



Published in "The Philadelphia Inquirer"
January 19th, 2003

A Publication of **Rachel's Vineyard Ministries**
www.RachelsVineyard.org

Acknowledging Abortion, Ambivalence

By: William LaFleur

A scholar considers "Roe v. Wade", its polarized American positions, and a middle-ground Japanese model of healing.

During the spring of 2000, Cedar Crest College in Allentown was the site of a theater production about abortion. *The Water Children* by Wendy MacLeod is about a young woman named Megan, active in the abortion-rights cause, who falls in love. Megan later learns, however, that the highly principled man she adores had been so appalled by the Vietnam War that he came to oppose all killing. He views abortion, too, as murder.

The drama's tension flows from this. Megan undergoes change – not in her basic belief that abortion must remain a legal option for women, but in a willingness to see that a fetus is life in some sense.

And what helps her along the way is learning that in Japan, where abortion has long been legal and will remain so, many women who have had abortions go to temples where they find a venue to express their troubled feelings before a Buddha-like image.

This figure is Jizo, the heavenly protector of deceased children and fetuses. He receives parents' prayers and accepts their words of apology for having caused pain by deciding to end an embryo's life. In Japan, the aborted are called *mizuko*, "water children" – the title of MacLeod's riveting play.

Both sides in America's exhausting debate over abortion may find things to criticize in *The Water Children*. Abortion foes will deplore the fact that Megan, though softened, remains committed to keeping abortion legal. Advocates of abortion rights may cringe because she admits that what has been aborted is at some level life, and that guilt might need to be acknowledged.

But is this perhaps the strength of the notion of "water children"? MacLeod's play throws a spotlight on what might be necessary, even valuable, in feeling deeply ambivalent about abortion. She writes that Megan had been living

in a world of black and white but “came to discover gray”. There may be no “100 percent right” solution for Megan...or for America.

The Water Children is not alone. Other Americans, too, claim to have found sanity and healing in the Japanese way. In the April 21 issue of the New York Times Magazine, Peggy Orenstein wrote about having a miscarriage while in Japan. She felt loss and sorrow, not guilt. But she made her way to a temple where all “water children”, even spontaneously aborted fetuses, can be remembered.

Orenstein prayed and placed tiny, inexpensive dolls as offerings on the images. Through the ritual, she felt much better. But as an American woman in favor of abortion rights, it had not been easy. Orenstein had to convince herself that it would be OK to mourn. Back home in America, things were, she knew, more uptight.

“The debate over abortion has become so polarized that exploring such contradictions feels too risky. In the political discussion, there has been no vocabulary of nuance”, she wrote.

Japanese society is not convulsed by two parties, each insisting on its way as totally right and the other as completely wrong.

While living in Japan decades ago, I began noticing and then studying the temples where people went for “water children” rituals. There was nothing comparable in the churches and synagogues back home in America.

I also asked Japanese priests about abortion. They said that, although we can expect to feel morally troubled when forcefully sending a water child back to the realm of “the gods and the Buddhas”, they as priests needed to show compassion for women caught by being pregnant when they had no wish to have a child.

These clergy, like most Japanese people, believed that every child should, as much as possible, come into this world as a wanted child, a deeply wanted one. This matched what I already knew about the Japanese family – it is remarkably strong and its children are usually treated as treasures.

When I wrote about all this in a book, *Liquid Life: Abortion and Buddhism in Japan* (Princeton 1992), I pointed out that already in the 17th century, Europeans in Japan admired the treatment of children they witnessed. Francois Caron, having spent years there, wrote: “Children are carefully and tenderly brought up here...Children of seven or eight years old behave themselves; their

discourse and answers savouring of riper age, and far surpassing any I have yet seen in our own country”.

Both then and now, the evidence from Japan suggests that to permit abortion need not have a negative effect on family life – as some claim on our side of the sea.

An American Catholic priest I know in Japan told me that Japanese Catholics will frequently go to a nearby Buddhist temple to perform *mizuko* rituals. And he said he understood their need.

Gary Chamberlain, an ethicist at Seattle University, a Jesuit school, researched this matter in Japan and, in a 1994 article, “Learning From Japan”, suggested that people in the West explore the formation of “*mizuko* type rituals in Christianity”. I have noted that within American Judaism, especially where women are permitted to be rabbis, there have already been significant efforts to create rituals of healing for people who have had abortions.

Has nothing changed in America over the 30 years since *Roe V. Wade*? Many think not. They see a battle still shaped by two unmoving sides.

Still, I see signs of movement in the last decade. People committed to retaining the right to abortion have been acknowledging that emotional and religious aspects cannot be discounted. And we here more and more voices saying that, although it is unacceptable to them, abortion should remain legal for people choosing it.

Are we, it is hoped, getting closer to the compromise the conservative columnist William Safire advocated more than a decade ago, something he called the “pro-comp” position? Is there an end in sight to America’s own Thirty Years War?



Rachel's Vineyard Ministries
808 N. Henderson Rd.
King of Prussia, PA 19406
610-354-0555—1-877-HOPE-4-ME