaign by entrepreneurial religionists” (p. 251). The problem here is that, although no one would contest that the 1970s saw a runaway and suspect commercialization of these rituals, there is no proof that this was also the rite’s origin. A “boom” differs from a beginning. Existing and positive religious practices have often been later co-opted by entrepreneurial types for monetary gain.

And in a concession undermining her central claim, Hardacre admits that “...aspects of *mizuko kuyō*’s material history can be identified in pre-modern practices of abortion, or in pre-modern traditions regarding the Bodhisattva Jizō....” (p. 20). Aspects only? Do not the tens of thousands of time- and weather-worn stone images of Jizō and Kannon

scattered throughout both rural and urban Japan show that well before the 1970s concerned women could express an apology to a “departed” fetus in front of a religious image which represented both that fetus and the bodhisattva believed to be its savior? (Miyoshi) Was that not *kuyō*? And, although I think a guilt factor cannot be discounted, Harrison is essentially right in holding that the *mizuko* rite expresses the agency, not the passivity, of women (Harrison 74). Feminist viewpoints may be plural here.

Masao Abe, a philosopher, suggested to me in conversation that a Buddhist position could maintain that, although the fetus is undoubtedly “life,” it does not have fully “human status” (*jinkaku*). If I were to amend my own book on abortion I would stress that point as conceptually important. But because I think that much moral reasoning in daily life is, in fact, carried on through what could be called the “poetry” of mental pictures and the physicality of bodily ritual, it is *mizuko* as rite that makes this concrete. The ritual is part of the decision process even though in time it follows the abortion itself. The position articulated is that, although the fetus — decidedly not the possessor of “the full spectrum of human rights” — is considered abortable, both its life value and some kind of indebtedness on the adults’ part are acknowledged. A *mizuko* is life, but a liquid form of it. It cannot be other than ambiguous — not a mere “thing” but also not up to what is unqualifiedly human.

Although I know of no one who has argued otherwise, Hardacre is correct in her repeated references to the fact that “there is no [Buddhist] canonical basis for the idea of *mizuko*” (p. 160). One should, however, not run too far with that. This is so because the relationship of Japan’s Buddhists to their incredibly variegated and stratified “canon” is not like that, for instance, of American evangelicals to their Bible. Text-citation carries less weight in ethical discourse. All kinds of practices — marriage of the clergy, for instance — are viewed by Japanese Buddhists as morally acceptable even though the “canon” clearly would favor the opposite. So too with the rite for fetuses. Since the genre of rituals called “*kuyō*” does have a canonical pedigree, many of Japan’s Bud-

dhists think it only proper to treat an aborted fetus with the level of respect this rite offers. Canonical or not, most of them think of this ritual as Buddhist.

Although his own essay rightly points out how emphatically the Indian “canon” prohibited abortion, Keown’s recently edited work demonstrates that within the Buddhist world there is no univocal position on this issue (Keown 1998). Neither having — nor especially desiring — the creation of a Buddhist equivalent to the Vatican, the world’s Buddhists in their practices differ considerably on these matters. Only one Buddhist denomination in Japan, the Jōdo shinshū, has taken a public stand, one of opposition to abortion — although not to the point of suggesting it be re-criminalized. The clergy in most temples deal with it on an individual basis and this means that many temples, including some of the Jōdo shinshū, provide some kind of ritual for memorializing aborted fetuses. Hardacre, however, takes a dim view of this:

...parish priests rely on their own resources in dealing with parishioners who request these rites, and it is little wonder that their responses are so varied and lacking in intellectual sophistication. This may be the price of remaining uninvolved in ethical debate for the sake of preserving Olympian remove, along with being overtaken by the more aggressive entrepreneurship of spiritualists (p. 196).

“Olympian remove” is, of course, one of the older barbs thrown down at Buddhist institutions from the heights of the Western fortresses. By merely casting it yet again Hardacre has missed the opportunity to do some interesting comparative work. Her implicit assumption is that there is something normative about the way these things are done in Europe and America, places where religious institutions make public pronouncements on a whole range of moral and social questions.

But how satisfied are we ourselves with that? As I read the words and interpret the actions of America’s Catholics, many, perhaps most, of them dearly wish that Rome were, in fact, a lot more “Olympian” — that is, not nearly so ready to tell both Catholics and non-Catholics what

to do in their bedrooms and in their hospitals. By putting only a negative spin on the Buddhists' refusal to issue authoritative dicta on very complex matters, Hardacre fails to see that restraint here, in fact, gives the lay practitioner a considerable amount of freedom and responsibility.

This point deserves more attention than students of religions have given it, perhaps especially because many of the newer Buddhists of Europe and America are restive about this tradition and want to see more unambiguous "stance-taking" by Buddhists on a wide range of ethical questions, some hinting that Buddhism needs to be "Westernized" in this way. Although such a course might have merit, I will here suggest that the anticipated gains could be accompanied by some real losses.

The connections among specific ecologies, the choice of metaphors in discourse about religion, and the allocation of moral responsibility have always been intimate ones. The Christian church, with its imagery strongly influenced by the ecological conditions of the Near East, made much of the relationship between clergy and laity as being like that of a shepherd to his sheep. Biblical imagery and later European pastoral poetry combined to shape this tradition — so much so that a Milton could count on immediate intelligibility when in "Lycidas" he lamented a current ecclesiastical condition as one in which clergy "scarce themselves know how to hold / A Sheep-hook" and "The hungry sheep look up, and are not fed."

The assumption that a church as a whole is under an obligation to "feed" its flock by laying down clear positions on ethical issues has been characteristic of Christianity, resulting in modern times in pronouncements from the Vatican and the articulation of position statements by the various Protestant churches. This practice, of course, has often also necessitated position reversals for Protestants and, for Catholics, stuck with institutional intransigence, widespread disregard in practice for what had been laid down as the official norm. On abortion many Protestant churches later altered earlier condemnations and many Catholics ignore Rome's directives.

Buddhist monks and nuns, at least traditionally, were — for better or for worse — under no obligation to act as “pastors” in that sense. They had nothing describable as a “flock,” and neither they nor the lay practitioners of Buddhism felt compelled to take official positions on a range of specific ethical questions. This was simply not their tradition.

Hardacre’s study, strikingly “Protestant” in many areas, disregards these historical differences and holds the denominational feet of Japan’s Buddhists to the fire for refusing to take unambiguous positions on such issues. They, she implies, pastor badly. Apparently she can discern the heart’s motives and that these things arise from the Buddhists’ need for “a camouflage for cowardice,” from the desire to avoid “any prospect of contradiction,” from a reluctance “to make themselves targets of accusations [of having engaged in political activity],” from being “ill prepared to deal with complex scientific data,” and from not wanting “to assume a strong position that might later have to be reversed and then justified to the membership” (pp. 90-91). This list of imputed reasons consists only of negatives. She simply disregards the fact that an intent to be traditional may at least also be in play here.

Curiously, though, the one clear exception to this pattern receives scant attention — and this is especially odd since this one exception, at least on the question of abortion, scarcely moves in the direction Hardacre could be expected to approve. She writes: “Of the major sects of Japanese Buddhism, only Jōdo shinshū has developed a clear policy on *mizuko kuyō* — a policy of absolute prohibition” (p. 191). Perhaps the fact that this denomination’s denunciation of all abortion does not involve moves to get abortion re-criminalized factors into her apparent readiness to glide over the Jōdo shinshū position so easily. This comprises, nevertheless, an odd silence in a book explicitly self-defined as “feminist” and ready otherwise to go as far as defining the fetus completely out of the picture in order to defend a woman’s right to abortion.

The reason for switching to *sotto voce* concerning Jōdo shinshū’s prohibition of abortion may, however, be that that denomination’s censure of the *mizuko* rite was more important to Hardacre’s larger con-

cern. Did a cost/benefit analysis convince her that, at least in terms of helping establish one of her major criticisms, she so needed the latter that she would wink at the former? The criticism I have in mind is that directed at what she dubs “spiritism” and treats as “false belief.” Condemnation of all belief in fetal spirits pervades her book.

Here I return to my question: Is there something inherently wrong with all attempts to imagine or represent a fetus? And do we have a right to insist that persons who have had abortions must be disabused of any mental image of the aborted as a life-form — even if such persons neither insist that others share their belief nor would legislate behavior to accord with their own beliefs on this question? I think not. Hardacre is right to document and criticize the falsifying of photographs to make the fetus appear menacing, but when she writes that “the idea of fetal existence apart from the mother” was “made conceptually possible” by fetal photography (p. 90), she again sees an origin where there is evidence for an enhancement only. Contrary to her claim, the concept and the mental image of a separable but living fetus-as-child predates this recent development in the field of photography. Evidence for it comes centuries earlier in Japan (Shinmura 86ff.).

Is this, however, something explicable merely in terms of dupers and their duped? Do cash, power, and ideology tell us all we need to know about phenomena which then we can dismiss as nothing more than “self-deception” and “false consciousness”? Not adequately addressed here is why so many Japanese hold this belief when they could be “released” from such simply by stopping in a local bookstore and perusing *Taiji no sekai* (The world of the fetus), a book now in its tenth printing and showing, with unre-touched photos, that the fetus, while clearly alive, will not strike the viewer as decidedly human. Why does this not suffice?

If searching for an alternative and better explanation of the *mizuko* rite, attention to Nicholas Tavuchis’s sophisticated study of the structure of interpersonal apology might be a good place to start. He suggests that often both the offender and the offended value the role of a “third

party” in “the pedagogy of apology” (Tavuchi 64). How would this apply to the abortion ritual? We need to assume that the very structure of the apology requires that the one offering it — that is, the one already feeling guilty — not add insult to injury. Therefore, precisely because any determination of the *mizuko*’s very existence eludes clear proof one way or the other, the far wiser choice is to err in the direction of honoring the one offended, specifically by acting as though its continued existence were proven. Better here to go too far than not far enough. By all means avoid “dissing” the one to whom an apology is directed. And by so doing it is far more likely, I suggest, that the offender, even if a bit poorer, will come out feeling better. And feelings matter here. Of course, money matters too — but not enough to halt the impulse to carry out this act of apology.

My point is that the whole thing may be much more intelligible and psychologically functional than its critics have been willing to recognize. Within even ordinary human affairs the offer of an apology is expected to improve a relationship or, at least, defuse the offended person’s impulse to bear a grudge and retaliate in some way. The sense of being menaced, even if only by being bad-mouthed by persons we have offended, is operative here. That some persons might believe an aborted fetus — if still alive in some sense — will harbor resentment and even be menacing is not really as outrageous as Hardacre holds. And, thus, the ritual has not really been explained when profiteers are shown to be active on the site. Hype is not all. Some things are desired even before being marketed.

“Spiritualists” get rough treatment by Hardacre. She does not hesitate to read an entire epoch as having an ethos in which they either surface or, alternatively, disappear into the cultural woodwork. Thus, she holds, Japanese national consciousness and religions, although “expansive and optimistic” from 1945 to the 1970s, fell thereafter into an epoch that was “pessimistic and fatalistic” following the “oil-shocks” of the mid-1970s (pp. 254-56). The slide into pessimism meant that “spiritualists” resurfaced and this, in turn, made room for that purport-

edly new thing, the abortion rite. “Thus, *mizuko kuyō*, based directly upon the idea of menacing fetal spirits, would have been quite out of place [earlier], and it did not appear until later [— that is, the mid-1970s]” (p. 255). In this context, she holds, Japan’s Buddhists weakly caved in to the spiritualists. Because they “had not issued a clear policy on these rites...Buddhist institutions had been overtaken by religious entrepreneurs and an outpouring of popular religious sentiment before they could reach a clear policy within each sect” (pp. 155-56).

Yet it is surprising that in a book so occupied with Japanese Buddhism’s easy tolerance of a “spiritualism” — something against which, we are led to believe, it should be battling — there is not a single reference to the rather vast literature, including some classic studies, dealing with the complex relationship between Buddhism and spirit-cults (Spiro; Tambiah 1970). The ethnographic studies do not share Hardacre’s assumption that all exorcism is inherently incompatible with Buddhism or with “good” religion. And in an essay entitled “On Avoiding Ghosts and Social Censure,” Gregory Schopen shows that Indian Buddhist texts — ones not only early but even designed for monks rather than the more “ignorant” laity — legislated “funereal procedures that appear to have been considered necessary to keep angry ghosts at bay...” (Schopen 204-237; emphasis mine). So whence comes Hardacre’s animus against spiritualists?

Decades ago Keith Thomas showed how the critique of magic, spirit-manipulation and especially exorcism had been wrapped up in the Reformation’s agenda. Hardacre’s approach further politicizes this basically Protestant and Tylorist bias. What needs noting, however, is that recent studies move in a very different direction. When given rounded social and historical contextualization, procedures of exorcism do not look so bad. Designed to offset what the subject experiences as “menacing,” it is now seen as having therapeutic functions and may even cure what our own culture calls forms of “emotional illness.” Tambiah, a Harvard colleague of Hardacre, writes, based on his own empirical studies as well as those by McKim Marriott and Sudhir Kakar:

In the Indian shamanistic or spirit possession beliefs...the results of unfulfilled desires are not [as in the West] internally split-off portions of the self but externalized entities given phenomenal existence as demons and spirits....The therapy naturally addresses itself to the expulsion of demonic agents and to the orienting of the patient to having solitary relations with other significant persons (Tambiah 1990: 134-35).

Is it not likely that the Japanese *mizuko* ritual is far closer to this Indian practice of exorcism-as-therapy than it is to the relentlessly modernized, medicalized, and ethicalized religious modalities of the West, ones from which, as we know, all exorcism rites have now been excised? It might be too great a stretch to try to square such practices with the teachings of canonical texts...but Asia's Buddhists do not live their lives by doctrine alone. Besides, in a well-known account Sakyamuni declared that the person struck by a poisoned arrow needs someone only to extract it and decidedly not a barrage of hypothetical questions. Not only a qualified agnosticism but also a certain kind of Buddhist pragmatism flows from this. What heals, heals. As therapy, the *mizuko* ritual seems to "fix" the emotional life of many persons struggling with their deeply ambivalent feelings about an abortion. And Japan's Buddhists seem to hold that, if in principle there is no need to fix what's not broken, it makes no sense to try to fix what fixes. And if their clergy wink at this, are they perhaps "pastoring" in the *wu-wei* mode?

Notes

¹ If "from time immemorial" is a proper designation for the past five centuries or so, then Hardacre's charge could apply to my studies. See LaFleur 138ff. for a discussion of this and also of recent commercialization.

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