‘Because they are no more’: Memorizing Pregnancy Loss in Japanese Buddhism and American Catholicism

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In comparative perspective, this dissertation examines contemporary American Catholic and Japanese Buddhist memorial practices related to pregnancy loss. For many women, a failed or terminated pregnancy is a traumatic, life-altering event. Yet, given the prevalence of pregnancy loss—estimations range from 1 in 4 to 1 in 3 pregnancies end in miscarriage, stillbirth, or abortion in the U.S. and Japan—there has been a marked inattention to this basic human experience.

In the last half-century, American Catholics and Japanese Buddhists have developed memorials to attend to grief that accompanies pregnancy loss experiences. These practices represent distinct attempts by diverse religious groups to respond to the reality of pregnancy loss within their communities. In each setting, the new memorials reflect the logic and the values of the theological and ritual frameworks in which they emerged.

The analytical categories employed in this study are prenatal theological anthropology and ritual efficacy. Prenatal anthropology refers to Catholic and Buddhist understandings of the significance of fetal life and death in the context of pregnancy loss. Ritual efficacy refers to the purported effects that these memorials bring about through their performance. This dissertation brings these themes together to ask, 1) what can be said about the nature of the prenatal beings memorialized in pregnancy loss rites, and
2) what are pregnancy loss rites believed to accomplish by means of their performance? It shows that Buddhist *mizuko* rites purport to effect a change in the postmortem destiny of lost prenates that helps them attain rebirth in the Pure Land. American Catholic pregnancy loss rites, by contrast, are premised on the belief that lost prenates do not require ritual intervention on their behalf because, in their innocence, they already fall under the protection of God’s mercy and salvific will. Despite these divergent ritual objectives, Japanese Buddhist and American Catholic pregnancy loss memorialization share a concern for the wellbeing of memorial participants troubled by pregnancy losses and worried about lost prenates. They address this concern by clarifying and ordering the postmortem status of lost prenates and by acknowledging the maternal-fetal relationship that has been broken through pregnancy loss.
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# Table of Contents

**Chapter 1: Introduction**

- Part 1: Pregnancy Loss in Focus—Imagining Fetal Life, Imagining Motherhood... 5
- Part 2: Defining the Argument........................................................................ 16
- Part 3: Chapter Outline.................................................................................. 27

**Chapter 2: Methodology**

- Part 1: General Methodology......................................................................... 35
- Part 2: Data Sources...................................................................................... 41
- Part 3: Conceptual Tools from Ritual Studies.................................................. 48

**Chapter 3: Prenatal Anthropology in Buddhism and Japanese Mizuko Kuyō**

- Part 1: Early Buddhist Ideas about Prenatal Life and Abortion................. 63
- Part 2: Contemporary Japanese Buddhist Ideas about Prenatal Life and Abortion... 78
- Part 3: Scholarship on Mizuko kuyō............................................................... 96

**Chapter 4: Catholic Theological Anthropologies of Prenatal Life**

- Part 1: Doctrinal Conceptions of Prenatal Theological Anthropology........ 114
- Part 2: Images of Childhood in Christian History........................................ 145

**Chapter 5: Mizuko Kuyō and Ritual Efficacy in Japanese Buddhism**

- Part 1: General Features of Japanese Religion and Ritual Practice.............. 173
- Part 2: Japanese Buddhist Funerals and Memorial kuyō.............................. 180
- Part 3: Mizuko kuyō and Ritual Efficacy.................................................... 194
- Part 4: Women’s Agency and Mizuko kuyō.................................................... 212

**Chapter 6: Emerging American Catholic Pregnancy Loss Memorials**

- Part 1: Ritual Efficacy and Catholic Memorialization of the Dead—
  Historical and Contemporary Perspectives................................................. 221
- Part 2: American Catholic Pregnancy Loss Memorials—
  Re-narration and Epistemological Efficacy............................................... 229

**Chapter 7: Conclusion**.................................................................................. 276

**Bibliography**.................................................................................................. 283
At the Shrine of St. Joseph in Santa Cruz, California, there sits an oversized bronze statue of St. Joseph cradling a delicate prenatal human figure in his hands. Here St. Joseph is referred to as the Patron of the Unborn, and the statue is part of a memorial commemorating those children lost through miscarriage, stillbirth, and abortion. Surrounding the statue, a wall inset with engraved stones names those who are remembered at this site—Aaron, Scarlett, the Two Babies of K.P., the Fifth Moore Baby.

On the other side of the Pacific Ocean, at Zōjōji Temple in central Tokyo, hundreds of small stone statues wearing red hand-knit bibs and hats dot the temple grounds. The statues represent mizuko, literally “water children”—prenates, neonates, and children that die at the earliest stages of life. Each monk-like statue is a miniature image of the bodhisattva Jizō, the Japanese Buddhist protector of children that die very young, asked by the parents of mizuko to watch over their lost loved ones.

The Patron of the Unborn memorial in Santa Cruz is part of a new and growing movement within American Catholicism to recognize pregnancy losses. Across the United States, parishes, dioceses, and other Catholic organizations have developed liturgical rites and memorials that provide a formal way to attend to the grief that often accompanies experiences of miscarriage, stillbirth, and abortion. These memorials range from dedicating commemorative plaques at places like the Shrine of St. Joseph, to “miscarriage masses” held at individual parishes around the country, to healing rites that involve “mothering” baby dolls as part of post-abortion ministry retreats.
In Japan the practice of memorializing pregnancy losses is already well established. The Jizō statues of Zōjōji Temple are part of a widespread ritual practice called mizuko kuyō, or water children rites. Mizuko rites are requested at Buddhist temples throughout the country as a way to commemorate experiences of pregnancy loss. They typically incorporate elements of traditional Buddhist funerals, such as sutra chanting, food offerings, and memorial name tablets for the dead. They gained popularity in the postwar period following the legalization of abortion in Japan but are also used to commemorate those pregnancies that fail to reach full term due to natural complications.

In comparative perspective, this dissertation examines contemporary American Catholic and Japanese Buddhist memorial practices related to pregnancy loss. These parallel practices have emerged within distinct religious landscapes, a fact that is reflected in both the forms and purposes of the memorial activities. By bringing these practices into dialogue with one another, this comparison demonstrates that though the American Catholic and Japanese Buddhist memorial practices confront the same basic problem—that is, the issue of pregnancy loss—they conceive of the problem in different terms, and as a result, propose different responses to it.

At the heart of this project are questions about the religious imagination of the unborn. Many major religious traditions have long histories of speculation about the form and significance of human life at its earliest stages. Much of this speculation is rooted in efforts to demonstrate that central religious figures were special even before birth. For instance, Aśvaghoṣa’s *Life of the Buddha* (1st century CE) recounts how Queen Maya, the mother of Siddhartha Gautama, was visited in a dream by a majestic white elephant before conceiving the future Śakyamuni Buddha. When the time came to deliver, the newborn
emerged from his mother’s side as she stood beneath a tree in Lumbini Grove. The book of Genesis in the Hebrew Bible recounts how twins Jacob and Esau struggled with one another inside the womb of their mother, Rebekah. During their birth, the infant Jacob emerged gripping the heel of his brother, foreshadowing Jacob’s future grasping after the elder Esau’s birthright. Familiar also is the story from the Christian scripture’s Gospel of Luke (1:41) in which the not-yet-born John the Baptist leapt in his mother Elizabeth’s womb upon recognizing the unborn Jesus within the womb of Mary.

Inherent in the imagination of the unborn is the imagination of pregnancy and motherhood as well. So, for example, Śākyamuni Buddha’s emergence from his mother’s side, rather than through her birth canal, points to the defilement associated with women’s bodies and the process of vaginal delivery. Descriptions in the Christian scriptures of Mary’s virginal conception of Jesus illustrate that her role as the “Christ-bearer” and mother is contingent on her purity and her submission to the intervention of God.

Today pregnancy loss memorial practices provide a new forum for the religious imagination of the unborn and of pregnancy and motherhood. In American Catholicism and Japanese Buddhism, the memorialization of pregnancy loss reflects and continues the construction of important theological differences between the traditions regarding how the nature of the unborn is understood. In the Japanese Buddhist setting, prenatal beings that die in the womb are seen as shaped by the karma of previous lives but open to the benefits of ritual intervention on their behalf that can help them attain a good rebirth or admission to the Pure Land. In the American Catholic setting, fetuses lost during pregnancy are understood to be fundamentally innocent, protected by the mercy of God, and therefore, not in need of intercession on their behalf. In both contexts, pregnancy loss
memorialization also serves a therapeutic function, providing reconciliation and healing in situations of grief and brokenness. It does so, in part, by ritually establishing a relationship between women as mothers and their lost children.

When the American Catholic and Japanese Buddhist pregnancy loss memorial practices are considered together, questions and insights arise that are of keen interest to theological and religious studies today—questions about the goals of religious practice and the nature of human life at its earliest stages. What purpose(s) do pregnancy loss memorials serve? Who takes part in them and why? What is the relationship between the living memorial participants and the lost fetuses that are being memorialized? Why do religious traditions that on the whole decry abortion provide memorial rituals to commemorate abortion losses? Why do the memorials fail to distinguish between cases of unintended miscarriage and induced abortion?

These questions go beyond scholarly interest in their direct relevance to the lives of Catholics and Buddhists who experience and mourn pregnancy losses during their lifetimes. For many women, a failed or terminated pregnancy is a traumatic, life-altering event. It leads some to feel betrayed by their bodies due to their inability to sustain a desired pregnancy. For others, it raises questions about one’s identity as a woman or as a mother. Yet, given the prevalence of pregnancy loss—estimations range from 1 in 4 to 1 in 3 pregnancies end in miscarriage, stillbirth, or abortion in the U.S. and Japan1—there has

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been a marked inattention to this basic human experience. This disregard can be traced to factors like uncertainty about how to react to miscarriage, stigmas about induced abortion, and social reticence to discuss issues that are seen as falling within the private domain: sexuality, reproduction, death, and grief.

Part I: Pregnancy Loss in Focus—Imagining Fetal Life, Imagining Motherhood

As the stories of Śakyamuni Buddha’s and Jesus’ fetal experiences illustrate, Buddhist and Christian religious communities have been imagining the unborn in great detail since the foundation of each tradition. Beyond the mythic tales about the Buddha and Jesus, the Buddhist and Christian imagination of the unborn has taken place in the context of medico-religious speculation about fetal development and the significance of early human life. For instance, Thomas Aquinas, drawing on Aristotelian embryology, correlated the timing of human ensoulment to forty days after conception.2 Early Indian Buddhist literature identifies the important role of karma in the processes of conception and fetal development. According to these sources, the karma of the parents as well as that of the “intermediate being” (antarābhava) awaiting rebirth all impact whether or not conception occurs. Should conception take place, lingering negative karma has the potential to manifest as gestational problems or as birth defects.3


3 Robert Kritzer, “Life in the Womb: Conception and Gestation in Buddhist Scripture and Classical Indian Medical Literature,” in Imagining the Fetus: The Unborn in Myth, Religion, and Culture, eds. Vanessa R. Sasson and Jane Marie Law (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 78-81; Frances Garrett, “Tibetan Buddhist Narratives of the Forces of Creation,” in Imagining the Fetus, 109. Similarly, throughout Christian history, birth defects, illnesses, and disabilities have often been understood as manifestations of sin or
The Impact of Technological Advances

Today, the imagination of the unborn—religious and otherwise—persists, though in a different manner in light of advances in embryology, medicine, and fetal imaging technology. Japanese feminist scholar Miho Ogino observes, “Changes in technology can bring important changes in the way people think about reproduction, family and children, and life itself—but development in the medical field tends to proceed without waiting for sufficient discussion and agreement in society,” including within religious groups. In some ways, Buddhist thought has required relatively fewer adjustments to these advances due to the remarkably sophisticated understanding of the processes of reproduction and fetal development established early in the tradition. By contrast, Catholic theology has been obliged to make great strides in the last century as it has struggled to catch up and keep up with modern science in the understanding of human life at its earliest stages.

More so than any other innovation, the rapid development and growing accessibility of fetal imaging technology, such as prenatal ultrasonography, has revolutionized the cultural and religious understandings of the fetal life. At their most basic, these technologies enable medical professionals to monitor the development of the fetus and give visual access to what is hidden deep within a woman’s body. In cases of moral imperfections. See Thomas E. Reynolds, Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008), 67.

abnormal development, illness, or distress, they facilitate historically unprecedented prenatal diagnoses and medical interventions, including surgeries performed in utero.\(^5\)

As a result of the visual and material interaction with the fetus made possible by fetal imaging technology, feminist scholars in America observe that in recent decades the fetus has taken on an identity of its own that is often positioned over and against that of pregnant women. That is because, in order to gain access to such an interior place as the womb, the woman carrying the fetus must be made transparent, invisible. Consequently, the fetus has been decontextualized from its place in the womb and is made to seem independent of the woman upon whom, in reality, it is wholly dependent. Political scientist Rosalind Petchesky argues that these technologies have radically transformed not only the cultural interpretation of the fetus but also women’s experiences of pregnancy.\(^6\) They have the effect of making a pregnancy seem more definitive earlier in gestation, which often leads to a heightened degree of prenatal bonding than in previous generations. Speaking of the American context today, she notes that fetuses have become an “almost unremarkable feature of the public landscape,”\(^7\) and the fetus that was once experienced during pregnancy as a “not yet” has now become already present, “first conceived not in the womb, but in visualizing technologies.”\(^8\)

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Shifting ideas about the unborn go hand in hand with changes in the ways that pregnancy and motherhood are understood. The early construction of the fetus through prenatal imaging has the effect of constructing maternal identity very early in pregnancy as well. Additionally, something as seemingly simple as the home pregnancy test has transformed when women are able to tell that they are pregnant. (Some tests boast that they can detect a pregnancy up to six days before a missed period.) As a result of this development, however, what in the past was experienced as a “late period” can now be recognized as an early miscarriage, and the maternal (or at least, pregnant) identity inspired by a positive home pregnancy test can be dashed—for better or for worse—just as quickly.  

The Challenge of Pregnancy Loss

Within the cultural narrative of pregnancy today, stories of unplanned loss typically get glossed over, particularly in developed countries like the United States and Japan where tremendous progress has been made in reducing fetal and infant mortality rates. Still, loss is an undeniable and unavoidable reproductive risk. While the likelihood and the mechanisms of pregnancy loss have been addressed frequently from a medical perspective, broader concerns about its emotional, social, and religious implications have only recently garnered the attention of scholars. These studies demonstrate clearly that pregnancy loss is much more than just a physiological phenomenon.

For most women wishing to become pregnant, the possibility of miscarriage never

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9 Layne, 82.
crosses their minds as a serious possibility until it happens to them. This was certainly the case for Linda Layne, anthropologist and leading scholar in area of pregnancy loss in America. She began her journey to start a family optimistic about what the future held for her, but in the coming years she went through one miscarriage after another. It was then, faced with her own ongoing struggle to sustain several pregnancies, that Layne grasped the reality and prevalence of pregnancy loss. Moreover, Layne experienced firsthand what a taboo subject pregnancy loss really is. In the midst of her own reproductive difficulties, she developed a growing awareness of the significance of pregnancy loss. She writes, “The fact that so many different people (doctors, midwives, relatives, and friends) seemed so uncomfortable and at a loss as to how to appropriately respond to pregnancy loss alerted me to the fact that something important was going on culturally.”\(^\text{10}\) Since that time, Layne’s research has unmasked the forces underlying the American discourse on pregnancy loss.

Layne argues that a culture of silence and avoidance surrounds pregnancy loss in America. She attributes this large-scale evasion of the subject to the fact that stories of loss challenge dominant cultural narratives of progress and control.\(^\text{11}\) According to Layne, while death in general poses a challenge to the story of individual and social progress, “the death of newborns”—and I would add the unborn—“is in some ways the ultimate such challenge.”\(^\text{12}\) That is, death at the earliest stages of life essentially undermines progress at its source; it undermines progress before progress even truly begins. In the American

\(^{10}\) Layne, 3.

\(^{11}\) Ibid., 67-68.

\(^{12}\) Ibid., 66.
context (particularly in white, middle class communities), pregnancy itself is framed as a microcosmic narrative of progress. This tendency is understandable—everybody likes a happy ending. Unfortunately, Layne’s personal experience and research demonstrate that when this narrative is interrupted through pregnancy loss, friends, family, and society lack the resources to address such a challenge.

This progress narrative has led some scholars to frame pregnancy (especially a first pregnancy) as a rite of passage. In the United States, pregnancy often marks a woman’s transition to adulthood.\textsuperscript{13} Within this framework, Layne explains, pregnancy is the temporary condition “betwixt and between” as a woman passes from one stable life stage to another.\textsuperscript{14} When a pregnancy loss occurs, however, the normal forward movement of the transition is thrown off, suspending the woman in a liminal state. Instead of emerging from pregnancy triumphantly with the hoped-for newborn in hand, the woman who suffers a loss is ushered out unceremoniously through a side exit.

In Japan, pregnancy is seen less as a rite of passage than as the first stage of parenting. According to Tsipy Ivry in her cross-cultural study of pregnancy, “the point of departure in [Japanese] thinking is the idea that the unborn baby and the mother are interconnected physiologically and mentally.”\textsuperscript{15} Within this framework, the mother bears great responsibility for protecting the fetus and its environment. Thus, the thinking goes,

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{13} Robbie E. Davis-Floyd, \textit{Birth as an American Rite of Passage} (Berkley: University of California Press, 1992).

\textsuperscript{14} Layne, 59.

\textsuperscript{15} Tsipy Ivry, \textit{Embodying Culture: Pregnancy in Japan and Israel} (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 233.
\end{flushright}
“If the child succeeds, a mother is complimented; if the child fails, a mother is blamed.”¹⁶

Sadly, one can imagine the burden the mother bears when the maternal-fetal relationship is ruptured through miscarriage or fetal death.

Stuck in the space of having been pregnant yet still not having a child, questions arise about one’s “parental identity.” With the Japanese emphasis on the mother providing the proper in utero environment, an unsuccessful or terminated pregnancy can carry the implication that a woman has failed as a parent even before giving birth. In the U.S. context, without a baby to bring home at the end of a pregnancy, one is left in a sort of limbo. A woman who delivered her stillborn daughter at 30 weeks gestation captured this predicament, saying, “We held her for hours; she was perfect in every way, except she wasn’t breathing, she wasn’t crying...and she never will. I knew thinking, ‘I’m a mom, but how can I be a mom if my baby is not here?’”¹⁷

Questions about parental identity are often coupled with broader insecurities about one’s identity as a woman in general. Following a miscarriage or stillbirth, many women say they feel profoundly betrayed by their bodies. More so than other health problems, reproductive troubles are experienced as an attack against one’s identity and sense of self. Janet Jaffe and Martha O. Diamond, mental health experts in the area of reproductive struggle, observe,

> If a patient had a broken arm or had to wear glasses, his or her reaction might be: A part of me needs mending, or a part of my body is weak. The client would go about correcting the problem, without felling like something was wrong with his or her core identity. But with a reproductive trauma, patients tend to respond with

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¹⁷ Jaffe and Diamond, 60.
statements that encompass the entire self.\textsuperscript{18}

In other words, women (and men as well) express feeling as though they themselves, rather than just their body parts, are broken or not performing correctly when faced with reproductive dysfunction. Jaffe and Diamond attribute this tendency to the deep connection that exists between personal identity and one’s reproductive system.\textsuperscript{19}

Consequently, they explain, “because the reproductive story is so deeply ingrained in the sense of self, when it takes an unexpected turn, ...it is a trauma that negatively affects every aspect of a person’s life.”\textsuperscript{20}

\textit{American Feminism and Pregnancy Loss}

In spite of the tremendous impact that reproductive loss has on individuals’ lives, it remains a phenomenon that has not typically received social acknowledgement commensurate to its prevalence. Yet as women have gained social prominence and power, so have so-called women’s issues. Though the circumstances and causes of pregnancy loss have shifted in recent years, Simonds and Rothman observe, “It is not the experience that changes; it is [women’s] power to make our experiences heard and to have them credited that varies.”\textsuperscript{21} Paradoxically, Layne observes that for many American scholars it is

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{18} Jaffe and Diamond, 60.
  \item \textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 61.
  \item \textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 51.
  \item \textsuperscript{21} Wendy Simonds and Barbara Katz Rothman, \textit{Centuries of Solace: Expressions of Maternal Grief in Popular Literature} (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 4, quoted in Layne, 15. Some of the changing circumstances of pregnancy loss today include the risks associated with \textit{in vitro} fertilization as well as the fact that many women are waiting until later in life to have children.
\end{itemize}
precisely their feminist commitments to women and women’s experiences that have stopped them from paying too close attention to pregnancy loss grief. For one thing, pregnancy loss calls into question feminist narratives of control, particularly control over one’s body. In addition, as Layne puts it, “The fear, in the context of pregnancy loss, is that if one were to acknowledge that there was something of value lost, something worth grieving in a miscarriage one would thereby automatically accede the inherent personhood of embryos and fetuses.” In short, the concern is that acknowledging pregnancy loss as a potential source of trauma could undermine the commitment of American feminists to abortion rights.

In Layne’s case, it was not until her own experiences with repeated miscarriages that she reluctantly began to acknowledge that the pregnancies she lost were more than just “tissue” to her. Still, she remained conflicted about her feelings. In the midst of her research on the pregnancy loss support movement, Layne faced this confusion, writing,

On a shelf in my office I keep a crepe-paper butterfly from one of UNITE’s conferences. At the conference, bereaved parents were invited to write the name of their dead “baby” or “babies” on the butterflies and then hang them on a felt tree to commemorate their loss/es. I remember how awkward I felt on that occasion, wanting to participate, to share in the healing power of ritual, but being unable to do so, never having attributed full-fledged personhood to my losses.

Layne’s research, which initially had been inspired by her own reproductive struggles, forced her to reflect back on her deeply held feminist principles in light of her pregnancy loss experiences. Her work shows that acknowledging pregnancy loss trauma need not be

22 Layne, 240.

23 UNITE, Inc. is a Philadelphia-based grief support network for individuals who have suffered the loss of a pregnancy or a child through miscarriage, stillbirth, or infant death.

24 Layne, 8.
at odds with a strong commitment to feminist values, and she calls on other scholars to incorporate pregnancy loss into the broader American feminist research agenda.

_Grieving, but grieving what exactly?—The American Context_

Layne’s mixed and conflicting feelings are not uncommon among those who suffer pregnancy losses. In her book _Grieving the Child I Never Knew_ (2001), Kathe Wunnenberg recounts the reproductive challenges she faced, including three miscarriages and one stillbirth, as she and her husband tried to start a family. Looking back on her history of pregnancy loss, Wunnenberg was left not only with feelings of grief but also confusion about why she was even grieving. She writes, “I never knew this child fully, so why do I grieve so deeply? I never held this tiny baby, never saw sleeping face, never locked eyes and gazed into the soul of this little person. Yet, I feel as if a part of me died and left a void in my being.”

Wunnenberg’s experience is not uncommon among those who have spontaneously miscarried a hoped-for child, and her reflections point to the complicated emotions surrounding pregnancy loss. In a healthy, desired pregnancy, there is a sense of both the “already” and the “not yet,” accomplishment and anticipation. The hoped-for child already exists and is felt in the womb by the mother, yet a great sense of mystery and potentiality remains since the fetus is not yet present in the world as an individual being with the ability to be known by others. This delicate balance between presence and absence is upset permanently when a pregnancy loss occurs, consigning both fetus and mother to a sort of limbo. Death before birth leaves the fetus suspended in an ambiguous

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state as a known-yet-unknowable object of memory while women mourning miscarriage often find themselves lingering in the liminal space of pregnancy, still holding on to the “already” while the “not yet” has transformed into a “not ever.”

This experience of liminality, confusion, and grief is not unlike the feelings many women go through after intentionally terminating a pregnancy. Eve Kushner’s book *Experiencing Abortion: A Weaving of Women’s Words* (1997) chronicles women’s reflections on the circumstances and emotional effects of their own abortions. It tackles a wide range of difficult issues impacting (and impacted by) abortion decisions, including relationships, self-image, and the meaning of the lost pregnancy and fetus. One particularly moving section of the book recounts women’s feelings of grief following abortion. It tells the story of a 19-year-old woman who felt tremendous grief after an elective abortion. The woman says,

> People think that if I could have an abortion, I don’t feel anything, that grieving isn’t even an option. I did grieve, though. I was sad that I created something that never could be, that I was never going to know anything more about it. It made me very sad when I would wonder what sex it would have been, what color eyes, tall, short...²⁶

The speaker here is right to point out the common assumption that a deliberately induced abortion is not mourned by the woman who ended the pregnancy. Many of the stories in Kushner’s book, however, paint a different picture. Some women, like the 19-year-old quoted above, mourn the particular fetus and what it would have been like had it been brought to term. Others grieve the unsupportive circumstances they faced before and after a pregnancy termination.²⁷

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Memorializing Pregnancy Loss

Just as no two pregnancy loss experiences are the same, neither are individual’s reasons for taking part in pregnancy loss memorials. The pregnancy loss memorial practices of Japanese Buddhists and American Catholics address a spectrum of pregnancy loss experiences and the feelings that arise with them. They build on existing Japanese and American cultural narratives of pregnancy, motherhood, and pregnancy loss. In addition, I suggest that these memorials are helping to re-shape how each of these categories is understood in the context of Japanese Buddhism and American Catholicism. At the very least, these memorial practices represent the growing public acknowledgement of a basic human experience that has failed to receive recognition proportionate to its pervasiveness. My goal in this project is not only to draw attention to the reality of pregnancy loss, but also to highlight the ways in which Japanese Buddhist and American Catholic groups are developing memorial practices capable of creatively responding to the challenges posed by miscarriage, stillbirth, and abortion.

Part II: Defining the Argument

American Catholic and Japanese Buddhist pregnancy loss memorial practices represent distinct attempts on the part of diverse religious groups to respond to the reality of miscarriage, stillbirth, and abortion within their communities. In each setting, the new pregnancy loss practices reflect the logic and the values of the theological and ritual frameworks in which they emerged. Taking these differences into account, I argue that American Catholic and Japanese Buddhist pregnancy loss memorial rites, though focused

27 Kushner, 61-77.
on the same problem, function in distinct ways and serve distinct purposes in each context. Whereas American Catholic practices primarily seek to provide healing and reconciliation in times of loss, the Japanese Buddhist memorials claim to affect the postmortem destinies of fetuses that die before birth through the performance of rituals on their behalf. While the Japanese Buddhist practices also aim at providing comfort to those mourning a loss, they do so in a manner that is markedly apolitical compared to the anti-abortion message communicated implicitly and explicitly in the Catholic memorialization of pregnancy loss.

Notes on Terminology

Defining the language of my argument and the overall project has been a continual struggle for precision due to the biologically nuanced and political explosive meanings associated with some of the key terms involved. First and foremost, my use of the term “pregnancy loss” is somewhat idiosyncratic. This is due to the fact that I use “pregnancy loss” to name not only a physiological event (i.e., the expulsion of embryonic and fetal tissue from the uterus) but also the emotional injury that the physiological experience often brings about.

Specifically, I use the term “pregnancy loss” to refer to instances of miscarriage, stillbirth, and abortion that are experienced as losses and as occasions for grief by those involved. This is not to say that all interrupted pregnancies are grieved or experienced as pregnancy losses. Eve Kushner observes, “After an abortion, some of us feel no loss at all—only gains.”28 Likewise, not all spontaneous miscarriages elicit a sense of loss or sadness

28 Kushner, 63.
from the once-expectant mother. Thus, while I recognize that not all pregnancies that fail to reach full term—either spontaneously or as a result of induced abortion—are lamented, my research focuses on those cases in which a pregnancy ends and that ending is accompanied by feelings of grief and loss.

My use of the term “pregnancy loss” is also idiosyncratic because I include unintended miscarriage and stillbirth within the same category as induced abortion. I do this for a couple of reasons. First, many of the pregnancy loss rituals and memorials currently offered by Japanese Buddhist and American Catholic groups do not distinguish between the circumstances of pregnancy losses in practice. Because spontaneous and induced abortion are undifferentiated ritually speaking, then, I group them together in my analysis as well.

Second, examining deliberately induced abortion within the same interpretive framework as unintended miscarriage and stillbirth challenges many common assumptions about abortion. In the United States and Japan today, there are strong stigmas associated with abortion, due in part to widespread stereotypes that women terminate pregnancies do so casually or for selfish reasons (such as an unwillingness to care for a child or in order to conceal illicit sexual behavior). By seeing abortion and miscarriage as part of a single continuum of pregnancy loss, one is able to forego such stereotypes and be open to seeing abortion as the genuine occasion of grief that it is for many women, regardless of their reasons for terminating pregnancies.

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29 This outlook can be characterized as a “probably for the best” mentality, which assumes that the fetus miscarried for a natural but necessary reason, such as genetic malformation.
Finally, it should be noted that “pregnancy loss” as I use it does not include infertility struggles within its scope. While the anguish and grief that often accompanies infertility is undeniable and also deserves acknowledgement, it is of a different nature than the experiences of women who are able to conceive yet go on to lose or terminate a pregnancy, and therefore I exclude it here.

In terms of the physical processes involved in reproduction, reproductive loss, and pregnancy termination, specific biological and medical terminology is used to identify the different stages of gestational development and to label the losses that may occur over the course of pregnancy. “Embryo” refers to the conceptus as it develops in the first eight weeks after conception (or fertilization). After that eight week point, the embryo becomes a fetus. The term “abortion” refers to the expulsion of a fertilized ovum from a woman’s body. When this expulsion is intentionally brought about through a medical intervention, it is called an induced abortion. What we commonly call a “miscarriage” in English is known as a spontaneous abortion within medical terminology and refers only to those pregnancies that end before the twentieth week of gestation. After the twentieth week, reproductive loss is technically fetal death or stillbirth.\(^{30}\) I draw on this terminology throughout the dissertation, frequently without the rigid adherence to technical precision that is required in scientific discussions of reproduction. For example, for the sake of simplicity and fluency, often I use the term “miscarriage” to refer to losses that occur before and after the twentieth week of development, that is, for both true miscarriages and stillbirths. I also typically refer to miscarriage and pregnancy loss in the singular form.

\(^{30}\) For a more complete discussion of the nuances of each of these terms, see *Williams Obstetrics*, 22\(^{nd}\) ed., eds. F. Gary Cunningham, et al. (New York: McGraw-Hill Medical Publication Division, 2005).
though in reality many women undergo multiple losses over the course of a lifetime. Similarly, I tend to use “fetus” and “fetal” in expansive ways that are meant to encompass the embryological stages of development as well.\textsuperscript{31}

I rely on this terminology in order to achieve a foundational level of precision and consistency in my discussion of the earliest stages of human life. Yet even the decision to refer to fetal life in medical terms can be interpreted as a political choice. In the American anti-abortion movement, for instance, the use of the term “fetus” is often interpreted as a rejection of personhood of the “child” in the womb. Or, my use of the “unborn” might find resistance within the American abortion rights community for attributing too much autonomy to fetuses, thereby extracting them from the context of women’s bodies. Throughout this text I try to honor individual communities’ preferred nomenclature when discussing each particular group. So, for example, when talking about Japanese Buddhist pregnancy loss rites, I call the lost fetus a \textit{mizuko}, or water baby. When discussing the American Catholic memorial activities, I rely on the terms “children” or “the unborn” more frequently since that is the language most commonly used by the groups and individuals that facilitate Catholic pregnancy loss practices.

Interestingly, in the Japanese context the terminology surrounding the discussion of fetal life and pregnancy loss, particularly abortion, is not as politically charged as it is in America. In the U.S., abortion rights supporters resist labeling embryos or fetuses as “babies” or “children” because of the implication of personhood inherent in such terms. Anti-abortion groups, by contrast, use the terms “baby” and “child” constantly as a linguistic affirmation of the personhood they believe exists from the time of conception.

\textsuperscript{31} When I do use the term “embryo,” typically I do so in a technically precise way as required by the context of the discussion at hand.
In Japan, the situation is quite different, in part because abortion does not elicit the same type of moral consternation there. For most of the 20th century, abortion was the most common form of “birth control” in Japan. I will go into the reasons behind this in Chapter 3, but for now, suffice it to say that abortion has been an essential part of Japanese family planning for decades. While there have been periods when abortion access has been opposed by various Japanese social and political groups, that opposition was not grounded in fundamental claims about fetal personhood (like it is for American pro-life groups).

Indeed, miscarried, stillborn, and aborted fetuses are routinely called mizuko, that is, water babies or water children. In part, this is what has attracted American scholars to study mizuko memorial practices over the years: first, despite its prevalence, abortion fails to be such a morally, socially, and politically contentious issue in Japan; second, there appears to be no conflict between recognizing a fetus as a child and having an abortion and/or supporting abortion rights. In the context of this project, I consider how the fetus is recognized as a child not only linguistically, but theologically through the Japanese Buddhist imagination of the unborn and ritually through the performance of mizuko kuyō.

Another terminological point that merits clarification is the language I use to identify the various pregnancy loss memorial practices under consideration. When I began this project, my intention was to focus on specific Buddhist and Catholic rites performed after a pregnancy loss. By rites, I mean formal ceremonies or liturgies that are explicitly focused on the issue of pregnancy loss, follow a pre-determined ritual structure, and are led by some sort of ritual specialist or facilitator, usually a Buddhist or Catholic priest.

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32 The word mizuko is composed of the Japanese characters for water (水, mizu) and child (子, ko). Japanese nouns can be singular or plural without any additional markings, therefore mizuko can refer to either a single “water child” or multiple “water children.”
Some scholars use “rites” to name specific ceremonies or liturgies and “ritual” to identify the broader category of ritualized practices. For the most part, I use the terms interchangeably.

As my research progressed, I came to see that these rites are just one aspect of the diverse body of pregnancy loss memorials, and I expanded my focus accordingly to take this diversity into account in the formulation of my argument. Examples of these less formal practices can be found within both traditions. For instance, instead of taking part in a specific mizuko ceremony, many Japanese women and couples visit temples known for mizuko rites to offer privately votive tablets (ema) inscribed with messages to their mizuko. Hundreds of these votive tablets hang at the entrance to the mizuko garden at Zōjō-ji Temple in Tokyo, and the messages they hold range from sweet to sad to heart wrenching. Similarly, many Catholic pregnancy loss practices simply entail visiting a special space that is dedicated specifically to commemorating pregnancy losses, such as the Patron of the Unborn Memorial in Santa Cruz, California.

Because I include such a wide variety of pregnancy loss experiences and memorial practices in my analysis, the specific sources I rely on as I construct the different elements of my argument are always shifting. My hope is that this leads a holistic, integrated view of the range of issues these memorials address and the diverse theological and ritual approaches within Japanese Buddhism and American Catholicism for responding to them.

**Central Themes**

This project grew out of an implicit comparison that began when I first learned of

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the Japanese *mizuko kuyō*. Hearing of a Buddhist ritual commemorating miscarriages, stillbirths, and especially abortions, I implicitly questioned and sought parallels in my home tradition, Roman Catholicism. Gradually, my implicit comparison evolved into an explicit comparison as I shifted from observing empirical differences between Buddhist and Catholic pregnancy loss memorials to situating those differences within the broader conceptual categories that came to structure my analysis.

The analytical categories at the heart of this study are prenatal theological anthropology and ritual efficacy. Here, prenatal theological anthropology has to do with Catholic and Buddhist understandings of the significance of fetal life and death in the context of pregnancy loss. Ritual efficacy refers to the purported effects or outcomes that pregnancy loss rituals bring about through their performance. I show that in the Japanese setting, Buddhist *mizuko* rites purport to effect a change in the postmortem fate of lost fetuses that helps fetal spirits attain a desirable rebirth as a human or in the Pure Land. American Catholic pregnancy loss rites, by contrast, are premised on the belief that in death, the unborn neither require nor benefit from ritual intervention on their behalf because, in their innocence, they already fall under the protection of God’s mercy and salvific will.

Despite these divergent ritual goals, Japanese Buddhist and American Catholic

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Implicit comparison has been a part of religious studies since its foundations in the 19th century as European scholars encountered new cultures and interpreted the practices, literature, and beliefs of others through the categories of Christian theology. (Gregory Schopen unmasks this process of implicit comparison in his essay, “Archaeology and Protestant Presuppositions in the Study of Indian Buddhism,” *History of Religions* 31, no. 1, 1991). In the late-twentieth century, a critical awareness developed of the presuppositions scholars of all disciplines bring to their research. This had the effect of making what were once implicit comparisons explicit as reflexivity became a valued and essential feature of scholarship, including scholarship in the disciplines of theology and religious studies. I will touch on this issue again in Chapter 5.
pregnancy loss memorialization share a common concern for the wellbeing of memorial participants troubled by their pregnancy losses and concerned about lost prenates. They address this concern by clarifying and ordering the postmortem status of fetuses that have been lost (does it still exist? If so, where and in what form? Is it in the Pure Land? Is it saved?), and by acknowledging the maternal-fetal relationship that has been broken through pregnancy loss. In this way, pregnancy loss memorials are therapeutic for memorial participants.

Employing these themes—theological anthropology and ritual efficacy—as analytical categories allows questions about the theological understanding of fetuses lost through miscarriage, stillbirth, or abortion, and about the goals of pregnancy loss rituals to come into focus. The first category, theological anthropology, is derived from the area of Christian theology that seeks to understand the human person from the perspective of theological sources such as scripture, doctrine, and liturgy. It examines human experience within a Christian theological framework in order to make fundamental claims about the nature and significance of human life and death. The second issue, ritual efficacy, relates to the goals and outcomes of the Catholic and Buddhist rites. It focuses on what the rites are purported to effectuate, or bring about, through their performance. Working within the comparative context of American Catholic and Japanese Buddhist pregnancy loss rites, I bring these two themes together to ask, 1) what can be said about the nature of the prenatal beings memorialized in pregnancy loss rites, and 2) what are pregnancy loss rites believed to accomplish by means of their performance?

While the category of theological anthropology is not native to Buddhism or Buddhist studies, speculation about the nature of human beings has been a part of the
tradition since its origins. As a result, the questions and methods of this area of Christian theological studies resonate with the concerns of key Buddhist sources and thinkers. Within Catholic thought, theological anthropology has historically centered on the adult (typically male) Christian as the exemplary model of human nature and human experience. Recently, a number of Catholic theologians expanded the gaze of theological anthropology to include children in their purview in order to grasp what children as children, not simply as immature adults, reveal about what it means to be human. In this dissertation, I take a more dramatic approach to understanding the anthropology of the very young by investigating how the fetus is imagined and constructed within Catholic and Buddhist thought. Specifically, I tease out the doctrinal and ritual articulations of the theological anthropology of the beings that pregnancy loss practices memorialize, that is, the “unborn dead,”35—embryos and fetuses who die through miscarriage, stillbirth, and abortion.

Fetuses that never reach full-term as a result of pregnancy loss are profoundly liminal beings that only ever exist at the boundaries of life and death. Though the fetus has long been an object of Catholic and Buddhist religious imaginations, speculation about the significance of prenatal life and death has typically occurred indirectly as classical and contemporary thinkers have wrestled with topics such as the ethics of abortion, medical explanations of embryological development, and accounts of what happens in the time immediately following any person’s or being’s death. My aim is to provide a detailed account of what I call the “prenatal anthropology” of each tradition. Doing so reveals the theological implications of pregnancy loss in both Buddhism and Catholicism and

elucidates the fundamental presuppositions about fetal life and death informing and being formed by the pregnancy loss memorial practices.

This raises the other issue at the heart of this comparison: ritual efficacy, or the question of what pregnancy loss rituals bring about through their performance. The category of ritual efficacy is drawn from ritual studies’ performance theory. Performance approaches to ritual rest on the notion that rituals “work.” That is, by their very performance, rituals are purported to be efficacious or instrumentally effective inasmuch they bring about specific, designated outcomes. This understanding of the ritual efficacy fits well with both Buddhist and Catholic interpretations of the potential of ritual to effect real changes in the lives of ritual actors and in the order of the cosmos. I incorporate practice theory into my analysis as well. Practice theory centers on the belief that human shape their environment through their choices and actions. Rather than merely responding to existing cultural forces and structures, this theory posits that individuals help construct the surrounding culture by acting in “culturally effective ways.” Performance and practice approaches to ritual are concerned with understanding what rituals “do” rather than what they mean. They highlight the agency of ritual participants in constructing the ritual experience while also acknowledging the influence cultural and social structures on the participant. In terms of pregnancy loss rituals, performance and practice theories allow me to home in on the question of ritual efficacy while still recognizing the web of religious, social, and cultural relations in which the rituals are embedded.
Part III: Chapter Outline

Following this Introduction (Chapter 1), I offer a detailed summary in Chapter 2 of the methodology I employ throughout the remainder of the dissertation. Due to the interdisciplinary nature of this project, I draw on several different fields in crafting a multidimensional analysis of pregnancy loss memorial practices. In addition to probing the history and doctrine of Catholicism and Buddhism in relation to the issue of pregnancy loss, I also turn to ritual studies in order to investigate the various goals and outcomes of pregnancy loss rites.

Chapters 3 and 4 analyze the religious imagination of the unborn in Japanese Buddhism and American Catholicism. I do this in order to situate pregnancy loss memorials, which are relatively recent developments, within the broader scope of Buddhist and Catholic thought. I suggest that Japanese mizuko kuyō and Catholic pregnancy loss memorials are reflective of existing doctrinal ideas about the nature of prenatal life while also generating a new forum for the articulation of prenatal anthropology within each tradition.

Chapter 3 explores the web of factors that have influenced the development of mizuko kuyō in Japan. First, I concentrate on early Buddhist resources that reflect on the significance of life in the womb, particularly Indian Buddhist speculation about embryological development and scriptural discourses that discuss the mechanisms of rebirth and the ethics of abortion. Then, I bring these resources into dialogue with the contemporary scholarship on Buddhism and abortion, Japanese Buddhist ideas about prenatal life, and existing English-language research on mizuko kuyō.
Chapter 4 turns to the Catholic theological discourse about the nature and value of unborn human life. The first part of the chapter examines magisterial texts, as well as the historical resources they draw on, to establish a foundational understanding of the place of the fetus in Catholic doctrine. Much of this speculation has been formulated within the context of discussions about the ethics of abortion, contraception, and new reproductive technologies (e.g. *in vitro* fertilization). My own interest is not in reproductive ethics per se, but in what the ethical discourse communicates about the imagination of the unborn in Catholic doctrine. The second part of Chapter 4 builds on this doctrinal perspective by exploring how other theological sources inform the Catholic imagination of prenatal life, including speculation about the existence of a children’s limbo and recent theologies of childhood.

In Chapter 5 and 6, I shift my focus from prenatal anthropology in order to concentrate on the ritual dynamics of pregnancy loss memorial practices. I draw on performance theory to analyze the “work,” or efficacy, of the rituals. I also turn to practice theory to examine the significance of the rituals as cultural practices that, in Catherine Bell’s words, create “a meaningful event out of a new and potentially incomprehensible situation, namely, by bringing traditional structure to bear on it.”[^36] My goal is not to leave the prenatal anthropology from the previous two chapters behind, but to understand the relationship between Buddhist and Catholic prenatal anthropologies and the traditions’ respective pregnancy loss memorial rites. This research demonstrates how these rituals are not simply enactments of doctrine but entail the negotiation of a broader range of social and cultural factors that simultaneously reinforce and re-construct doctrinal notions.

of prenatal life as well as beliefs about the nature of pregnancy loss and the maternal-fetal relationship.

To this end, in Chapters 5 and 6 I employ both etic and emic theories of ritual to probe the melding of tradition and innovation in pregnancy loss memorials. I draw on performance theory’s concept of ritual efficacy to get at the specific goals of mizuko kuyō and Catholic pregnancy loss memorial rites. The principles of practice theory also inform my analysis in these chapters. The central strength of practice theory is the attention it devotes to the agency of ritual participants. It looks at how individuals actively take in and reframe symbols in order to construct their own systems of meaning. This is a departure from older ritual theories that treated ritual participants only as passive receivers of existing cultural meaning, roles, and structures that were uncritically expressed through ritual practice. By contrast, practice theory attends to the creative and potentially transgressive ways in which individuals reshape culture through rites. Drawing on the transformative potential of ritual, I suggest that through pregnancy loss memorials individuals are able to re-frame (or re-narrate) their pregnancy loss experiences, thereby changing them from stories of trauma and brokenness to ones of reconciliation and relationship. This re-narration takes place through the memorial performance, which transcends discursive communication in order to create a new form of ritually-based “knowing” that impacts how pregnancy loss is interpreted by memorial participants and the broader religious community.

Chapters 5 and 6 focus on the specific cases of pregnancy loss memorials in Japanese Buddhism and American Catholicism. In both the Japanese and American contexts, my argument is informed and supported by ethnographic research carried out in
Japan and the United States, including participant-observation of pregnancy loss rites and interviews with individuals who facilitate the memorials. Chapter 5 starts with an exploration of the general features and values of Japanese religion and ritual followed by an in-depth consideration of Japanese Buddhist funerals and memorial kuyō. My aim in that section is to understand the role of ritual broadly within Japanese religion as well as the structure and function (efficacy) of funeral and memorial rites in particular. This in turn elucidates the milieu in which mizuko kuyō arises and sets the stage for my analysis of mizuko kuyō in the second half of the chapter. In a similar vein, Chapter 6 introduces the notion of efficacy in the context of Catholic liturgical practices centered on deceased members of the community including funerals and prayers for the dead. This section shows the shifting senses of ritual efficacy that have taken hold over the course of Christian history and that have come to direct the orientation of today’s liturgical theology. I follow this with a detailed description and analysis of contemporary American Catholic pregnancy loss memorial practices from the perspective of ritual efficacy and performance and practice ritual theories. These practices include parish-based “miscarriage masses,” diocesan-sponsored post-abortion healing retreats, and public abortion monuments.

Examining pregnancy loss memorials through the lens of ritual efficacy reveals that the Japanese and American practices seek different goals and serve different purposes in each context. In the Japanese setting, the focus is on the ability of memorials to bring about ontological changes in the destiny and status of the fetus after death. There is also an epistemological function that gives women an opportunity to re-frame their pregnancy loss experiences through the lens of loving commemoration and ongoing care. In the
American Catholic setting, memorials make no claims to ontological efficacy and focus strictly on epistemological goals. Here, not only does the process of memorialization give women the chance to re-frame pregnancy loss experiences in terms of Catholic narratives of grace and healing, it also gives Catholic organizations concerned with the ethics and politics of abortion a new forum for advancing the pro-life cause. In both contexts, the memorials are not simply literal, discursive responses to pregnancy loss. Rather, by means of their performance, they enact new, embodied ways of understanding loss experiences that shift how miscarriage, stillbirth, and abortion are “known” by ritual participants and by the surrounding community. They address wounds that penetrate multiple areas of life—physical, emotional, spiritual, interpersonal, social—to bring new meaning to situations normally defined by brokenness and alienation.

Over the course of the final chapters I define terms of this argument in greater detail. While the general category of efficacy is drawn directly from performance approaches to ritual, the distinction between ontological and epistemological forms of efficacy is not. I develop these categories through the process of bringing theological, emic understandings of ritual into dialogue with the etic framework of performance theory. While most performance theorists focus on the social or healing outcomes of rituals, I use performance theory in conjunction with Buddhist and Catholic accounts of ritual as a tool for understanding the theological claims to efficacy within each context. Unlike many other ritual theories, performance theory is able to stand along side emic ritual interpretations without undermining internal claims of efficacy, including ontological efficacies. I employ practice theory to take into account the broader social and cultural implications of pregnancy loss rituals. This two-tiered, comparative analysis demonstrates
Conclusion

What all the pregnancy loss memorials considered in this dissertation have in common is the social construction and “individualization” of lost fetuses through the act of memorialization. That is, through the memorial practices, lost fetuses come be recognized socially and claimed as part of a family, and in that way, they are given individual identities as someone’s absent yet beloved child. Put differently, every lost fetus that is memorialized becomes a child by means of the memorial. While it seems redundant to say that a woman becomes a mother when she has a child, in cases of pregnancy loss, maternal identity is compromised and often remains ambiguous. Thus, in the construction of the lost fetus as a child, the identity of the woman as mother is also constructed through the process of memorialization.

The title of the dissertation comes from the Hebrew Bible’s book of Jeremiah in which the matriarch Rachel is described as mourning for her children. The figure of Rachel is frequently invoked by Christian groups that focus on pregnancy loss because of Rachel’s own struggles with infertility. In the book of Genesis she is introduced as the “graceful and beautiful” daughter of Laban. Jacob works for Laban for seven years to win her hand in
marriage, yet on the night of their wedding, Laban deceives Jacob and weds him instead to Leah, Rachel’s older sister. Still desiring Rachel, Jacob agrees to work for Laban for another seven years in exchange for her hand.

In the story, Leah goes on to bear Jacob four sons while Rachel is described as “barren.” Her inability to bear children is attributed to the will of God who “withheld from [her] the fruit of the womb” (Gen 30:2), and over time, her condition begins to wear on her. Eventually, the story tells us, “God remembered Rachel...and opened her womb” (Gen 30:22), and she gives birth to Joseph and Benjamin, Jacob’s favorite sons because Rachel was their mother. Sadly, after years of reproductive struggle, Rachel did not live to raise her children but died while delivering Benjamin.

Rachel appears once again in the book of Jeremiah.

A voice is heard in Ramah, 
   lamentation and bitter weeping.
Rachel is weeping for her children; 
   she refuses to be comforted for her children, 
   because they are no more. (Jer 31:15)

I draw the title of the dissertation from this passage because it captures the sense of loss and devastation many women feel after a failed or terminated pregnancy. In particular, I use “because they are no more” to refer to fetuses that never come to term and that, in turn, become the focus of rituals and memorials undertaken after a pregnancy loss. Additionally, however, I use “because they are no more” to recognize the experience of no longer being pregnant or of losing one’s maternal identity as a result of a pregnancy loss.

The memorial practices considered here ritually acknowledge and manifest both of these things—the lives of lost fetuses and the motherhood of the women who lost them. Though they have emerged within diverse religious and cultural contexts, Japanese
Buddhist and American Catholic pregnancy loss memorials offer Buddhist and Catholic practitioners a public and formal way to address losses that have long been ignored by society. On the surface, both traditions appear to address pregnancy loss similarly insofar they both offer memorials to commemorate losses. Probing more deeply, we can see that each tradition conceives of the problem of pregnancy loss differently, and in turn, offers a distinct way of addressing that problem.
CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY

Part I: General Methodology

Methodologically speaking, this project is ambitious in its effort to bring together diverse types of research. On one level, it provides a synchronic, ethnographically-grounded investigation into contemporary religious practices (sometimes called “lived religion”) centered on pregnancy loss. At the same time, it undertakes a detailed diachronic study of the doctrinal and ritual frameworks employed and inhabited by pregnancy loss practices. Incorporating these distinct disciplinary perspectives presents a more holistic picture of the factors—theological, cultural, social, political—influencing pregnancy loss practices than any single approach could provide.

On top of all of this, this dissertation is comparative. The goal of this comparison is not to demonstrate that the Catholic and Buddhist practices are similar to each other. Nor is it to suggest that one set of practices developed out of the other. Rather, comparing Catholic and Buddhist pregnancy loss memorial practices allows the two cases to probe one another and brings to light questions and insights that would remain hidden without the give and take of dialogue. This comparative element has proved to be particularly important for exploring pregnancy loss practices in the American Catholic religious context. Because there is so little existing scholarship on the subject of pregnancy loss memorials in America, comparison with the well-established Japanese Buddhist practices has drawn attention to aspects of the emerging Catholic practices that could otherwise be taken for granted or simply overlooked in research focusing strictly on the Christian tradition.
Comparative Methodology

My comparative method is similar to that of anthropologist Tsipy Ivry in her study of the experience of pregnancy as a culturally-conditioned phenomenon in Japan and Israel, *Embodying Culture: Pregnancy in Japan and Israel.* Ivry’s project began as an ethnography of Japanese ideas about pregnancy, but during the process of her research, she found herself implicitly drawing comparisons between her Japanese findings and her own Israeli cultural background. Rather than masking the impact of this implicit comparison on her thought, Ivry reformulated her project as an explicit comparison, which enabled her to benefit from the comparative process in an open and reflexive manner.

When I first learned of mizuko kuyō, I found myself in a similar position to Ivry. The more I researched mizuko kuyō, the more I felt myself looking to my primary field of research (and home religious tradition), Roman Catholic theology, for parallels and resources for understanding the logic of memorializing pregnancy loss. Like Ivry, I opted to take advantage of the questions and insights emerging from my implicit comparison by undertaking an explicit comparison between Japanese Buddhist mizuko kuyō and the new Catholic pregnancy loss memorials I was discovering in the U.S.

Ivry’s two-part comparative method is characterized by, “first, the shift of viewpoints back and forth between cases; and secondly, the use of ‘differences’ and ‘similarities’ as ‘stimulants’ for thinking and as ‘analytical resources.’” The first part,
shifting between the two viewpoints, in her words, “create[s] a methodological apparatus where neither the Israeli nor the Japanese case can be taken for granted or serve as a point of departure: rather, points of departure shift back and forth.”

In the second aspect of her approach, differences and similarities “are first identified at the level of empirical findings and trigger a series of sub-questions that propel the analysis up to the conceptual level in a zigzag movement between the fields.”

Taken together, these steps keep Ivry’s project ethnographically-rooted and analytically-focused while also providing an effective mechanism for integrating the diverse perspectives of her two case studies.

The approach I take in this dissertation has much in common with Ivry’s methodology. Like Ivry, I shift viewpoints deliberately throughout the project in order to “rej[e]ct privileging the perspective of either culture under investigation.”

Shuttling between Japanese Buddhist and American Catholic perspectives, my own points of departure shift as I address the “sub-questions”—in my case, these are the specific questions of prenatal theological anthropology and ritual efficacy—triggered by my initial research comparing *mizuko kuyō* and the new Catholic memorial practices. Some of the issues I pursue stem from the American Catholic arena while others developed out of my research into the Japanese Buddhist context. As Ivry observes, comparison “entails a particular mode of consciousness with far-reaching effects on every single aspect of research.”

For me, pursuing a comparative agenda required that my fieldwork and my

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4 Ivry, 15.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.
analytical work be bound together in a feedback loop, constantly informing and shaping one another. While I remain grounded in ethnographic data, the driving themes of the project are conceptual in nature. Staying tied to these conceptual guideposts helps me avoid presenting two freestanding case studies with little to say to or about one another and instead allows me to move beyond surface similarities and differences in order to embrace both the insights and the messiness that can emerge from the process of comparison.

_Bridging the Gap Between Intellectual and Lived Approaches to Religion_

As I mentioned in the Introduction Chapter, it was through preliminary comparisons of the American Catholic and Japanese Buddhist cases that the issues of theological anthropology and ritual efficacy emerged as worthy of further investigation. These issues, when situated within the broader Catholic and Buddhist doctrinal frameworks, reveal the distinctive response of each tradition to the problem of pregnancy loss and invite the scholar to think about the relationship between doctrine and ritual in the formation of new ritual practices. In this way, my project concurs with the comparative principle articulated by Luis Gomez that “correspondences in context are valuable even when they reflect similar issues but different or mutually exclusive solutions.”

At its core, this project is multidisciplinary. Beyond the broad outlook entailed in any Buddhist-Catholic comparison, it draws on diverse methodologies in its exploration of

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pregnancy loss memorials within each tradition. It integrates academic scholarship on the doctrinal and conceptual categories underpinning this study (i.e. theological anthropology and ritual studies) with data gathered through ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Japan and the United States. My aim in incorporating these diverse sources of data is to craft an account of pregnancy loss memorialization that remains attentive to the historical and doctrinal structures underlying these practices without losing sight of the individuals who take part in the memorials and what they bring to the practices. Balancing these perspectives is no easy task, yet I do so in the hope that a more balanced picture of mizuko kuyō and emergent Catholic pregnancy loss practices will come into focus as a result.

Historically, Catholic studies have been dominated by textually-, doctrinally-, and institutionally-focused scholarship that privileges elite perspectives and downplays popular (sometimes called “folk”) stories, beliefs, and customs in the process. Yet, without rejecting the traditional cerebral modus operandi of academic theological studies, scholars in recent years have called for greater attention to Christianity as it is lived and practiced on the ground. Prominent Catholic scholar David Tracy reflects this view, writing,

We still await the Clifford Geertz to write Catholicism Observed in different cultures, or the Wendy Doniger to illuminate the great myths and symbols of Mexican, Polish, Italian, and Irish forms of Catholic life...Above all, we need not only philosophers and theologians but historians of religion and anthropologists to study the myths, rituals, symbols, and symbolic forms of this amazing, pluralistic, and rich Catholic tradition.9

Tracy recognizes that the intellectual forms just one element of the Catholic religious world and makes an appeal for the sort of research that has highlighted the lived (mythic, symbolic, ritual, material) aspects of other religious traditions. Tracy continues, “Such

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historical, social-scientific, anthropological, and history-of-religion perspectives, in my judgment, are what are most needed to challenge, enrich, and change familiar forms of Catholic studies.”

This concern for bridging the gap between academic religious scholarship and lived religion is shared by scholars of Buddhism as well. Echoing observations made by Robert Sharf and Luis Gomez, Steven Covell and Mark Rowe note two tendencies that characterize scholarly approaches to Buddhism in Japan and beyond. On the one hand, some Buddhologists tend to focus so much on foundational figures, histories, and doctrines that they seem unable to address contemporary and popular religious developments without resorting to narratives of degeneration or corruption. On the other hand, scholarship on religion in modern Japan is inclined to privilege economic, social, and political explanations and ignore the potential impact of doctrinal influences. Covell and Rowe call for “ethnographic approaches that are also attentive to doctrinal and historical forces” in order to move beyond research that highlights one point-of-view while obscuring others.

Ian Reader and George Tanabe voice a related concern about the academic study of religion in general in their book, Practically Religious: Worldly Benefits and the Common Religion of Japan. They discern a “particularly problematic split between anthropological and sociological studies on the one hand (which tend to focus on phenomena such as ritual, practice, and custom that are often visible apart from scriptural sources), and theological studies on the other with their focus on issues of creed, text, and doctrine.” Their book,

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10 Tracy, 549.

which concentrates primarily on practice, attempts to bridge this divide by examining key practices “in relation to the wider perspective of religion in Japan—that is, in terms of the doctrinal sources and meanings associated with such practices and the textual sources that affirm them.” This is precisely the sort of balance I attempt to strike in this dissertation.

I investigate contemporary pregnancy loss memorial practices in connection to the “wider perspective” Reader and Tanabe identify, that is, the doctrinal and theological frameworks of Japanese Buddhism and American Catholicism. Using authoritative scriptural, doctrinal, and magisterial sources from Buddhism and Catholicism as well as secondary theoretical literature, I establish an intellectual foundation for exploring the questions of prenatal theological anthropology and ritual efficacy. I then bring these doctrinal and conceptual categories into dialogue with ethnographic research on pregnancy loss practices in Japan and the U.S. In doing so, I hope to bridge divisions between research on the intellectual and “lived” aspects of religion, thereby avoiding the myopia and pitfalls identified above.

**Part II: Data Sources**

*Scholarly Resources on Pregnancy Loss in Buddhism and Christianity*

Throughout this project I cast a wide net in gathering sources that contribute to the understanding of how Japanese Buddhist and American Catholic groups are responding to the phenomenon of pregnancy loss. These sources and the responses they represent are diverse in nature—from theological texts to interviews with memorial facilitators, from the

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12 Reader and Tanabe, 4.

13 Ibid., 6.
memorial rites themselves to the material culture of pregnancy loss in Japan and the United States. The chapter outline in the previous chapter presented a brief overview of the primary and secondary theological and theoretical sources I draw on in crafting Catholic and Buddhist prenatal anthropologies and to interpret the ritual dynamics of Catholic pregnancy loss rites and *mizuko kuyō*. Though relatively few in number, scholarly texts that specifically focus on Christian responses to pregnancy loss and on *mizuko kuyō* comprise an important element of my research.

Within Christian theological studies, the subject of pregnancy loss and related ritual practices remains relatively unexplored. Among the few works on the subject is Christian feminist theologian Serene Jones’ essay, “Hope Deferred: Theological Reflections on Reproductive Loss (Infertility, Miscarriage, Stillbirth)” (2001), which considers the grief experience of women mourning their own loss and the theological implications of such experiences.14 Jones’ article was later republished in a collection of essays titled, *Hope Deferred: Heart-healing Reflections on Reproductive Loss* (2005), in which five female scholars reflected theologically on their struggles with infertility, miscarriage, and stillbirth. Within American Roman Catholic scholarship, substantial research has not yet been done on the subject.15


By contrast, Japanese mizuko rites have received significant scholarly and popular attention in Japan and in the West. Within English-language scholarship, since the early 1980s Japanese mizuko rites have been the subject of many books and articles. The works of William LaFleur (Liquid Life, 1992) and Helen Hardacre (Marketing the Menacing Fetus in Japan, 1997) stand out within research on mizuko kuyō as inspiring, for better or for worse, a multitude of subsequent studies on the subject. Elizabeth Harrison has also published significantly on the topic, though her work is limited to individual articles and book chapters, and as a result, has failed to elicit the same level of scholarly engagement as LaFleur and Hardacre. More recently, Jeff Wilson’s Mourning the Unborn Dead: A Buddhist Ritual Comes to America (2009) explored the religious and cultural adaptations apparent in American Buddhist and therapeutic, non-Buddhist appropriations of the Japanese ritual.

I will explore these sources, Christian and Buddhist, in the chapters ahead. Each contributes valuable insights to the understanding of pregnancy loss and its theological, social, and political implications. I build on these resources in my research, yet I ultimately ask different questions of pregnancy loss memorialization, and consequently, draw on a wide variety of sources—Catholic systematic theology, bioethics, early Buddhist literature, ritual studies, cultural studies—to address those questions.

Multi-sited Ethnographic Fieldwork in the U.S. and Japan

Data gathered during ethnographic fieldwork in the United States and Japan also comprises an important part of this study. For the American Catholic side of the project,

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16 In articles published in 1999 and 1988, Elizabeth Harrison and Bardwell Smith, respectively, refer to a forthcoming collaborative book project focusing on mizuko kuyō, but unfortunately, no such book has materialized to date.
this sort of research was essential considering that pregnancy loss memorials have received little to no scholarly attention before now. On the Japanese Buddhist side of the project, *mizuko kuyō* has been the subject of extensive ethnographic research by scholars of religion, but the focus of my research as well as the conflicting findings of previous scholars required that I explore the field for myself.

My field research was qualitative in nature and aimed at gathering a “lived religion” perspective that could be used to triangulate the findings of my research based in “intellectual” sources in order to present a holistic picture of the form and function of pregnancy loss rituals in each tradition. Through participant-observation of pregnancy loss rituals, visits to memorial sites, and semi-structured interviews with memorial facilitators, I gained firsthand experience of the beliefs, feelings, and tone of pregnancy loss memorial practices. Undoubtedly, there were variations from site to site, from ritual to ritual, but overall, the data gathered by means of ethnographic fieldwork supported my original hypothesis regarding the distinct functions of pregnancy loss memorialization in Japanese Buddhism and American Catholicism.

During the summer of 2010, I undertook intensive, short-term fieldwork in Tokyo, Japan. Working with a native interpreter, I visited dozens temples that offer *mizuko* memorials. I gathered data by way of participant-observation in *mizuko* rites and in-depth interviews with several temple priests who facilitate *mizuko kuyō*. Initially I had hoped to interview *mizuko kuyō* participants (particularly women) as well, but this proved to be a pragmatically untenable objective. In place of this, I gathered the information I

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17 Interestingly, my interpreter commented several times on the benefits my status as a *gaijin*, or foreigner, afforded me during my fieldwork in Tokyo. She felt that priests, temple workers, and visitors were more open with me in our conversations because I was an outsider to Japanese culture and to Buddhism.
sought, namely, women’s perspectives on the reasons for taking part in mizuko kuyō after a pregnancy loss, by other means. Particularly informative were temple’s votive tablets (ema) with messages directed at lost mizuko, responses posted internet message boards hosted by organizations that offer mizuko kuyō, and informal conversations with women taking part in mizuko memorials.

The temples included in my research represent a wide range of Japanese Buddhist sects, including the Jodō, Nichiren, and Sotō Zen schools. While there are important philosophical and doctrinal differences between Japanese Buddhist sects, I opted to include a variety of schools in my research in order to demonstrate the transectarian nature of mizuko kuyō. Mizuko rites, like other funerary and memorial customs, share the same basic structure regardless of sectarian affiliation. Additionally, several priests told me that those seeking mizuko kuyō services typically visit a temple other than the one with which their family is affiliated (i.e., where their familial grave is located). This is done either to preserve one’s anonymity or to have the kuyō performed at a temple that is renowned for its mizuko services (e.g., at Shiunzanji, the Purple Cloud Temple, in Chichibu, or Chingodō, a small temple affiliated with the popular Sensōji in central Tokyo). In short, the specific doctrinal nuances between different sects appear not to be of primary importance to those seeking mizuko services.

Witnessing mizuko kuyō firsthand and speaking with memorial facilitators and participants proved invaluable to my understanding of Japanese Buddhist attitudes toward

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18 Mariko Namba Walters has demonstrated that despite doctrinal differences between sects, the structure of funeral rites is basically consistent across the different schools. See “The Structure of Japanese Buddhist Funerals,” in Death and the Afterlife in Japanese Buddhism, eds. Jacqueline I. Stone and Mariko Namba Walter (Honolulu: University Hawai‘i Press, 2008), 247-292.
pregnancy loss and pregnancy loss memorials. It also refined my understanding of the fundamental dynamics of Japanese religiosity, particularly the centrality of death and funerary customs in forming a connection between temple Buddhism and the average Japanese person.

Part of my desire to conduct my own field research stemmed from the fact that the two main English-language books on the mizuko kuyō, William LaFleur’s Liquid Life and Helen Hardacre’s Marketing the Menacing Fetus in Japan, present conflicting accounts of the history, purpose, and significance of mizuko kuyō in Japan. LaFleur offers a positive appreciation of mizuko kuyō that seeks to connect the contemporary practice with broader themes in Japanese history, culture, and religion. Hardacre, whose book can be read as an extended response to LaFleur, presents a skeptical account of the subject as she draws attention to things Liquid Life overlooked, such as the consumerist and sexist aspects of mizuko kuyō practice and discourse. While each of their perspectives informs my own mizuko kuyō research, LaFleur’s complete optimism and Hardacre’s utter cynicism required that I explore the field for myself in order to develop my own sense of the place of mizuko kuyō in Japanese religion and culture.

On the Catholic side of the project, conducting field research was imperative since these pregnancy loss memorial practices have as yet gone unexplored by theologians and scholars of religion. These practices have emerged (and are emerging) within Catholic communities across the country and have different target audiences. Some are one-time liturgies held in response to a stillbirth within a parish community. Others are permanent public monuments commemorating miscarriages or abortions. Still others are part of concerted efforts by organizations like Project Rachel and Rachel’s Vineyard, which
sponsor counseling and weekend retreats that are intended to provide “healing after abortion.” Because of the novelty of these practices and this area of research, I tried to get a sense of the wide range of pregnancy loss memorial services currently offered. In the coming years, I have no doubt that pregnancy loss memorial practices will continue to proliferate in Catholic communities, and it will be interesting to see which practices take hold, which ones fade away, and what new practices are yet to arise.

In-depth interviews proved my most important source for gaining information about the history and thought behind various pregnancy loss memorials that have arisen over the last twenty-five years. I interviewed a number of memorial or ritual “facilitators,” that is, those individuals responsible for developing or providing memorial practice, in places including Santa Cruz, California, Kansas City, Missouri, and Chicago, Illinois. I took part in a liturgy commemorating miscarriages, stillbirths, and abortions as a participant-observer, and I also participated in a day long training session led by the founders of the Rachel’s Vineyard post-abortion healing retreats. Because post-abortion memorials are an integral component of my research, and because abortion in the U.S. is such a contentious issue that bleeds into discussions of other forms of pregnancy loss, I interviewed folks that span the political spectrum regarding abortion, from fervent abortion foes to supporters of abortion rights. Doing so gave me a good perspective on the logic behind different approaches to pregnancy loss and demonstrated to me that pregnancy loss memorialization in America is more closely tied up in the politics of abortion than it is in Japan.

As with my Tokyo research, my fieldwork in the U.S. was aimed at grasping the breadth of practices available to those wishing to memorialize a pregnancy loss. My goal
was to undertake a general ethnography of American pregnancy loss memorialization in order to understand and draw attention to new Catholic responses to an age-old part of women’s lives. This is an area that continues to be ripe for future research.

**Part III: Conceptual Tools from Ritual Studies**

Throughout the research and writing phases of this project I have relied heavily on ritual studies’ performance and practice theories for understanding pregnancy loss memorialization in the Japanese Buddhist and American Catholic settings. Ritual studies as a discrete field of research within religious studies is a relatively recent development. Catherine Bell, a leading scholar and critic of ritual studies, traces its formal foundation to the publication of Ronald Grimes’ 1982 book *Beginnings in Ritual Studies*. Though Grimes set out to identify the basic parameters, goals, and methodology of the field, ritual studies has been deliberately and self-consciously interdisciplinary from its beginnings. ¹⁹ The theories I draw on (performance and practice theories) are not unique to ritual studies but rather are general scholarly tools for thinking about and interpreting a wide range of human activities—from staged theater performances to the mundane routines of daily life.

The diverse spectrum of activities that have been studied under the purview of ritual studies points to the difficulty of identifying what precisely ritual is. Grimes, a self-described ritologist, notes that efforts at identifying what constitutes ritual have thus far been unsuccessful. Definitions of ritual have typically been circular (e.g., ritual is a rite), too broad to be meaningful, or too narrow to account for new forms of practice. ²⁰ Bell

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¹⁹ Bell, “Performance,” *Critical Terms in Religious Studies*, 207.
argues against the reification of ritual as an autonomous category of human activity and challenges the problematic thought-action dichotomy embedded in most scholarly treatments of ritual.\textsuperscript{21} Talal Asad identifies the Christian historical roots of the category of ritual, despite the fact that these roots have been obscured by usages of the term that imply universal applicability. Masking the specific historical circumstances that gave rise to the category of ritual, he suggests, entails an exercise of hegemonic power.\textsuperscript{22}

Recent scholarly discomfort with definitions of ritual is in no small way a response to generations of scholars who were decidedly less hesitant to identify what they saw as the nature, origins, and function of ritual. Early ritual theorists, like William Robertson Smith and James Frazer, saw ritual as the source of myth and religion. Others, like Mircea Eliade, viewed ritual as the acting out of primordial myths, events, and symbols.\textsuperscript{23} Various other intellectual trends in the 20\textsuperscript{th} century were premised upon sociological, psychological, and structuralist interpretations of ritual. As the critiques made by Grimes, Bell, and Asad demonstrate, however, scholars working on ritual in recent years have pushed back against these and other explanations, cautiously crafting a more open and flexible definition of ritual without making the boundaries so diffuse that the category loses all significance.


\textsuperscript{22} Bell, \textit{Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions}, 79-80.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 4-11. Catherine Bell’s \textit{Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions} provides an excellent history of the study of ritual.
Debates about the relationship between religion, magic, and science that began in the 19th century have also played a large role in how the category of ritual has been understood. “Traditionally,” as Bell observes, “ritual has been distinguished from other modes of action by virtue of its supposed nonutilitarian and nonrational qualities.” Unlike science, ritual action has been characterized as lacking “any practical relationship between the means one chooses to achieve certain ends.”24 Today, many scholars of religion continue to identify non-utility as one of the defining features of ritual practice. William Sax, writing in the introduction to a recent volume titled The Problem of Ritual Efficacy, captures this perspective well, writing, “we only call actions ‘rituals’ when we do not understand the relation between means and ends, when they do not match our criteria of rationality, or better yet, when they do not correspond to our criteria of efficacy.”25 With this in mind, The Problem of Ritual Efficacy tackles the question, “Do rituals really work, and if so, then how?”26 Essentially, this is the question I address over the course of this dissertation by focusing specifically on the pregnancy loss memorials of Japanese Buddhism and American Catholicism.

According to Sax, “the taking of a position with regard to ritual efficacy is a strategic act, through which one locates oneself in terms of political, economic, social, and theological disputes.”27 The essays within Sax’s volume demonstrate his point. The

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24 Bell, Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions, 46.


26 Ibid., 3.
majority of the essays focus on the ways in which rituals are materially or observably efficacious and demonstrate a certain degree of skepticism toward *emic* explanations of ritual efficacy. Their subjects include royal enthronement rites, medieval excommunication, and various sources of physical healing, including two essays on the mind-body relationship in light of the impact of placebos and prayer. My research also considers the “healing” effects of ritual, but perhaps more controversially, it addresses the non-quantifiable, non-observable *ontological* goals of pregnancy loss rites.

My exploration of ritual efficacy is not designed to uphold or dispute the veracity of the claims of efficacy made in either the Japanese Buddhist or American Catholic context. Rather, I aim to explore what is *believed* or *purported* to happen through these rituals from the perspective of those within each tradition. As such, I concentrate primarily on Japanese Buddhist and American Catholic *emic* conceptions of the instrumental effectiveness of memorialization from the points of view of doctrine and of memorial facilitators and participants. To get at these issues, however, I use the *etic* analytical categories of efficacy and agency from performance and practice theories as heuristic tools for probing the question of ritual efficacy. Nonetheless, as Sax rightly points out, taking seriously *emic* accounts of ritual efficacy in some sense makes a statement about my own theological presuppositions and reveals my desire to listen to the voices of religious practitioners.

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27 Ibid., 14. He continues, “All of this goes to show that the question of ritual efficacy is not just a question of how rituals work. To pose the question of ritual efficacy—and more importantly, to answer it in one way and not another—is also to say something about who one is, to position oneself with respect to a range of issues, from the relationship between mind and body to the difference between modernity and tradition, or the alleged conflict between religion and science. How do rituals work, and if so, how? One should think twice before answering that question.”
Performance Theory—Efficacy via Performance

The performance approach to ritual studies emerged in the 1970s as a result of a confluence of other scholarly developments, including J.L. Austin’s concept of performative speech acts, and Richard Schechner’s efforts to bring together theater and anthropology. Prior to this time, scholarly concern had centered on “what rituals mean” and treated rituals as texts to be deciphered. They were seen as mere expressions of established cultural and social values, and ritual participants were treated as passive receivers and re-enactors of existing symbolic scripts. With the rise of performance theory, the focus shifted to “what rituals do,” or “how performative actions produce a culturally meaningful environment as opposed to simply communicating ideas or attitudes.” Performance theorists, then, look to the ways that ritual impacts the reality and experience of ritual actors and pay attention to the active role of participants in making that impact possible.

In the context of ritual studies, performance theory hinges on the notion of efficacy, one of the driving themes of this project. Efficacy, in Catherine Bell’s words, is “the emergent quality of ritual, defined as a function of its performative dimensions, which refers to what ritual is uniquely able to create, effect, or bring about.” “Emergent” here names the potential of ritual to create an effect greater than the confines of the ritual itself might suggest. Building on the work of Schechner, Bell notes that the quality of efficacy is what “distinguishes ritual activities from related activities such as literal communication,

28 Bell, Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions, 73; Bell, “Performance,” 208; emphasis added.

29 Bell, Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions, 75.
routine labor, or pure entertainment.” While labor and entertainment are not necessarily excluded from ritual, it is the ability of ritual performances to “create the very social realities they enact” by means of their performance that sets it apart from mundane or entertainment-based activities.

The work of Stanley Tambiah on crafting a performative approach to ritual can be credited with drawing out efficacy as an important feature of ritual. Tambiah relied on J.L. Austin’s notion of “performatives,” or the idea that sometimes, “to say something is to do something.” Performatives are statements that are best judged not by their degree of truth or falsehood, says Austin, but according to “normative judgments of felicity or legitimacy,” that is, whether or not the statement brings about the intended effect. Tambiah builds on Austin’s notion of illocutionary speech and argues that ritual can also have “perlocutionary (functional) consequences.” Reflecting on the import of Austin’s and Tambiah’s work, William Sax writes,

30 Bell, “Performance,” 208.


33 Austin, 177-178; William Sax, Dancing the Self: Personhood and Performance in the Pāṇḍava lilā of Garhwal (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 4. William Sax summarizes the classic example of what Austin means by felicitous, efficacious statement. “For example, if a wedding officiant says, ‘I now pronounce you husband and wife,’ this utterance is in fact the doing of an action (i.e., the marrying of a man and a woman), and the proper question to ask of it is not ‘Is it true?’ but rather ‘Is it efficacious?’ (in Austin’s terms, ‘Is it felicitious?’), that is, did it accomplish its intended task? Judgments of felicity or infelicity will in turn depend on a whole set of ancillary social conditions: Did both persons intend to marry each other? Was the officiant legally empowered to perform weddings? and so on.”
The greatest value of this approach lies in the way in which it shifts the terms of analysis of ritual away from judgments of truth or falsity, according to which ritual and its practitioners must inevitably be regarded as mystified, irrational, or downright foolish, to judgments of felicity, according to which ritual is seen as one of many human devices for ensuring an ordered social existence.\(^{35}\)

Within religious rituals, Tambiah contends that the consequences or outcomes should not be judged according the rules of Western science and logic, but instead must be “examined within a performative frame of social action [through which] a new horizon opens for viewing the logic of such purposive acts and the canons for their validity from the actor’s point of view.”\(^{36}\) Jack Santino identifies this approach as one that analyzes the ways in which a practice is “emically efficacious,” or how a practice is thought to be functional by its practitioners.\(^{37}\)

Tambiah sees ritual as taking place within a “culturally constructed system of symbolic communication,” and though rituals (particularly new rituals) sometimes transgress this system, their power derives from working within existing structures of meaning. This does not mean that for Tambiah rituals are mere enactments of prevailing systems of meaning, but rather that they gain their “performative potency” by drawing on doctrines, myths, sounds, and actions already familiar (and therefore meaningful) to ritual

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\(^{35}\) Sax, *Dancing the Self*, 4-5.

\(^{36}\) Tambiah, 136.

participants. Once “recognized” by a community, a new ritual can become a customary practice while contributing a “new resonance” to the existing system.  

Bell identifies attention to the framing, or the hermeneutical framework enacted by the ritual that makes ritual communication possible and meaningful, as one of the hallmarks of the performance approach. It is this framework that establishes a ritual act as significant, or even simply licit, particularly in cases in which the ritual act would be considered illicit or problematic outside the appropriate ritual context. Though a ritual may ultimately transgress social, cultural, and religious norms and values, it is only by working within the established framework (at least initially) that it can be effective. Within the ritual itself, scholars focus on the holistic bodily and sensory experience of the ritual and how it “does not simply express cultural values or enact symbolic scripts but actually effects changes in people’s perceptions and interpretations.” Throughout this dissertation, I refer to the process of effecting changes in ritual participants’ perspectives as a form of re-framing or re-narration that impacts how the pregnancy loss experience is understood. This re-narration takes place as memorial performances bring about a new interpretive framework that is ritually embodied in the actions of memorial participants. It goes beyond the level of descriptive discourse in order to actually enact the reality it communicates.

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38 Tambiah, 161.

39 Bell, Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions, 74. Emphasis added.
Practice Theory—Acting in Culturally Effective Ways

Practice theory, which also developed in the 1970s, shares much in common with performance approaches to ritual. Like performance theory, practice theory is “likely to eschew concerns with how ritual molds people to maintain the status quo, looking instead at how individuals fashion rituals that shape their world.”\textsuperscript{40} Yet one point of distinction between the two approaches is practice theory’s attention to everyday activities rather than just to so-called “paradigmatic” events generally recognized as important cultural and religious performances (liturgies, official ceremonies, etc.). Reacting against structuralism’s focus on totalizing systems, “practice theory claims to take seriously the ways in which human activities, as formal as religious ritual or as casual as a midday stroll, are creative strategies by which human beings continually reproduce and reshape their social and cultural environments.”\textsuperscript{41} In other words, all actions, not just paradigmatic actions, can be meaningful.

Perhaps most well known among practice theorists is Pierre Bourdieu. He posits that no cultural structures exist independently of the individual practices, or \textit{habitus}, that construct them. Consequently, he challenges other practice theories that see ritual as the mediator of “history and structure”\textsuperscript{42} to the extent that he believes that “neither exists except insofar as they are embodied and reproduced in human activity as cultural values.”\textsuperscript{43} Yet, as Bell points out, rarely are individuals aware of the values implicitly

\textsuperscript{40} Bell, “Performance,” 209.

\textsuperscript{41} Bell, \textit{Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions}, 76.

\textsuperscript{42} See Bell’s summary of the work of Marshall Sahlins, for example. \textit{Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions}, 77.
encoded in their actions, and in the case of ritual, certain activities function as “strategic practices for transgressing and reshuffling cultural categories in order to meet the needs of real situations.” Ritual, then, becomes “performative medium” for brokering social and cultural power relations. As Bell summarizes it, for practice theory, ritual is “the means for mediating enduring cultural structures and the current situation.” She continues, “It is through ritual practice that culture molds consciousness in terms of underlying structures and patterns, while current realities simultaneously instigate transformations of those very structures and patterns as well.” In short, practice theory sees ritual performances as a dance between what already exists and what is coming into being through the efforts of the ritual participants.

A practice-centered approach to ritual studies is the method that Bell herself advocates as the most useful tool for ritual interpretation. One of the primary advantages she sees of working with practice theory is the flexibility allowed in the interpretation of what qualifies as “ritualization.” She prefers the term ritualization to ritual because it encompasses a wider range of social actions within its scope. That is, it does not restrict ritual activities to an autonomous category of behavior. At the same time, “ritualization” does not go so far as to imply that all activities are ritualized either. Rather, it gets at what is distinctive about particular social behaviors, especially in the minds of the actors involved. Bell explains,

41 Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*, 78.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid., 79.

In a very preliminary sense, ritualization is a way of acting that is designed and orchestrated to distinguish and privilege what is being done in comparison to other, usually more quotidian, activities. As such, ritualization is a matter of various culturally specific strategies for setting some activities off from others, for creating and privileging a qualitative distinction between the ‘sacred’ and the ‘profane,’ and for ascribing such distinctions to realities thought to transcend the powers of human actors.  

Part of Bell’s preference for ritualization over ritual is that the flexibility it engenders can help facilitate research in non-Western settings without necessarily imposing a Western conceptual framework on the data.

In an attempt to avoid an overly narrow definition of ritualization, Bells writes, “the most we can say is that it is...a way of acting that distinguishes itself from other ways of acting in the very way it does what it does.” Bell remains attentive to the “micropolitics” and power relations that are inscribed in and constructed by ritual activities, namely, the power of the ritual specialist over participants or the potential for ritual to serve as a Foucauldian form of discipline over the ritual actors. Like performance theory, practice theory is concerned with “what rituals do,” but in this case, the focus is on how patterns and relationships of domination and submission are produced.

Implicit in the idea of ritualization is the insight that people act in “culturally effective ways.” Here again we see how practice and performance theories share much in common. Depending on the culture, what actions qualify as effective varies. Thus, Bell identifies understanding the context in which ritualized activities occur as one of the fundamental precepts of a practice approach. This entails examining the behaviors under

47 Bell, Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice, 74.

48 Bell, Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions, 81.

49 Bell, “Performance,” 206.
consideration within the broad spectrum of a particular culture’s social actions rather than from the perspective of a predetermined concept of ritual. Only within this spectrum can one see how and why ritualized activities are culturally meaningful and effective.

Despite acting in culturally effective ways, ritual actors are not always conscious of the power of their own body, actions, and agency, according to practice theory. Indeed, much of the presumed power of ritual action derives from the notion that ritual actors are not in control of the situation. “They do not see how they have created the environment that is impressing itself on them but assume, simply in how things are done, that forces beyond the immediate situation are shaping the environment and its activities in fundamental ways.”\(^{50}\) They believe that they are only reacting to the situation, not taking part in its construction. In reality, according to Bell, the ritual environment develops out of a feedback loop of creativity and response in which the ritual actors are immersed. That is, the ritual actors find themselves in “a specially constructed space, simultaneously defining (imposing) and experiencing (receiving) the values ordering the environment.”\(^{51}\) Yet in not recognizing their own agency in this process, ritual actors are nonetheless empowered by the belief that the power of ritual activities comes from an authority outside themselves.

This feedback loop fosters what Bell sees as the ultimate goal of ritualization: the development of ritualized agents “who embod[y] flexible sets of cultural schemes and can deploy them effectively in multiple situations so as to restructure those situations in

\(^{50}\) Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*, 82.

\(^{51}\) Ibid., 82.
practical ways.” In what is essentially a circular process, ritualized agents effectively deploy ritual activities in order to become effective ritualized agents. Thus, ritualization is a pragmatic exercise that negotiates complex, often contradictory, life situations while also cultivating individuals capable of making such negotiations. It is fundamentally a practical, rather than symbolic, activity.

Conclusion

My argument in this dissertation grows out of concepts based in performance and practice approaches to ritual. From performance theory I draw the notion of ritual efficacy. As I mentioned in the Introduction chapter, in the early stages of my comparison of Japanese Buddhist and American Catholic pregnancy loss practices, it became clear that each tradition articulated distinct goals for the memorials. Whereas in the Buddhist context the main focus is on the spirit of the lost mizuko, the Catholic rites seem primarily concerned with the spiritual and emotional wellbeing of the woman who experienced miscarriage, stillbirth, or abortion. The wellbeing of post-pregnancy loss women is also a concern in Japanese mizuko kuyō, yet it is not put forward as the central ritual goal as it is in the rhetoric of American pregnancy loss practices.

I also turn to practice theory in order to highlight the agency of ritual participants in the process of pregnancy loss memorialization. Along with performance theory, practice theory underscores the work of the ritual participants as creative cultural agents acting in meaningful ways to respond to their experiences of pregnancy loss. It attends to the little and big ways in which individuals constructively face life’s situations by drawing

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52 Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*, 81.
on the resources available within their cultural framework. Though Buddhist and Catholic pregnancy loss memorials are clerically driven in many respects, ritual participants deserve credit for their role in strategically deploying religious symbols, doctrines, and ritual practices in ways that respond to experiences that historically have been ignored by religious communities.
CHAPTER 3: PRENATAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN BUDDHISM AND MIZUKO KUYŌ

Introduction

In three parts, this chapter brings together information from diverse subject areas in order to build a foundation for understanding the complex factors involved in mizuko kuyō. In Part I, I provide a detailed account of early Buddhist ideas about the nature of life in the womb. In addition to Indian medical texts on embryology, I examine scriptural responses to the issue of abortion for clues about how the status of prenatal beings was understood in foundational Buddhism. Establishing this doctrinal foundation allows both the traditional and innovative aspects of mizuko kuyō to come to light in Part II, which looks at concepts of prenatal life, or prenatal anthropology, in contemporary Japanese Buddhist thought. In the second part of the chapter, I also look at how Buddhists and scholars of Buddhism today continue to draw on classical sources as they grapple with contemporary issues, especially abortion.

In Part III, the groundwork laid in Parts I and II is brought into dialogue with the specific subject at hand: Japanese Buddhist memorials for the unborn dead. Over the last three decades, two books and several articles have been published in English on the subject of mizuko kuyō in Japan. These works approach the subject from dramatically different perspectives and have reached radically different conclusions. The writings of William LaFleur, Helen Hardacre, and Elizabeth Harrison in particular are important in the field insofar as they offer the most complex accounts of the mizuko kuyō and have inspired

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1 As I noted in the Introduction, Jeff Wilson’s Mourning the Unborn Dead: A Buddhist Ritual Comes to America also concentrates on mizuko kuyō and Buddhism but in the American context, not in Japan, and for that reason, he is not included in the mizuko kuyō literature review in Part III of this chapter.
substantial responses from other scholars. Part III examines their work as well as that of their critics.

Both the early and contemporary perspectives reveal the remarkable adaptability of Buddhism. From the emergence of the tradition within the prevailing religious milieu of ancient India to the negotiation of classical values in the modern world, Buddhism has adapted to the challenges and opportunities of new cultures and eras. Nonetheless, the tradition has remained rooted in its foundations, and the instructions of the Buddha and the early monastic community continue to be relevant today. This chapter considers this adaptability in the context of contemporary Japan by exploring the relationship between old doctrines and new rituals. It shows both consistency and creativity in the way that prenatal life has been interpreted by Buddhists over time, and it demonstrates that beliefs and rituals do not derive solely (nor maybe even primarily) from theological sources but are part of larger social practices in which a multiplicity of influences are brought together and reproduced in constructive ways.

Part I: Early Buddhist Ideas about Prenatal Life and Abortion

The Buddhist imagination of the unborn has its roots in stories of the conception of Śakyamuni Buddha himself. Foreshadowing the significance of his future life, Pali and Sanskrit hagiographies declare that the earliest stages of the Buddha’s final rebirth were nothing short of extraordinary. Aśvagoṣa’s well-known Life of the Buddha tells of his mother, Queen Maya, being visited in a dream by a white elephant just before conceiving
the Buddha-to-be, and of how she delivered the child Siddhartha “from the armpit” while
standing in a tree grove in Lumbini.²

Other sources, including the Lalitavistara, Mahāvastu, and the Majjhimanikāya, fill in
the details of the Buddha’s time in the womb. They tell of how, forgoing the typical stages
of fetal development, the future Buddha existed in utero as a small but fully formed child,
sitting upright in the lotus position indicative of an awakened being. Although Maya’s
virtue and karma merited her the role of mother to the Buddha, the defilements inherent
to her body were nonetheless problematic, and so within her womb the Bodhisattva dwelt
inside a miniature palace that protected him from her corporeal pollution.³ Within that
palace, he received all necessary nourishment from a lotus flower given to him by the god,
Brahma, and thus, though he inhabited Maya’s body, he remained completely independent
of her.⁴ Further removing the future Buddha from the realm of typical fetal development
is the claim that his life in utero was visible to individuals outside the womb due to either
Maya’s superhuman power to see inside her own belly or the Bodhisattva’s own inner light
that made Maya’s abdomen glow transluently for all to see.⁵

University Press, 2008), 5-7.

³ Vanessa R. Sasson, “A Womb with a View: The Buddha’s Final Fetal Experience,” in
Imagining the Fetus: The Unborn in Myth, Religion, and Culture, eds. Vanessa R. Sasson and Jane

⁴ Ibid., 62-63.

⁵ Ibid., 57-58. The descriptions of the visualization of the Bodhisattva in utero are
particularly interesting in light of the fetal imaging technology available today. Sasson
observes that the ability to peer outside the womb endowed the fetal Buddha with an
extraordinary degree of agency.
In light of all of these details, Vanessa Sasson in her research on the “final fetal experience” of the Buddha observes, “The Bodhisattva simply resided in the womb. He was a being placed in utero, but a fetus he was not.” While the details of his life in the womb prefigure the extraordinary powers and significance of the Buddha-to-be, for our purposes they are most valuable for what they reveal about early Buddhist interpretations of what constitutes an ordinary pregnancy and an ordinary fetus. The necessity of the palace to guard against defilement, for example, points to negative views of the women’s bodies and of the womb. Additionally, the relative tranquility and comfort of the Bodhisattva in utero is asserted over and against traditional Indian notions of gestation as a painful process for both the mother and the fetus. Buddhaghosa in the Visuddhimagga offers a particularly disturbing account of the fetus’ experience inside the womb in relation to what the mother ingests while pregnant:

the searing pain that [the fetus] undergoes, as though he had reappeared in the cold hells, when his mother drinks cold water, and as though deluged by a rain of embers when she swallows hot rice gruel, rice, etc., and as though undergoing the torture of the ‘lye-picking’ when she swallows anything salty or acidic, etc.—this is the suffering rooted in gestation.

The contrast between Buddhaghosa’s interpretation of gestation and the Buddha’s fetal experience is clear. In this way, stories of the fetal Bodhisattva draw on existing cultural understandings of embryology and gestation while simultaneously subverting them in order to illustrate the exceptional character of this future Buddha.

Beyond hagiographical literature, early Buddhism and the Indian milieu out of which it grew have well-developed traditions of speculation about fetal life, which came to


influence later Buddhist thought. This speculation took place in the context of various types of texts, two of which will be touched upon briefly here. The first category I consider is Buddhist texts that examine embryology from a medico-religious perspective. These sources not only chart fetal development in conjunction with the medical knowledge of the time, they also add a religious or moral gloss to the medical data in order to explain particular facets of development, such as the karmic reasons for birth defects or miscarriage. The second category of sources is texts that address abortion. Early Buddhist consideration of abortion occurs in the context of diverse forms of literature, from monastic rules regarding monks’ involvement with women seeking abortions to graphic tales that tell of the horrifying karmic repercussions of causing an abortion. What emerges from these sources is a portrait of early Buddhist ideas about the prenatal life and death that set the stage for considering prenatal anthropology in the context of Japan and the practice of mizuko kuyō today.

Medico-Religious Texts on Embryology

The foundational sources of the classical Indian system of medicine, known as ayurveda, emerged between 200 BCE and 400 CE. Among the most important texts for ayurvedic medicine are the Caraka Saṃhitā and Suśruta Saṃhitā, which are thought to have been composed just before the beginning of the Common Era. At the time of their composition, these texts offered the finest medical knowledge available. Nevertheless, they remained bound in many ways to the dominant beliefs of their day. As a result,

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ayurvedic texts often include commentary on what today would be considered outside the bounds of medicine.⁹ The Suśruta Saṃhitā, for instance, spells out the challenges to health that curses and demonic forces can pose.¹⁰

Similarly, the Caraka Saṃhitā takes the notion of rebirth as a given in its description of embryological development, and it includes the ensoulment of the fetus as a step in its timeline of gestation.¹¹ However, in a remarkably modern move, the Caraka Saṃhitā proffers an epigenetic model of embryological development very similar to the account given by the scientific research of today. This stands in contrast to the preformationist model of development that was dominant in Europe as late as the 18th century. According to the preformationist account of fetal development, upon fertilization a homunculus, or “little man,” was implanted in the womb. Over the course of gestation, the homunculus, already perfectly formed, would simply grow to the size of an infant.¹² By contrast, Robert Kritzer explains that the Caraka Saṃhitā did not imagine that a homunculus is implanted in the womb at conception and needs only bide its time and grow in size during the nine or ten months of gestation. Rather, [it describes] a process in which the material contribution of the two

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¹⁰ Ibid., 93.


parents, once animated by...the soul, develops gradually, its various parts becoming differentiated and growing month by month.13

The parental “material contribution” envisioned in ancient Indian medicine was semen from the father and menstrual blood from the mother, working in conjunction with an ātman moving toward rebirth.14 In this respect, the Caraka Saṃhitā is representative of the classical Indian medical approach to embryology.

Beyond ayurvedic sources, Buddhist texts are also a rich resource for gaining information about medical knowledge during this period. While medical texts on embryology focus primarily on biological development, Buddhist texts on the subject imbue the stages of conception, gestation, and birth with moral or religious significance. This can be seen in the Buddhist text with the most detailed account of fetal development, the Garbhāvākrāntisūtra or the Entering the Womb Sūtra. Dated to first few centuries of the Common Era, this early Mahayana sutra came to be the “locus classicus of Indo-Tibetan Buddhist rhetoric of childbirth.”15 Its account of human development occurs within a broader discussion about the conditions, medical and religious, for rebirth. Robert Kritzer observes that while in comparison to other religious texts on the subject, the Entering the Womb Sūtra is “far richer in medical or pseudo-medical detail,” it is also “far more insistent on its religious message.”16 In particular, its attention to the reality of suffering inherent in

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14 Engler, 435.

15 Langenberg, 7, 1. See Langenberg’s work for a detailed description of the textual history of the Entering the Womb Sūtra.

gestation and birth demonstrates this point. For this reason, Kritzer sees the sutra as an “extended meditation” on the first Noble Truth.17

Like the Caraka Saṃhitā, the Entering the Womb Sūtra offers an epigenetic account of fetal development. It is exceptional in the degree of detail with which it describes the week-by-week growth of the fetus, from an undefined blob to a being with fully-formed limbs, organs, and senses, anxious to exit the womb. As each stage of development is elaborated, so too is the suffering inherent in the process—the purported filth of the mother’s womb serves as a torturous and repulsive environment for the growing fetus.18

The Sūtra also details the impact of karma on each stage of rebirth. Before conception takes place, karma affects not only the fertility of the parents, it also determines the karmic being suited for rebirth to those parents.19 Once conception actually occurs, the karma of the fetus can trigger the formation of birth defects, just as the karma of the mother and of the fetus can precipitate miscarriage.20 Should the woman sustain a healthy pregnancy, it is nonetheless defined by pain and discomfort for both mother and child.

Taken together, the Caraka Saṃhitā and the Entering the Womb Sūtra show early Buddhism’s heavy debt to the prevailing Indian culture in the development of its own


18 Langenberg, 99-102. Langenberg points out that at least one use of the Entering the Womb Sūtra was as a “graveyard meditation” (aśubhābhāvarā, literally “meditation on foulness”) for fostering detachment from the body, 89. For more on this subject in general, see Elizabeth Wilson, Charming Cadavers: Horrific Figurations of the Feminine in Buddhist Indian Hagiographic Literature (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).


20 Ibid., 80-81, 85-86.
system of beliefs. Beyond their descriptions of embryology, there is significant overlap between the two texts’ accounts of the conditions essential for conception. For example, both texts assert that in addition to the material contributions of the parents, the presence of a karmic being ready for rebirth is necessary for conception to occur. In the Caraka Saṃhitā, this additional substance is the ātman, a subtle body that transmigrates from the previous life. In the Buddhist Entering the Womb Sūtra, the additional element for conception is identified as an antarābhava, that is, “a conscious entity accompanied by previously accumulated karma,” that enters the womb and animates the blood-semen mixture. The descent of the antarābhava into the womb coincides with the appearance of consciousness in the fertilized ovum. Despite the fundamental differences between early Hindu and Buddhist views of the person, the distinction between the ātman and the antarābhava in these texts remains hazy. To be sure, scholars observe that the antarābhava cited by early Buddhist sources like the Entering the Womb Sūtra is strikingly similar to the substantial, transmigrating ātman of the Upanishads.

According to Bryan Cuevas, “the Buddhist Sanskrit term antarābhava refers quite literally to existence (bhava) in an interval (antarā) and designates the temporal space

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21 This is also asserted in the Majjhima Nikāya, or Middle Length Discourses, of the Tripitaka, M.I.266, according to Harvey, An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics: Foundations, Values and Issues (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), xvi.


24 Langenberg, 60.

25 Langenberg, 57; Kritzer, "An ātman by Any Other Name," 5-11.
between death and subsequent rebirth.” The term is also used, as it is in the Entering the Womb Sūtra, to name the intermediate being believed to exist in the transitional stage between rebirths. Yet, the very existence of an intermediate state or being was an object of fervent debate among early Buddhist sects. Some argued against it on the grounds that it violated the Buddha’s foundational teaching of anātman by positing a soul-like substance that connects one life to the next. Others argued in favor of the antarābhava, which Cuevas views as an assertion of predominant Vedic and Upanshadic symbols and ideas.

At the heart of the antarābhava debate is the proper interpretation of the mechanism of rebirth and the relationship between the moment of death and the beginning of new life. According to the Buddhist teaching of anātman, which was formulated over and against Upanishadic ideas about a permanent, unchanging self or ātman, individuals are made up of five aggregates, or skandhas, that are continuously in flux. The skandhas (physical form, feelings, perception, mental formations, and consciousness) come together to form what individuals experience as a ‘self.’ Yet because the skandhas change from moment to moment, no constant or enduring self truly exists. Consequently, by denying the existence of the ātman, questions developed within Buddhism about how to account for continuity between rebirths, and the notion of the

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27 The term gandharva (gandabba in Pali) also used to refer to the intermediate or transitional being.

antarābhava arose as one solution to the problem. While the antarābhava is rejected in the Theravadan tradition, which holds that rebirth occurs almost instantaneously after death, Mahayana Buddhists accept the idea of an intermediate state as an extraordinary opportunity to forego rebirth and achieve nirvana.\textsuperscript{29}

This debate draws attention to the fact that in Buddhism, birth is always rebirth. As the Caraka Saṃhitā and the Entering the Womb Sūtra show, for early Indian and Buddhist embryology, the nature of one life is always determined in part by the karma of previous lives. Thus, Buddhist prenatal anthropology is shaped by ideas about rebirth and by how the transition from one life to the next is understood.\textsuperscript{30}

The Entering the Womb Sūtra represents the early Buddhist medico-religious integration of material and immaterial explanations of fetal development. The image of prenatal life that emerges weaves together biological and moral causality to reveal a new being resulting from the coincidence of female fertility, sexual intercourse, and karmic compatibility. While in the Sūtra the womb is repeatedly disparaged as a filthy wound, the fetus is portrayed as a deserving victim of its agonizing environment due to its own karma. The contrast between the painful in utero experience of the typical fetus and the

\textsuperscript{29} Cuevas, 285-287. The Tibetan Book of the Dead gives a detailed account of the intermediate state, or bardo (“interval”). According to Tibetan sources, the intermediate being is drawn from one life into the next by lingering desire, which drives it to seek (1) a safe haven in the womb or (2) to observe the sexual activity of its future parents. In either situation, the powerful feelings experienced by the intermediate being ensure its rebirth.

\textsuperscript{30} In Part II of this chapter, I will discuss how the practice of mizuko kuyō is grounded in the idea of an intermediate being that can receive merit from the living, which can impact the being’s next birth for the better. As a result, the liminal period between death and rebirth is seen as a particularly powerful opportunity for helping one’s mizuko reach the Pure Land by making offerings and earning merit on the mizuko’s behalf.
extraordinary peaceful gestation of Śakyamuni Buddha described in hagiographies confirms the point.

Additionally, this brief review of literature reveals the Indian medico-religious roots of the Sūtra, though the text itself has been preserved over time in Tibetan and Chinese translations. In particular, examining the Entering the Womb Sūtra in conjunction with the Caraka Saṃhitā draws attention to the difficulty of delineating a distinctly Buddhist position on embryology, prenatal life, rebirth, etc., that existed independently of the cultural milieu out of which Buddhism developed. Rather, early Buddhism drew on prevailing Indian thought in order to create its own account of life, death, and the workings of the universe, even in cases where Buddhist teachings would eventually come to challenge those existing beliefs.

This process of adoption, adaptation, and negotiation with existing culture is characteristic of Buddhism’s development and growth in the various environments to which it spread. Later in this chapter I show how this process of re-shaping continues today in the formation of a modern Japanese Buddhist prenatal anthropology.

In the next section I analyze early Buddhist responses to abortion in order to develop a more detailed picture of the place of the unborn in Buddhist thought. My focus is not on the ethical implications of abortion, but rather, on what abortion-related cases documented in early canonical texts reveal about Buddhist understandings of the nature of prenatal life.

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Langenberg, 4-7. The sutra is available in Japanese in the Taishō canon (310, 317), but no mention has been of it in any of the sources I have read relating to mizuko kuyō.
“May I eat the flesh of my own children if it was done by me.”

These words come from the Pali canon’s *Petavatthu*, or *Stories of the Departed*, a collection of tales of ghosts tormented by the effects of their own karma. They are spoken by a woman called the “Devourer of Five Children” who out of jealousy caused her pregnant co-wife to miscarry. When asked if she played a role in the co-wife’s abortion, she replies with the oath of innocence that foreshadows the hellish fate of her next life: “May I eat the flesh of my own children if it was done by me.” The woman died shortly after making this false vow and was reborn in hell as a foul-smelling, bad-breathed, fly-covered ghost. Twice a day the ghost fulfilled her vow by giving birth to five sons who she would subsequently gobble up ravenously, never satisfied by what she consumed.

This tale is one of many Buddhist stories that tell of the fate that awaits anyone who causes an abortion. According to James McDermott, while “there appears to be no clear, explicit, general prohibition of abortion in the Pāli Canon or its classical commentaries, in spite of the fact that killing itself is prohibited by the first precept,” the story of the Devourer of Five Children illustrates the horrifying consequences of such actions. The *Petavatthu*, in particular, is known for its colorful tales that graphically depict the karmic effects of unwholesome acts. Other sources, such as several *Vinaya* texts, discuss the issue of abortion from a more pragmatic, rule-focused point of view. Contemporary scholars

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interested in ethics draw on these sources in formulating Buddhist responses to the moral
questions facing individuals and societies today.

Within the Vinaya, the Buddhist prohibition against taking life is applied specifically
to the practice of abortion in multiple passages. For instance, the Mahāvagga of the Vinaya
explains,

An ordained monk should not deliberately deprive a living thing of life, even if it is
only an ant. Whatever monk intentionally deprives a human being of life—even to
the extent of causing an abortion—he becomes no longer a (true) recluse (samaṇa),
not a son of the Sakyans [that is, no longer a follower of the Buddha]. As a flat
stone, broken apart, is something which cannot be put back together again, so a
monk who has deliberately deprived a human being of life is no longer a (true)
recluse, not a son of the Sakyans. This is something not to be done as long as life
lasts.35

Thus, abortion is declared antithetical to following the path of the Buddha within the
broader Buddhist prohibition against taking any life. However, the manner in which
abortion is included in this prohibition—“even to the extent of causing an abortion”—
implies that whether or not abortion should be considered killing was a point of ambiguity
that needed clarification.

The proscription against abortion is reiterated elsewhere in the Vinaya, framed
once again in terms of the behavior deemed appropriate for followers of the Buddha.
“Whatever monk should intentionally deprive a human being of life...he is also one who is
defeated [in the monastic life], he is not in communion.”36 Here the gravity of the offence
is indicated by the penalty for taking part in abortion: expulsion from the sangha.37

35 Vinaya I.97, quoted in McDermott, 164.
36 Vinaya III.73, quoted in Harvey, 313.
37 Harvey, 313.
Some contemporary scholars have questioned whether certain physical qualities of the fetus are relevant to an abortion’s degree of offense. In doing so, they attempt to correlate the magnitude of wrongdoing entailed in abortion to the physical size and complexity of the being whose life is terminated. Ultimately, these arguments have been dead ends. Interesting though they may be, they have not accomplished what scholars who put them forward hoped, that is, they have not provided a solid foundation within Buddhist history capable of mitigating the offence of abortion.

Though the size of the fetus may be irrelevant to the moral gravity of an abortion, other spiritual and karmic attributes have been suggested as potential ways to gauge the relative offense of killing a prenatal being. For example, it is typically considered worse to harm a person of great virtue than to harm a wicked person. It is not that the sinful person’s life is actually worth less but that by killing a holy person the world as a whole is deprived of the wisdom, goodness, and knowledge he or she embodies. Applying this logic to the issue of abortion, one could infer that terminating some pregnancies is worse than others based on the nature and potential of the womb-being.

The flip side of this issue is the question of whether the karma of the fetus has anything to do with its eventual expulsion from the womb. As Keown points out, spontaneous abortion, or miscarriage, was understood by early Buddhist commentators as a common occurrence. In such cases, embryonic loss was blamed not on abnormal

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40 Ibid., 97.
gestational development nor on complications with maternal environment. Rather, the karma of the being inhabiting the womb was seen as the primary cause of miscarriage.\textsuperscript{41} Buddhaghosa explains,

\begin{quote}
A ‘barren woman’ means one who cannot conceive. But in fact there is really no such thing as a woman who cannot conceive, and this phrase is actually used of a woman who \textit{does} conceive but in whose womb the embryo fails to become properly established. It is thought that all women conceive during their fertile period, but in the case of the one described here as ‘barren’ there occurs a maturation of bad karma for beings who enter her womb to take rebirth. They, who have taken rebirth through the maturation of only limited virtue, are overcome by the maturation of the evil karma and die.\textsuperscript{42}
\end{quote}

This passage comments only on the reasoning behind instances of spontaneous miscarriage, blaming the fetus’ karma for its failure to come to term. What of cases of induced abortion? Little mention is made of the role of the karma of the \textit{conceptus} in incidences of intentional pregnancy termination. Instead, in the \textit{Vinaya}, women’s sexual immorality is at the root of most cases of deliberate abortion. For example, women are depicted as seeking abortions for “questionable, perhaps self-serving, reasons,” such as wishing to terminate a pregnancy so as to conceal an extramarital affair.\textsuperscript{43} Instances of women seeking abortions for the sake of preserving their own health are not found in the early literature, though Keown believes that the decision to abort would have been looked upon more favorably in such cases. Thus, the intention of the woman in seeking the abortion is weighted heavily in the discussion of the morality of the act.

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Keown, \textit{Buddhism and Bioethics}, 84.
\item Ibid.
\end{enumerate}
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To reiterate a point made above, my interest here is not in the ethics of abortion, but rather in what reactions to the question of abortion reveal about early Buddhist ideas about the nature of prenatal life. The image of the prenate that emerges from early sources is of the fetus as a karmic being bearing out the consequences of past lives and deeds. Human from the start, womb-beings’ unwholesome karma manifests in the form of gestational suffering and abnormal fetal development. The next chapter will show that this is a marked difference from Christian anthropologies of the unborn, which presume a fundamental innocence of fetal beings. In the case of contemporary Japan, the issue of the karma of the mizuko tends to fade into the background as the focus shifts to the ritual potential of kuyō. While concern for the mother’s karma is still strong, particularly in cases of abortion, the mizuko is looked to as a blameless being to whom the mother is directly accountable.

Part II: Contemporary Japanese Buddhist Ideas about Prenatal Life and Abortion

In total, seven cases of abortion are described in the monastic code. Based on these cases and those included in other parts of the Tripitaka, Robert Florida asserts, “The early scriptures and commentators are clear and consistent. Human life begins very early in the womb, and killing a fetus is equally grave as an unskillful act as killing an adult person.”44 Despite the consistency of Vinaya and commentarial responses decrying abortion, the very inclusion of these cases demonstrates that abortion was an issue of consistent concern in early Buddhist communities. In other words, clarity regarding the negative consequences of abortion did not necessarily serve as a deterrent against its occurrence.

Today, abortion endures as a topic of keen interest, particularly in the area of Buddhist ethics. Over the last two decades, ethics has emerged as a sub-field within the broader discipline of Buddhist studies. Historically, unlike in Christianity, ethics has not been a discrete category of Buddhist thought or inquiry. This is not to say, however, that Buddhism lacks the internal resources for ethical reflection and moral guidance. Peter Harvey notes that though “the schools of Buddhism have rich traditions of thought on ethics, ...this is often scattered through a variety of works which also deal with other topics.” Consequently, contemporary scholars and Buddhist thinkers return to a wide variety of early sources, like those discussed in the previous sections, as they grapple with the ethical questions, new and old, faced by Buddhist individuals and societies today.

With issues like in vitro fertilization and the on-going support of patients in persistent vegetative states, the field of Buddhist ethics faces situations never imagined by the early Buddhist community. By contrast, abortion is among the subjects that earliest Buddhists are reported in the scriptures to have dealt with directly. What do the ancient sources have to do with Buddhist responses to abortion today? Though very distant in many ways, there are still deep connections between early Indian Buddhism and contemporary Buddhist thought. Much like the early Buddhists’ adaptation of existing Indian religious and medical ideas in the creation of a Buddhist worldview, scholars and practitioners today negotiate core beliefs and cultural influences in ways that reveal the continuing relevance of Buddhist beliefs and values. While some have suggested that these changes represent a corruption or degeneration of some original, “pure” tradition, I

45 Harvey, 1.
suggest instead that they be seen as the next phase in a long history of Buddhist adaptions to diverse situations.

On the subject of abortion, scholars like Damien Keown and Peter Harvey mine foundational scriptures and commentaries for stories and examples that can be used to guide current Buddhist ethical discourse. However, as the debate over the relevance of fetal size to the morality of abortion demonstrated, these scholars, reading the same sources, sometimes reach different conclusions.46

A significant portion of contemporary scholarship on Buddhism and abortion centers on the question of when life begins. This work integrates foundational Buddhist teachings on the process of rebirth with modern scientific data regarding the mechanisms and timing of human reproduction. Following the lead of early Buddhist embryology, contemporary research in Buddhist ethics supports the notion that human life begins at the time of fertilization with the coming together of the physical components and the descent of consciousness into the conceptus to create a new being. Due to the original sophistication of early Buddhist embryology, remarkably little revision is required to bring it up to date with contemporary scientific research. Yet as one might expect, current scholarship is less concerned than early sources with correlating abnormal fetal development or miscarriage to the karma of the womb-being. More attention is paid to comprehending classical explanations of rebirth in relation to recent technological advancements, like in vitro fertilization and embryonic stem cell research.

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46 The work of Michael Barnhart highlights the fluid and dynamic interpretive context of the ethics of abortion in Buddhism as Barnhart attempts to construct “a Buddhist defense of abortion,” which he says is “made in full knowledge that one is swimming against the tide of conventional interpretation but still [is made] within the tradition,” 277. See Michael Barnhart, “Buddhism and the Morality of Abortion,” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 5 (1998): 276-297.
In addition to bringing Buddhist doctrine into dialogue with current scientific knowledge, several scholars also examine the on-the-ground reality of abortion in so-called Buddhist countries today. In Thailand, for example, a country where 90-95% of the population is Theravada Buddhist, the abortion rate is among the highest in the world.\footnote{U.S. State Department, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor. \textit{International Religious Freedom Report} (Washington, DC, 2005). http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2005/51531.htm. (accessed January 12, 2011); Florida, 137-168.} Though legal abortion is available in Thailand on a limited basis (for the health of the mother and in cases of rape), illegal abortion is rampant throughout the nation. Recently this fact gained worldwide attention when, in late 2010, two thousand aborted fetuses from illegal clinics were found on the grounds of a Buddhist temple’s crematorium.\footnote{Seth Mydan, “Thai Police Find 2,000 Illegally Aborted Fetuses,” \textit{New York Times} (November 19, 2010). http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/20/world/asia/20bangkok.html?ref=Buddhism (accessed December 11, 2010).} While there is relatively little data about the relationship between Buddhist belief and abortion in Thailand, a 1998 survey of eleven Thai women hospitalized after complications from illegal abortions showed that all of the women were Buddhist, and all were aware that Buddhism denounces abortion. Among the respondents, 36% expressed worry about the abortion creating bad karma for them.\footnote{Florida, 152.} Nevertheless, all of the women went ahead with the pregnancy termination, reflecting the complicated relationship between religious morals and practical decision-making. Pinit Ratanakul, Thai scholar of Buddhist bioethics, concludes, “For Thai Buddhists, abortion is a complex issue that cannot be dealt with in isolation from other aspects of life, such as family and societal well-being, economic pressures, educational practices, medical ethics and religious teachings and the wants and
emotions of individual women and men.” Undoubtedly, this is not unlike the situation in other predominantly Buddhist countries as well.

Abortion and Pregnancy Loss in Japan

Inevitably, discussions of Buddhism and abortion turn to the case of Japan and mizuko kuyō. This is due in large part to William LaFleur’s 1992 book, Liquid Life: Abortion and Buddhism in Japan, which drew international scholarly and popular attention to the once little-known practice. Few Western scholars had broached the topic previously, and LaFleur’s book set off a firestorm of discussion about mizuko kuyō in particular and Japanese religion more generally.

LaFleur, an American scholar specializing in bioethics and Japanese studies, correlates his initial interest in the issue of abortion in Japanese society to the 1973 U.S. Supreme Court decision, Roe v. Wade. Living in Japan in the wake of Roe v. Wade, he wondered how Japan, where abortion had been legal for almost twenty-five years, dealt with what was such a divisive issue in America. From his perspective, the issue failed to create the same sort of social turmoil in Japan that it elicited in the United States, and he wanted to find out why. In other words, the absence, not the presence of social upheaval surrounding abortion led LaFleur to his initial inquiry.

The modern history of abortion in Japan begins in the period immediately following Japan’s defeat in the Second World War. In the first half of the twentieth century, Japan’s imperial aspirations led to the occupation of overseas territories in much of East Asia and to calls for the Japanese to populate the new lands in order to supply the empire with workers and soldiers. With the surrender of Emperor Hirohito in August 1945, the empire

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50 Ratanakul, 61.
collapsed, reducing the lands under Japanese control by 40% and forcing Japanese people living in colonial territories to repatriate to the main islands of Japan.\textsuperscript{51} In the five years between 1945 and 1950, the population increased by 15% from 72 million to 83.2 million. As a result, Japan faced severe overpopulation and famine, in addition to the physical destruction that had already befallen much of the nation. These and countless other social and economic challenges troubled the new Japanese government as well as the occupying powers, and interest groups committed to legalizing abortion—mainly socialist groups concerned with eugenics and physicians looking to corner the abortion market—took advantage of the turmoil to bring about change in national reproductive policy.\textsuperscript{52}

With the ratification of the Eugenic Protection Law in 1948, abortion became legal but only under certain conditions. Legitimate reasons for seeking an abortion included if the health of the mother were at risk or if there were the possibility hereditary diseases being passed on to the offspring. Other stipulations were a part of the law as well, such as that only certified physicians (not midwives) were permitted to provide abortion services; that persons with undesirable inherited physical or mental diseases could be forced to undergo sterilization; and that all abortions were required to get the approval of a local eugenics committee before the procedure could take place.\textsuperscript{53} The following year, 1949, saw the expansion of the Eugenic Protection Law to include economic hardship among the


admissible justifications for obtaining an abortion, and in 1952, the requirement to obtain prior consent from a eugenics committee was eliminated. The combination of these two emendations opened the door to essentially unrestricted access to abortion.\(^{54}\)

Initially, access to contraceptives had also been included in the provisions of the 1948 Eugenic Protection Law, but it was dropped prior to the law’s approval after encountering resistance for being too progressive.\(^{55}\) Despite rapid advances in contraceptive technologies in the years following Japan’s legalization of abortion, birth control struggled to gain acceptance among Japanese medical professionals, women’s rights groups, and everyday women.\(^{56}\) In her detailed study of abortion politics in postwar Japan, Tiana Norgren argues that, perhaps unwittingly on the part of lawmakers, “in giving designated doctors (who were all ob-gyns) a monopoly over abortion services, the Eugenic Protection Law created an institutionalized incentive for ob-gyns to work to maintain and

\(^{54}\) Norgren notes that following the revision of the law, “99 to 100 percent of Japanese women cited ‘economic reasons’ on the paperwork that must be filled out when an abortion is performed,” 46. More recently, between 1975 and 1995, preserving the health of the mother was given as justification for the procedure in more than 99 percent of cases. Aya Goto, et al., “Abortion Trends in Japan, 1975-95,” Studies in Family Planning, vol 31, no. 4 (2000): 301. The most significant change to the Eugenics Protection Law to occur since its original ratification happened in response to the lobbying of disability rights groups. In 1996, the eugenics-related elements of the law were removed, and it was renamed the Maternal Protection Act.

\(^{55}\) Norgren, 39-40.

\(^{56}\) According to surveys, condoms account for 78% of the contraception used in Japan, and the condom industry, like physician-providers of abortion, opposed the legalization of oral contraception out of a vested interest in preserving their business. High-dose oral contraceptives were originally approved in Japan in the 1971 for non-contraceptive purposes. These pills have significantly more side effects than their low-dose counterparts, and consequently, taking them was unappealing and unsustainable for many Japanese women. Aya Goto, Michael R. Reich, and Iain Aitken, “Oral Contraceptives and Women’s Health in Japan,” Journal of the American Medical Association 282, no. 22 (8 Dec 1999): 2173-2174; M.O. Kihara, et al., “Knowledge of and Attitudes Toward the Pill: Results of a National Survey in Japan,” Family Planning Perspectives 33, no. 3 (May-June 2001), 123.
expand access to abortion—in other words, to maintain their livelihood.”57 Particularly after the development of oral contraceptives in 1960, maintaining this monopoly entailed opposing the legalization of birth control pills so as to not jeopardize the large number of abortions sought annually. For its part, the women’s movement in Japan also shied away from advocating for greater access to birth control until the 1970s. The most likely reason for this is that contraception did not fit into the Japanese women’s movement’s overall agenda, which gained its moral authority by representing the traditional values of good wife- and motherhood.58

Ultimately, low-dose oral contraception did not receive government sanction in Japan until 1999, decades after its introduction in the United States and Western Europe. Political morass and economic interests undoubtedly lay at the heart of the belated approval, though concern about the safety of birth control pills was given as the official reason for why they had been rejected for so long.59 Other reasons justifying its denial over the years included concern that it would promote sexual promiscuity and moral

57 Norgren, 44, 5. Historically, abortion rates are believed to have been significantly underreported in Japan so as to conceal physicians’ taxable income from the government.

58 Ibid., 103, 51.

59 To put the issue of safety concerns in perspective, the drug for male erectile dysfunction, Viagra, was legalized in 1999 after only six months of safety consideration, shortly before the forty year long deliberation over oral contraceptives ended. Kihara, 123. Norgren quotes a newspaper story that argues that different approval processes of Viagra and birth control pills “highlight the extent to which Japan remains a society dominated by men—elderly men willing to license a pill for their own benefit, but who seem scared of giving young women control over their fertility and sexuality. Japan remains a male gerontocracy,” Norgren, 130.
corruption, contribute to the spread of AIDS, and exacerbate Japan’s problem with low annual birth rates.  

Due to rampant underreporting by physicians, it is difficult to discern reliable abortion statistics for the years immediately following the legalization of abortion in Japan. Statistics for later years are not much better. As a rule, most scholars estimate that the number of abortions performed per year is two to three times the officially reported figure. For example, between the years 1955 and 1960, official records indicate right around one million abortions per year while scholars estimate closer to three million occurred annually (roughly 1,300 to 1,500 abortions per 1,000 live births). Even after taking underreporting into account, abortion rates are thought to have declined in recent decades after peaking around 1955.

Norgren contends that Japan’s progressive abortion policy combined with its conservative approach to oral contraceptives led to a situation in which “by default, abortion became the primary means of ‘birth control’ in the initial postwar period.” Recent quantitative studies suggest that her argument holds true more recently as well. A 1999 study by the Allan Guttmacher Institute found that 52% of all pregnancies in Japan were unplanned. A related study concluded that 28% of abortions in Japan could have been avoided were low-dose contraceptive pills available.

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61 Norgren, 5.

62 Ibid., 6, 83.

63 Goto, “Oral Contraceptives and Women’s Health in Japan,” 2175. In the U.S., around 30% of pregnancies are thought to be unplanned, and in France, only 19%. Recent studies also indicate a shift in the demographics of those having abortions, from primarily
It is against the historical and political backdrop of Japanese reproductive policy that *mizuko kuyō* developed and gained popularity in the 1960s and 1970s. Generally speaking, religious groups in Japan have contributed very little to the political discussion about abortion and contraception.\(^{64}\) Buddhist organizations in particular are not in the habit of publishing “official” views on social issues.\(^{65}\) Thus, to uncover a “Buddhist” response to abortion in Japan, one must look to the *mizuko* rituals. I will discuss the structure and function of *mizuko kuyō* in greater detail later in this chapter and then again in Chapter 5. For now, suffice it to say that while the exact roots of *mizuko kuyō* are unknown, its rise coincided with the proliferation of abortion in the postwar era. Today, *mizuko* memorials can be found throughout Japan, and young and old alike visit them to remember recent and long-past losses.

So far in this section I have focused strictly on the issue of abortion in Japan. Undoubtedly, the intertwining of Buddhism and abortion in *mizuko kuyō* is what initially attracted scholars to study the practice further. Yet the memorialization of miscarriage and stillbirth comprises an essential component of the *mizuko kuyō* story, even if abortion losses are behind the majority of the *kuyō*. It helps ground what could be considered a “fad” practice within the broader rhythms of human life and death—themes with which Japanese Buddhism is well acquainted.

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\(^{64}\) One new religious group, *Seichō no ie* (House of Life), fervently campaigned against abortion in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Working in conjunction with a cohort of Catholic physicians, *Seichō no ie* argued “that abortion was murder, that the abortion situation was out of control, that it harmed women’s mental and physical health, that the law had lowered sexual morality and devalued life,” Norgren, 185, n. 55.

\(^{65}\) LaFleur, *Liquid Life*, xiii.
The *Japan Medical Association Journal* indicates that 15% of all pregnancies end in miscarriage, and a long-term study of stillbirths in Japan reports that approximately 4,500 stillbirths occur in the country per year.\(^{66}\) As I mentioned in the introductory chapter, the feelings that accompany miscarriage and stillbirth are of a special quality that involves not only mourning the hoped-for child that was lost, but also anguish when one’s body, one’s womb, becomes a space of death. In Japan, “a society where deep-rooted ideologies such as ‘a woman who cannot bear a child is not a real woman’ or ‘marriage without children is a failure’ still hold power,”\(^ {67}\) social pressures compound the physical and personal hurts of pregnancy loss.

Elizabeth Harrison observes, “Aborted, miscarried, and stillborn children, as well as those who died while still very young, had been, until the advent of *mizuko kuyō*, ‘left out’ of the usual Japanese Buddhist funeral and memorial services for the dead.”\(^ {68}\) The complex feelings of those who lived through prenatal and neonatal death firsthand were largely overlooked as well. Many of those feelings are related to the ideas one holds about pregnancy loss in general and ideas about the *mizuko* that was lost specifically. In the next section I explore Japanese cultural and Buddhist conceptions of prenatal life to demonstrate how these ideas help construct the logic underlying the performance *mizuko kuyō*.

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\(^{67}\) Ogino, 231.

Ideas about Prenatal Life

To maintain that certain Japanese ideas about prenatal life form the rationale for mizuko kuyō is not to say that those ideas necessarily preceded the development of the ritual itself. Saying that one came entirely before the other would be a bit like claiming to have solved the riddle of the chicken and the egg. Instead, I believe that mizuko kuyō emerged out of the intersection of multiple factors, including native ideas about prenatal beings, long-standing Buddhist traditions for memorializing ancestors (to be discussed more in Chapter 5), the postwar proliferation of abortion, and the unresolved feelings many (but not all) women experienced after pregnancy losses. Over time, Japanese beliefs about prenatal life and death have been adapted and multiplied as mizuko kuyō has become more widespread. These ideas have also changed as a result of the severe criticism mizuko kuyō has been subject to within Japan.

Through the observation of mizuko rites, conversations with participating priests and laypersons, and analysis of primary and secondary literature on the subject, several ideas have emerged as significant features of Japanese prenatal anthropology in the context of mizuko kuyō. Briefly put, within the ritual, the mizuko is (1) treated as a human child (2) with an individual identity. After death, the mizuko (3) exists in a transitional state in which it is (4) able to be in relationship with its family through mizuko kuyō and associated religious practices. Finally, it is commonly believed that, if not well cared for, the mizuko (5) has the potential to become a source of problems in the lives of near and distant relatives.

The first significant feature of Japanese prenatal anthropology is that fetal beings that never emerge from the womb nor even reach an advanced gestational age are treated
as fully human children in the performance of mizuko kuyō. Though prenates who die before birth are designated by the special term, mizuko (水胎, water babies or children), within the ritual this is not meant as an indicator of inferior status. In contrast to American abortion rights rhetoric, there is no attempt to linguistically resist the humanization of the fetus in order to safeguard abortion rights by denying the independent humanity of the conceptus. Thus, within the kuyō, a mizuko is a child with a mother and father, regardless of the circumstances of the pregnancy loss. As for the root of the term, its exact etiology is unknown. Priests I interviewed told me that the name mizuko derived from the fact that the fetus is surrounded by water in the womb. LaFleur, on the other hand, suggests that the name mizuko is a reference to the fluid nature of prenatal existence, which ebbs and flows between life and death (I will return to LaFleur in Part III of this chapter).

In addition to being treated as children, mizuko are ascribed personal identities through the performance of kuyō (the second feature of Japanese conceptions of prenatal existence). Japanese anthropologist, Emiko Namihira, sees this “individuation” of fetal life as a departure from pre-modern notions of fetal (non)personhood and child loss. Along with William LaFleur, she argues that traditionally children’s lives were understood as fluid and unsettled, and thus, when a child died—due to illness, stillbirth, miscarriage or infanticide—he or she was thought to return to the common “reservoir” of life to be drawn

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69 This is not to say that all Japanese people think of prenates as having the same moral standing as newborns. Igeta Midori, in her response to Elizabeth Harrison, challenges Harrison’s use of the term “child loss” on these grounds. See Igeta Midori. Response to Harrison’s “Women’s Responses to Child Loss in Japan,” Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion 11, no. 2 (1995): 95-100.

back into the world again at a later time. In these situations, neither a funeral nor a posthumous name was devoted to the deceased child because it was expected that it would return to the world again later to receive its real name and real life, potentially even from the same family. In today’s mizuko kuyō, the situation appears to be quite different from that of the past insofar as the kuyō itself becomes an invitation for the mizuko to return.

A third important feature of Japanese prenatal anthropology regards views about the posthumous destiny of a deceased fetus. Doctrinally speaking, the postmortem journey of the mizuko is said to be no different than that of other beings, which in itself is a statement about the nature of prenatal existence. Following death, the mizuko is thought to exist in the in-between stage identified in early Mahayana writings as the antarābhava. In Japanese, this intermediate state is called the chū (ちゅ) and is believed to last for up to forty-nine days. According to Mariko Namba Walter, “in the interim state, the deceased can do little or nothing to improve their own condition; only memorial prayers offered by the living can transfer merit to them, relieving their suffering and enabling them to be born in a better realm.” Hence, the dead rely on the living for their continued wellbeing.

In general, the chū is a relatively amorphous concept. It is a vague transitional phase in which the mizuko, through the efforts of its family, can attain Buddhahood (jōbutsu, 成仏). An alternative, popular account of the postmortem destiny of mizuko

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73 Ibid.
details a place called *Sai no kawara* (賽の河原), the mythical banks of the River Sai. Kunio Yanagita, renowned Japanese ethnologist, traces the origins of *Sai no kawara* to a Japanese legend that was eventually assimilated into Buddhist lore as well.\(^{74}\) For our purposes, the interim stage, *chū", and *Sai no kawara* need not be considered mutually exclusive places. Rather the *Sai no kawara* story can be understood as offering a rich and personified account of what happens to the very young after death.

According to the traditional song that recounts the legend of *Sai no kawara*, the riverbank is a dark and frightening spot located at the entrance to hell and patrolled by a demon figure. Suffering and crying out for their parents, the spirits of *mizuko*—miscarried, stillborn, and aborted fetuses in addition to young children—go there after death and before rebirth in another realm.\(^{75}\) To earn merit while in this liminal place, the *mizuko* create miniature stupas made of stones dedicated to their parents and siblings. Each night, the songs say, the demon destroys the stupas. He tells the *mizuko* that the cause of their pain is their own lack of filial piety, and he scolds them for deserting their parents.

Despite the unsettling elements of the *Sai no kawara* tale, the purpose of the legend is neither to reproach *mizuko* as disloyal children nor to upset parents who have lost a child. Rather, the point is to tell of the mercy of Jizō,\(^{76}\) the bodhisattva savior who rescues

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\(^{76}\) For more on the figure of Jizō, see Jan Chozen Bays' *Jizo Bodhisattva: Guardian of Children, Travelers & Other Voyagers* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 2002) and Jeff
the *mizuko* in their distress. Out of the darkness, Jizō appears on the riverbank and comforts the *mizuko*. He pulls them into the warmth of his cloak, and he extends his staff to help those who cannot yet walk. The duration of the *mizuko*’s stay in *Sai no kawara* is less proscribed than doctrinal descriptions of the *chūu* that specify a strict limit of forty-nine days. Instead, songs and stories suggest that a *mizuko* remains in *Sai no kawara* until liberated via the intercession of Jizō, which comes after loved ones perform a *kuyō* on the behalf of the *mizuko*.

A fourth feature of Japanese prenatal anthropology grows out of the vision of postmortem existence just recounted. Whether imagined in *Sai no kawara* or in a less defined intermediate state, *mizuko* are thought to remain in communication, and in some sense, in relationship with family members through *mizuko* rites. Though the priests I interviewed tended to emphasize the *mizuko* reaching the Pure Land (*gokuraku jōdo*) and the realization of Buddhahood as the true goals of *mizuko* *kuyō*, votive tablets (*ema*) left by parents and grandparents in *mizuko* gardens present a different perspective. According to Ian Reader and George Tanabe, “such votive tablets are...’letters to the gods’ through which people can externalize, publicly express, and put into concrete form an inner desire.”

Hand-written and addressed directly to the *mizuko*, these tablets give voice to the enduring bond the living feel with their lost loved ones. Often, mothers and fathers simply ask that the *mizuko* “watch over” her or him. Other messages reveal an intimate connection between the *mizuko* and family. One tablet hanging within the grounds of Zōjōji, the main

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temple of the Jōdo Shu sect and Tokyo’s most prominent site for mizuko services, said, “Dear baby, I will wait for you forever so please be born healthy next time. Your dad, mom, and your older sister are looking forward to you.” This tablet, and others like it, communicates a sense of longing and gives the impression that this is merely one message in an ongoing conversation with the mizuko. It also reflects an idea noted by Noel Williams in his study of the “right to life” in Japan. Williams writes, “there has been a tendency in traditional Japanese society to perceive life as part of a continuous circle. The unborn baby was viewed as one who did not have the destiny to come into the world at that particular moment in time. It was accepted that it was the unborn baby’s fate not to be born at that time.” The reference in the message to health complications of the lost child suggests a degree of acceptance with the situation on the part of its author. At the same time, the message also reflects the hope that, if indeed life is a continuous circle, the mizuko will have the opportunity to return again in the future.

A similar feeling is reflected on other tablets, including ones with messages that imply the loss resulted from a decision to terminate a pregnancy. For example, another tablet from Zōjōji reads,

To the baby I was not able to meet,
It was a life given to us but I am sorry that we could not give you birth because of my selfishness. I am truly sorry. Please be sure to come back to my womb again. Next time, I will without a doubt show you the sunshine. I promise. I am truly, truly sorry.

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80 Votive tablet at Zōjōji in Tokyo, dated February 24, 2010, translated by Mika Hama.
Tinged with regret, this message includes an apology to the mizuko and makes promises about the future. It also contains a request for the mizuko to return to the same mother someday, much like the tablet above. The continuing relationship envisioned by the mother is both expressed and manifested through the message to her mizuko, and thus, if the mizuko does ultimately return one day, she will be ready for it.

A final feature of Japanese ideas about prenatal life that deserves mention is the association of mizuko with hellish retribution or curses called tatari. Sometimes called “spirit attacks,” tatari is the shadow side of the ongoing relationship believed to exist between the living and the dead. It is thought by some that if a mizuko, particularly one resulting from an abortion, is not properly remembered and apologized to through a kuyō, then it will become a wicked spirit in the lives of its parents and extended family. Affliction and ill-fortune of all sorts have been attributed to tatari, including chronic pain, depression, marital problems, and even, that other children in the family experience hauntings.²² Even though the notion of tatari is explicitly denied by most Buddhist temples that offer mizuko kuyō, it persists as an object of popular concern and fascination, and it is among the most common sources of mizuko kuyō criticism, especially when it is used as a scare tactic to incite participation in the ritual.

As this overview demonstrates, the practice of mizuko kuyō incorporates a wide variety of ideas about the unborn. Earlier in this chapter, I detailed Buddhist doctrinal notions of prenatal life, and while elements of these doctrines certainly inform Buddhist

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⁸¹ This is Helen Hardacre’s preferred translation of the term. Helen Hardacre, Marketing the Menacing Fetus in Japan (Berkley: University of California Press, 1997).

mizuko kuyō, other Japanese cultural beliefs about the unborn impact its practice as well. Sometimes these diverse beliefs coalesce; other times they coexist in apparent tension with one another. In the next section I examine scholarly literature on mizuko kuyō. This research further highlights the various sources—religious, cultural, historical, and political—that have influenced the formation of mizuko rites as well as mizuko kuyō participants’ diverse reasons for taking part in the memorials.

Part III: Scholarship on Mizuko kuyō

Popular accounts of Japanese mizuko kuyō by non-Japanese authors typically follow a similar pattern. First they describe the rows of small stone statues wearing red hats and bibs that sit behind Buddhist temples throughout Japan. Then they tell of the pinwheels that stand with the statues, and they reflect on how these toys give the space a playful air. Next, in an oft-repeated reversal of expectations, they surprise the reader by revealing that these statues—cute, grinning, and legion—memorialize fetuses that died as a result of abortion, the primary form of family planning in Japan. Finally, they draw a piece of wisdom from the situation that the Western reader is meant to learn from the Japanese way of dealing with problem of abortion. Usually it is that, despite the prevalence of abortion in Japan, it fails to elicit the same sort of moral consternation that it produces in the U.S. The statues and the accompanying ritual, they conclude, must have something to do with it.

Admittedly, this narrative pattern of Americans encountering mizuko kuyō is not unlike my own initial encounter with the Japanese practice. Further investigation into the subject has shown that mizuko practices have been a consistent object of interest for
Western scholars since the early 1980s. This research has made important contributions to the scholarly understanding of *mizuko kuyō* that go beyond simply observing the discrepancy between Japanese and American cultural responses to abortion. Nevertheless, gaps in *mizuko* scholarship remain. Specifically, most *mizuko* studies to date fall into the category identified by Tanabe and Reader as sociologically- and anthropologically-focused research. Few offer what Tanabe and Reader identify as a “theological” perspective that connects contemporary practices to the scriptures and doctrine of Buddhism. When they do, their contact with Buddhist principles remains vague, and insights from sociological and anthropological approaches are overlooked.

*Mizuko kuyō* first gained significant attention outside Japan with the publication of William LaFleur’s *Liquid Life: Buddhism and Abortion in Japan* (1992) and Helen Hardacre’s *Marketing the Menacing Fetus in Japan* (1999), which take different approaches to understanding the nature and historical roots of the rites. In the introduction to *Marketing the Menacing Fetus in Japan*, Hardacre discloses that LaFleur’s book “provided a major inspiration” for her own. Though she states that she agrees with LaFleur on many points, her work can be read as an extended critique of *Liquid Life*. While LaFleur sees *mizuko* rites as a product of the negotiation of Buddhism within contemporary Japanese culture, Hardacre argues that the rites lack a “canonical anchor” within Buddhism and are better understood as a cultural innovation characteristic of 20th century Japanese religious revival.

The publication of these two books prompted a wide range of responses and critiques by other scholars. Despite the dramatic differences between LaFleur’s and

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81 Hardacre, 8.
Hardacre’s arguments, their work elicited a shared criticism, namely, that neither study had incorporated the perspectives of mizuko kuyō participants in its research in any meaningful way. In response to this problem, the scholarly backlash to their work included research thoroughly committed to including the voices of those who seek out and take part in mizuko services, especially women. This reaction produced several fine studies notable for their even-handed treatment of a delicate and disputed subject. The research of Elizabeth Harrison stands out in this respect. Based on extensive fieldwork in Japan, her work draws attention to the ways in which the performance of mizuko rites embodies women’s creative negotiation of culture in dealing with their own experiences of pregnancy loss. In this final portion of the chapter, I consider the approaches of LaFleur, Hardacre, and Harrison in detail. I also look closely at the criticisms leveled at them by other scholars interested in mizuko kuyō.

William LaFleur

LaFleur frames his study of mizuko kuyō around what he sees as two apparent incongruities in the Buddhist practice. The first incongruity he notes is the Japanese tendency to humanize aborted fetuses, particularly through the use of the name mizuko, literally “water child” or “child of the waters.” This stands in contrast to American abortion rights rhetoric, which uses clinical terms like “products of conception” and “pregnancy tissue” that intentionally preclude any attribution of independent existence or human qualities to an embryo or fetus.

The second apparent incongruity regards the questionable propriety of an association of abortion with Buddhism. Some see the involvement of Buddhist institutions
in post-abortion rituals as an implicit condoning of abortion by temples and priests, which in turn seems like an affront to the first precept of prohibiting killing. Similarly, many question how Buddhist individuals can bracket their religion’s values when making the decision to terminate a pregnancy, yet then look to the tradition for consolation after the abortion. Recognizing this paradox, LaFleur’s aim in Liquid Life is “to describe 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, in spite of that, to think of herself as a ‘good’ Buddhist.”

Facing these incongruities head on, LaFleur attempts to tease out the historical roots of mizuko kuyō, and he highlights the resources within Buddhism and Japanese culture that help justify memorial rites for aborted, miscarried, and stillborn fetuses as well as for very young children.

LaFleur begins by drawing out the implications of “mizuko” in order to explain the rationale behind mizuko rites. He argues that calling dead fetuses “water children” is really a statement about how the nature of prenatal life is understood. The term, he says, has its roots in a Japanese belief about the fluidity of childhood existence. Flowing easily between life, death, and the next rebirth, early child life is always “in flux; its viability in the everyday, empirical world remains in some sense an open question.”

Or as one reviewer put it, “Birth is a significant transition, but not necessarily a decisive one.”

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84 LaFleur, Liquid Life, 12.

85 Ibid., 29.

86 Green, 811.
Intimately linked to the notion of fluidity is the concept of the gradual “densification” of children as they age and become more solidly part of the human world. Reflective of the continuous motion of the cycle of rebirth, densification is a movement from the fragile, fluid existence of early life to the stability of adulthood. In this view, “what we call ‘being born’ is really taking progressive leave of the world of gods and Buddhas and entering that of human."\(^7\) At the end of life, an inverse process, or “thinning,” occurs as the elderly slowly transition out of the human realm and back into the realm of the gods (kami) and the buddhas and prepare for buddhahood or the next life.\(^8\)

LaFleur formulates this interpretation against the historical background of the instability of pregnancy, childbirth, and early childhood in pre-modern Japan. He contends that imagining deceased children as *fluid* and part of the world of the buddhas and the *kami* mediated the widespread reality of natural child loss.\(^9\) Additionally, it mediated cases of infanticide, or *mabiki* (literally, “the culling of seedlings”). These were situations in which newborns were intentionally killed or abandoned for the sake of the welfare of the larger community during periods of famine or hardship.\(^10\) In such cases,

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\(^7\) LaFleur, *Liquid Life*, 35.

\(^8\) The coexistence of the *kami* and the buddhas in a common pantheon reflects Japan’s religious pluralism. While Buddhism and Shinto have a fairly strict division of labor in Japan—Buddhism handles the funerals while Shinto covers birth rituals—many scholars of Japanese religions note the casual overlap between the two in the mind of the average Japanese person. I will return to this issue in greater detail in Chapter 5.

\(^9\) Ibid, 37.

\(^10\) Ibid, 93-94, 98. Citing recent research and statistics regarding the leveling off of population after a period of rapid growth late 18\(^{\text{th}}\) and early 19\(^{\text{th}}\) centuries, LaFleur
neonates were euphemistically said to have been “returned,” by the parents and by the community, to the realm of the buddhas and the *kami*.  

In the contemporary context, LaFleur believes that many of the dynamics that influenced Japanese women and families in eras past are still at work. He cites cases in which women or families not wishing to have a child at a particular time “return” their *mizuko* to the realm of the gods, hoping that the same child will be reborn to them when the time is right. The Zōjōji votive tablets quoted in the previous section also suggest that this logic remains intact today. Thus, according to LaFleur, this understanding of the fetus or child as a *mizuko*—still fluid and not yet fully in the human world—is in part what permits Buddhists to make the decision to abort without sacrificing thinking themselves as good Buddhists.

Not surprisingly, however, LaFleur admits that the so-called *mizuko* logic is not the only factor in the moral decision-making equation. To explain how Japanese Buddhists can simultaneously uphold seemingly contradictory beliefs and practices, he draws on Jeffrey Stout’s notion of moral *bricolage*. According to Stout, one’s sense of morality is informed at once by multiple ethical systems (legal, religious, social, cultural, etc.), and it is the task of the individual to creatively delineate truth and untruth to form one’s own, not-always-consistent ethical framework. Bringing this notion of moral *bricolage* into dialogue with

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92 Ibid., 26.

the issue of abortion in Japan, LaFleur writes, “It is this that allows [Japanese women] the freedom to avoid being hemmed in by Buddhism’s early proscriptions and at the same time, to act responsibly still as Buddhists in key ways.”94 By “key ways,” LaFleur means taking part in Buddhist memorial practices. For him, mizuko kuyō provides a “concrete way] individuals deal with abortion in their lives” and helps satisfy the tendency toward ritualization LaFleur considers fundamental to Japanese culture.95

Despite the even-handed tone of LaFleur’s work, it nonetheless managed to stir up scholarly controversy. In his review of LaFleur’s Liquid Life, George Tanabe, Jr., critiques LaFleur’s book “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.”96 Further, he criticizes LaFleur’s reading of mizuko kuyō as focusing too much on what is implicit in Japanese history and in Buddhist thought and for failing to take into account how mizuko rituals have become a well-marketed product in the last several decades. LaFleur pushed back at Tanabe’s critiques, and through a series of rejoinders and counterresponses, Tanabe and LaFleur were able to agree that there are layers of complexity to the issue and no single approach can account for them all.

Helen Hardacre

In contrast to LaFleur’s Liquid Life, Helen Hardacre’s work hones in on the issue Tanabe raises of the commercialized aspect of the mizuko kuyō. The provocative title of her

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94 LaFleur, Liquid Life, 12.

95 Ibid., 143, 150.

book on the subject, *Marketing the Menacing Fetus in Japan*, is suggestive of her larger project. To Hardacre, a scholar of modern Japanese religious history, *mizuko kuyō* is a "distinctly contemporary phenomenon" without roots in traditional Japanese religious practices. It developed "not as an unmediated expression of popular sentiment about abortion, but as the product of an intense media advertising campaign...[that] rested upon a festishization of visual images of the fetus."\(^97\) Hardacre works hard to counter the image, put forth by LaFleur, that *mizuko kuyō* is practiced universally by women who have experienced pregnancy losses, and she contends that *mizuko kuyō* is, at root, misogynistic for the unfair burden of responsibility and guilt it places on women.\(^98\)

Because *mizuko* rite lacks what Hardacre calls a "canonical anchor" within a particular religious tradition, it has been taken up by a variety of groups and has also been open to manipulation.\(^99\) She is especially critical of those providers of *mizuko kuyō* who promote warding off vengeful spirits (*tatari*) as the purpose of the ritual. The way in which abortion has been pounced upon as an arena for ritualization, she argues, is representative of the broad-based Japanese religious revival that took place the 20th century, particularly with the new religions of Japan.\(^100\) In her view, *mizuko kuyō* is best understood as just


\(^98\) Ibid., 252.

\(^99\) In contrast to LaFleur, Hardacre focuses on the non-Buddhist manifestations of *mizuko kuyō*. She is right in pointing out that other religious groups facilitate *mizuko* rites, but in my opinion, she downplays the affinity between *mizuko kuyō* and other Buddhist ancestor memorial practices.

\(^100\) Hardacre, 155.
another element in the highly commercialized “occult boom” of the last several decades, and not “simply as ‘Japan’s way of dealing with abortion.’”  

Two additional aspects of Hardacre’s work deserve mention here: her attention to the “deritualization” of reproduction and the rise of “fetocentric” rhetoric. First, Hardacre reveals the deritualization of pregnancy and childbirth that has taken place since the Meiji Restoration (1868). Due to the replacement of midwifery with modern medicine and with the regulation of reproduction through various social policies, the traditional Japanese discourse on sexuality and family planning was dismantled. What remained was medical language that could account for the fetus in the uterus but little else in the childbearing experience. In response to this change, Hardacre suggests, *mizuko kuyō* developed in the 1970s to fill the void left by this deritualization.  

A second issue Hardacre raises is the “fetocentric rhetoric” that has come to dominate abortion discourse in Japan. According to her, “the fetocentricism in tabloid accounts of *mizuko kuyō* erases the distinction between fetus and infant, and attributes full humanity and agency to a fetus from the moment of conception. It further separates the pregnant woman from the fetus as ‘mother’ and ‘child’ and positions them in opposition to each other.” Advocates of *mizuko kuyō* employ fetocentric rhetoric to give a sense of independent personhood to the fetus, which helps justify the performance of a memorial  

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102 Ibid., 19-28, 48-54.  
103 Ibid., 13, 253.  
104 Ibid., 80, 253. Hardacre notes that historically “the oneness of the woman and the fetus was such a powerful motif that any separation of the two, any pretense that the fetus’s existence was independent from—far less opposed to—that of the mother, was virtually inconceivable.”
ritual on the mizuko’s behalf. More malignantly, it has been used in conjunction with fetal imaging technology to visualize tatari and create the predatory tabloid icon Hardacre calls the “menacing fetus.” Ultimately, she believes this rhetoric has inspired a “fetishizing of the fetus” that marks a departure from traditional Japanese modes of thinking about reproduction and puts the interests of the mother at odds with those of the fetus.

George Tanabe, who offered a pointed critique of LaFleur’s Liquid Life, is less critical of Hardacre’s approach. However, while he does not disagree with Hardacre’s research or conclusions, he does wish to draw greater attention to certain points that get lost in Hardacre’s presentation of the topic. For example, while Tanabe agrees with Hardacre that the tabloid marketing of the “menacing fetus” is out of hand, he stresses that the mainstream approach to mizuko kūyo is not primarily focused on vengeful fetal spirits. He also emphasizes Hardacre’s acknowledgement of the fact that mizuko kūyo is a new ritual practiced only by a minority of those who have abortions. For this reason, Tanabe praises Hardacre’s work insofar as it “liberates the ritual from its restrictive association with

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105 Hardacre, 80. Fetocentric rhetoric has also invoked by those who oppose abortion, namely, the Seicho no Ie group, a religious and political organization that devoted significant effort in the 1970s to restricting abortion access. Seicho no Ie (“Truth of Life Movement”, or literally “Home of Long(est) Life”), founded by Taniguchi Masaharu, is new religion of Japan that in 1929 splintered off from another new religion, Ōmotokyō. According to its own website (snitruth.org), “The Seicho-No-Ie Truth of Life Movement is a nondenominational movement based on the belief that all religions emanate from one universal God. It is dedicated to spreading the truth that every person is a child of God; therefore, in reality every person is divine in nature and the possessor of all of the creative powers of God.” In 1964 the movement expanded with the formation of the Seicho no Ie Seiji Rengo, “The Political Association of Seicho no Ie,” which was intended as a political lobby for the group’s conservative causes, including the prohibition of abortion. According to Hardacre, it failed to ever develop significant political sway. See Hardacre, 5-6, 74-77.

106 Hardacre, 80.

abortion and Buddhism, and, thereby, from much of the popular and academic hype that makes students of Japanese religion mistakenly think that mizuko kuyō is an important ritual tied to abortion.”\textsuperscript{108} Clearly, in this last point Tanabe is making a (not so veiled) critique of William LaFleur’s work.

\textit{Elizabeth Harrison}

The third scholar whose work deserves close examination is Elizabeth Harrison. In contrast to LaFleur and Hardacre, Harrison focuses specifically on the voices of women involved in mizuko kuyō in order to showcase their agency in the performance of the ritual. Unfortunately, she says, most studies of mizuko kuyō portray women in a negative light. According to such sources, by participating in mizuko kuyō women are either passively following an existing religious and cultural custom or they are pitiably being conned into buying the manipulative product that is mizuko kuyō. By contrast, Harrison argues that women should be credited for the active role they play in facilitating their own mizuko kuyō and through it, their own healing.\textsuperscript{109}

Like LaFleur, Harrison finds that today’s mizuko kuyō draws on pre-modern Japanese beliefs and practices in constructive ways. Yet she also agrees with Hardacre’s point that mizuko kuyō is “invented tradition” of the 1960s and 1970s.\textsuperscript{110} Indeed, it is within the

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{108} Tanabe, Review of \textit{Marketing the Menacing Fetus in Japan}, 380.
\item\textsuperscript{110} In using this term, Harrison makes reference to Eric Hobsbawm’s \textit{The Invention of Tradition} (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992).
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
upheaval of the postwar context that Harrison believes *mizuko kuyō* must be understood. She asserts that it emerged out of a “new articulation of the relationship between spirits of the dead and the welfare of the nation.” Unlike previous generations that only recognized mature ancestors, with the abortion boom in the decades following the end of the war, “recognition of the existence of spirits of *unborn dead children* in continuing dynamic relationship to society” became of part of the Japanese religious consciousness. Harrison attributes this new awareness to efforts that were taken to reconstitute community in the face of the rupture created by the Second World War and its aftermath. She draws attention to the role of changing family structures in the creation of the *mizuko* ritual, and she notes that change in the status of children in society most likely played a part in its development as well. Echoing a point made by LaFleur, Harrison asserts that whereas the place of a child in a family was relatively unstable in earlier eras due to the prevalence of stillbirth, miscarriage, and early childhood death, “something in the Japanese conceptual framework has changed to put (dead) young children into the family as seemingly autonomous individuals.”

Recognizing these changing social structures, Harrison sees *mizuko kuyō* as the “social and religious acknowledgement of the existence of *mizuko* in some relationship to

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112 Ibid., 793.

113 Ibid., 777.


the living (usually, but not always, their mothers).”\textsuperscript{116} She criticizes depictions of mizuko kuyō as a fad that has lured (mostly) women to uncritically consume religious goods and rituals. This view oversimplifies the diverse personal and social reasons behind the performance of mizuko kuyō. Harrison writes, “women who participate in the practice choose to do so for their own reasons, which may be a response to the public rhetoric, to prevent harm from coming to their family, ...to soothe their own sense of loss, or to take care of a child who is perceived to be separated from its mother.”\textsuperscript{117}

The final reason in the list is at the heart of what Harrison considers the purpose of the kuyō, that is, “the (re)establishment of a mother-child relationship with one’s mizuko.”\textsuperscript{118} As Ronald M. Green, summarizing Harrison’s work, puts it, mizuko kuyō “allows women to re-produce themselves as good mothers by placing abortions that are culturally regarded as reproductive and maternal failures within a context of positive ritual acts.”\textsuperscript{119} Because of the equation of womanhood and motherhood in Japanese society, failing to mother one’s child is a grave offense. In the performance of mizuko kuyō, the lost fetus or child is given a form and name through which the mother can form a relationship with the mizuko.\textsuperscript{120} Through the transfer of merit, the mother can even (indirectly) attend to the

\textsuperscript{116} Harrison, “Strands of Complexity,” 770.

\textsuperscript{117} Ibid., 790. Going off the translation of mizuko as “water child,” the Harrison typically refers to aborted, stillborn, and miscarried fetuses as children. Thus, when she writes of a “child,” “children,” or “dead children,” she is typically referring to what I have been calling mizuko.

\textsuperscript{118} Harrison, “Women’s Responses to Child Loss in Japan,” 67.

\textsuperscript{119} Green, 814.

\textsuperscript{120} Harrison, “Women’s Responses to Child Loss in Japan,” 69.
mizuko’s well-being.\textsuperscript{121} The ritual, Harrison writes, “acts as an acknowledgement that there was (by virtue of conception), \textit{would have been} (in that a child conceived is the seed of a child born), and still \textit{is} a child, even though that child is not now present in the mundane sense of the word.”\textsuperscript{122} It gives an identity not only to the lost mizuko, but also to the woman wishing to reclaim her role as mother.

Despite the contributions that each of these scholars has made to mizuko kuyō research, they are not without their critics. LaFleur’s \textit{Liquid Life} has been severely critiqued for lacking historical and ethnographic evidence to back up his claims.\textsuperscript{123} Likewise, Hardacre has been challenged for relying so little on fieldwork in formulating and supporting her own argument. More troubling, however, is the fact that in her presentation, “women caught up in mizuko kuyō are largely [portrayed as] unwitting victims of the forms of cultural oppression it embodies.”\textsuperscript{124} Harrison’s use of “child loss” to refer to both miscarriage and abortion has been disputed, and her findings have been challenged for understating mizuko kuyō’s role in re-entrenching the ideology of motherhood that many Japanese women seek to overcome.\textsuperscript{125} Finally, referring to the work of LaFleur, Hardacre, and Harrison, Ronald M. Green observes that “virtually every position taken in the \textit{mizuko kuyō} debate reflects a series of strongly held moral commitments.”

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{121} Harrison, “\textit{Mizuko kuyō: The Reproduction of the Dead},” 265.
  \item \textsuperscript{122} Ibid., 261.
  \item \textsuperscript{125} Midori, 99, 98.
\end{itemize}
continues, “While all the scholars treating the phenomenon of *mizuko kuyō* are trying to understand it, their efforts are also invariably linked to its moral evaluation.” In my opinion, the problem is not with the moral evaluations themselves, but with the scholars’ lack of reflexivity about the biases of their own approaches.

That said, the value of their research should not be overshadowed by the weaknesses. LaFleur, for example, shows a remarkable sensitivity to the grief that often accompanies pregnancy loss, and he uncovers resources within Buddhism to help cope with such feelings. Hardacre’s study is notable for the critical eye she brings to her research. Her attention to the misogynistic and exploitive elements of *mizuko kuyō* is especially valuable for rectifying the somewhat overly optimistic picture of the ritual painted by LaFleur. Unfortunately, women’s agency somehow seems to get lost in her study. This, in turn, is remedied by Harrison’s work, which grants insight into the perspectives of women who, for a variety of reasons, feel the desire to memorialize their losses in a formal way. It “stresses women’s agency in constructing and enacting the ritual...[which makes] women’s reproductive plight in a patriarchal society visible.”

Before concluding, I would like to bring one final scholar into the discussion. Meredith Underwood’s single article on *mizuko kuyō*, “Strategies of Survival: Women, Abortion, and Popular Religion in Contemporary Japan,” is in my opinion among the most sophisticated treatments of the subject. Drawing on the insights of cultural studies, Underwood argues that in participating in the *mizuko kuyō*, women are neither religious

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126 Green, 809.

“dupes” nor “dopes” caught up in exploits of others. Rather, they are “negotiators of culture...[who] have instituted by popular demand a ritual that meets their religious needs.” In contrast to other scholars, Underwood devotes significant attention the idea of tatari, or menacing spirits. LaFleur and Hardacre both vehemently deny the reality of tatari, which Underwood interprets as disparaging women as unsuspecting victims of a religious ruse. While she is critical of tatari as a Foucauldian instrument of discipline, she believes that it must be taken seriously as a reflection women’s social vulnerability and for the power that it exercises over women’s lives, rather than simply brushed aside as an inauthentic element of religious belief.

Conclusion

In 1995, Elizabeth Harrison wrote, “Critics of the [mizuko kuyō]—those who called it a boom—predicted that it would disappear in a few years when women realized that it would not do anything for them. Instead in the ten years I have been studying the phenomenon, it has become mainstream, unremarkable and largely unremarked, and seems to be offered at most religious sites around the country, thereby ensuring women access to the support and the voice that it can offer them.” Fifteen years later, Harrison’s reflections still hold true.

128 Underwood, 739-768.
129 Ibid., 740.
130 Ibid., 758-765.
I return to *mizuko kuyō* in Chapter 5 where I examine the question of efficacy in the context of the ritual. Briefly put, there I investigate what precisely *mizuko kuyō* are believed to accomplish for those who take part in them. Throughout that chapter, I continue to draw on what has come to light in this chapter, namely, that a complicated web of social and religious factors came together in the rise of *mizuko kuyō*; that women participate in the rituals for diverse reasons; that beliefs about the nature of prenatal life help undergird the ritual performance; that ancient Buddhist ideas still, in some sense, inform the practice of *mizuko kuyō*, but that Japanese cultural beliefs cannot be denied the major role they play as well.

At the beginning of this chapter, I devoted my attention to delineating early Buddhist ideas about prenatal life and abortion, which I then supplemented with contemporary Japanese perspectives on the same subject. While these views certainly do not coincide perfectly, they come together in *mizuko kuyō* and reflect the dynamic cultural negotiation that has been characteristic of Buddhism since its beginning. Though some, like Helen Hardacre, suggest that *mizuko kuyō* has little to do with the “authentic” Buddhism they envision, I contend that it demonstrates the ability of Buddhist values and rites to be adapted to the changing situations facing Japanese society without becoming disconnected from its foundations.
CHAPTER 4: CATHOLIC THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGIES OF PRENATAL LIFE

What can be said theologically about life in the womb? How is the ontological status of prenates understood at the level of doctrine and in the popular imagination? What are fetuses called on to be and to do in elite and popular accounts of prenatal existence? In two parts, this chapter explores these questions in order to understand the role of prenatal anthropology in the development and practice of Catholic pregnancy loss rituals. Part I is an examination of historical and contemporary Catholic doctrinal ideas about prenatal theological anthropology. Because few texts address the subject directly, magisterial and papal documents discussing the morality of abortion provide the best point of entry for exploring the topic. Understanding the ethics of abortion, however, is not my aim in examining these sources. Rather, the goal is to see what they reveal about Catholic views on the nature of prenatal life in their consideration of abortion. Part II considers other theological sources that illuminate how Catholics have interpreted life (and death) in the earliest stages of human development. These sources include 20th century theologies of childhood as well as stories of Limbo and the Holy Innocents. Together, these two parts establish a detailed understanding of Catholic theological conceptions of the significance of prenatal life.

In the last chapter, through the pulling together of diverse sources, a picture of the Buddhist imagination of prenatal life emerged. Early Buddhist texts describe a being, valued as a human being from the start, that is bound by its own karma, which determines whether the being’s time in the womb results in defects, miscarriage, or if all goes well, a healthy birth. By contrast, contemporary Japanese Buddhist perspectives de-emphasize
the particular karma of the conceptus, and instead stress the potential of a mizuko to reach the Pure Land or to return to the human realm if helped along through the performance of mizuko kuyō. This information was drawn from mizuko rituals themselves or from scholarly accounts of them. In this chapter I do not dedicate attention to actual Catholic pregnancy loss memorials or the social and cultural factors that might influence a woman’s decision to take part in one. This is primarily because there are so few sources to draw from on the Catholic side. Instead, I concentrate here on the doctrinal statements dealing with prenatal life and on the Catholic imagination of the unborn and of the very young. In Chapter 5 I will look at prenatal anthropology specifically within the context of emerging pregnancy loss rituals while also considering other cultural and social influences that shape the form of the rituals and individuals’ reasons for participating.

Part I: Doctrinal Conceptions of Prenatal Theological Anthropology

Recent papal statements on the morality of abortion are unambiguous. John Paul II made the promotion of what he called a “culture of life” a hallmark of his papacy, and in his 1995 encyclical, Evangelium vitae, he wrote, “the Church has always taught and continues to teach that the result of human procreation, from the first moment of its existence, must be guaranteed that unconditional respect which is morally due to the human being.” Yet many scholars argue that over the course of the 2,000-year history of Christianity, the issue has not always been so clear-cut. In particular, questions surrounding the timing of the physical development and ensoulment of the fetus in utero

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1 John Paul II, Evangelium vitae (March 30, 1995), no. 60. Unless otherwise specified, the papal, magisterial, and conciliar texts cited in this dissertation are taken from the official English translations posted on the Vatican’s website, vatican.va.
have been a source of debate in determining the definition of and morality of abortion since early in the church’s history. As the issues of contraception and abortion gained prominence in the middle decades of the 20th century, scholars, such as John Noonan and John Connery, began devoting attention to better understanding the history of the church’s approach to such issues. Though there is certainly diversity within Catholic history as to how to determine the morality of abortion, the work of these scholars and others show that the nuances of the various approaches tend to be glossed over in favor of a view of that sees the tradition as “unchanged and unchangeable.” Here I examine the ways in which the tradition both has and has not changed.

_Abortion in Scripture and the Early Church_

Considering the centrality of the question of abortion to the identity of the American Catholic church today, it is somewhat surprising how little attention the Hebrew and Christian scriptures devote to the issue. The most explicit mention of the issue in scripture comes in Exodus 21:22-25 in which an incident of abortion induced by a third party (that is, not by the mother) and its corresponding penalty are outlined.

> When people who are fighting injure a pregnant woman so that there is a miscarriage, and yet no further harm follows, the one responsible shall be fined what the woman’s husband demands, paying as much as the judges determine. If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.

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2 Paul VI, Address to the National Congress of Italian Jurists (December 9, 1972) quoted in _Evangelium vitae_, no. 2.

3 John R. Connery, _Abortion: The Development of the Roman Catholic Perspective_ (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1977), 12. Connery also mentions a Mishna source in which the life of the mother takes priority over that of the fetus if there is difficult in childbirth, thus necessitating the “dismemberment” of the fetus. Ibid., 15.
Though the financial penalty listed refers to harm done to the fetus, the primary concern of this “lex talionis,” or “law of retaliation,” verse appears to be defending the mother. It makes no mention of self-induced abortion nor does it correlate the stage of fetal development to the penalty incurred. By contrast, the Septuagint’s Greek translation of the same verses suggest that the penalty for causing an abortion is based on whether the fetus is formed and unformed. In the case of an unformed fetus, only a fine must be paid. If the fetus is fully formed, however, the offender will “give life for life.”

In his history of Roman Catholic perspectives on abortion, John Connery speculates that the importance attributed to the life of the fetus in these verses suggests that self-induced abortion, not just abortion caused by a third party, would have been considered wrong in biblical times. In addition, he points to the significance of the discrepancy between translations, arguing that not only does the Greek Septuagint translation correspond more closely to Aristotelian thought, but that it also would have been the version known by many of the early church fathers, thus affecting both foundational and subsequent Christian treatments of the subject based on the distinction of phases in fetal development.

As for the New Testament, the only possible allusion to abortion comes in Paul’s letter to the Galatians (5:20) when he condemns the administering of pharmakeia—the meaning of which is somewhere between medicine and sorcery—as a sin of the flesh.

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5 Connery, 17.

6 Ibid., 17-18.
While in contemporary texts *pharmakeia* is sometimes used in reference to abortion-causing drugs, this is not the term’s exclusive meaning, which included a broad spectrum of medicinal practices.\(^7\) Thus, though Paul could have been referring to the use of abortifacients, it cannot be said that to be his sole intention. Notably, the *Didache*, thought to have been written before the end of the first century CE by one of the earliest Christian communities, explicitly condemns abortion in its declaration, “You shall not slay the child by abortions (*phthora*). You shall not kill what is generated.”\(^8\) Listed among sexual sins (adultery, fornication) and the admonitions of the Ten Commandments (homicide, theft),\(^9\) the gravity of abortion is emphasized while the precise nature of the offense—as sexual immorality or as homicide—remains unclear.

Among early church fathers such as Tertullian of Carthage (160-240) and Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-215), the type of offense constituted by abortion vacillates between murder and sexual immorality or both. For example, Tertullian writes, “For us,” that is, for Christians,

> indeed, as homicide is forbidden, it is not lawful to destroy what is conceived in the womb while the blood is still being formed into a man. To prevent being born is to accelerate homicide, nor does it make a difference whether you snatch away a soul which is born or destroy one being born. He who is a man-to-be is man, as all fruit is now in the seed.\(^{10}\)

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\(^8\) *Didache* 2.2 quoted in Noonan, 9.

\(^9\) Noonan, 10.

\(^{10}\) Tertullian, *Apologeticum ad nations* 1.15, quoted in Noonan, 12.
For Tertullian, the fetus in the womb is undoubtedly alive and ensouled—for “how are (the stillborn) dead unless they were first alive?”\textsuperscript{11}—and any attempt to terminate pregnancy is understood as aggressive act against a human person. For Clement, on the other hand, “Women who have recourse to lethal drugs to conceal fornication”—meaning, to induce abortion intentionally—“destroy not only the fetus within them but their own humanity.”\textsuperscript{12} Thus, while Clement considered induced abortion a grave sin, once again one can see how concern for sexual immorality is intertwined in the judgment the morality of the abortive act itself.

In the 4\textsuperscript{th} and 5\textsuperscript{th} centuries CE, Jerome, while taking a firm stance against the abortion of a formed fetus, remained more ambiguous on the status of the unformed fetus. This ambiguity left room enough for later thinkers to invoke him in arguments for and against the idea that aborting an unformed fetus does not constitute homicide.\textsuperscript{13} Like Jerome, Augustine recognized a distinction between the formed and unformed fetus without committing to whether or not an unformed fetus was necessarily un-animated as well. I will undertake a more in depth consideration of Augustine’s thought when I discuss the issue of infant baptism and the ontological status of prenatal and neonatal life. For now, suffice it to say that while Augustine deemed abortion immoral, the primary offense was that it was a sin against marriage, rather than homicide, in that it made husband and

\textsuperscript{11} Tertullian, De Anima 25.5, quoted in Noonan, 13.

\textsuperscript{12} Connery, 37.

\textsuperscript{13} Noonan, 15; Connery, 53; David Albert Jones, The Soul of the Embryo: An Enquiry into the Status of the Human Embryo in the Christian Tradition (New York: Continuum, 2004), 69. The sources that would later build on Jerome’s work include Gratian’s Concordance of Discordant Canons and Peter Lombard’s Sentences, both of which argued that abortion does not constitute homicide until the fetus is both formed and ensouled.
wife no better than adulterers.\textsuperscript{14} Thus, as this brief sampling demonstrates, within the early church there was general agreement in the condemnation of abortion, though precisely on what grounds such a condemnation should be made—homicide or sexual immorality—and what qualified as abortion—only the formed fetus or the unformed fetus as well—remained unresolved.

\textit{The Medieval and Early Modern Periods}

In the centuries immediately after Augustine, Noonan notes, interest surrounding the immaculate conception of Mary and the virginal conception of Jesus became popular, thereby leading to increased consideration of the theological significance of life in the womb.\textsuperscript{15} Penitentials spanning this period point to the severe penances associated with abortion. Interestingly, several of these penitentials describe varying penances depending on the development of the fetus. The distinction here is no longer just between the formed and unformed fetus, but rather between the unformed (three and a half years penance), the formed but not yet ensouled (seven years penance), and the formed and ensouled fetus (fourteen years penance).\textsuperscript{16} Yet in general, different judgments persisted as to whether or the abortion of an unformed fetus constituted homicide. That is, until Gregory IX’s \textit{Decretals} of 1234 when it was declared homicide to abort formed fetus.\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{14} Noonan, 15-16; Connery, 55-60.

\textsuperscript{15} Noonan, 19.

\textsuperscript{16} Jones, \textit{The Soul of the Embryo}, 67.

\textsuperscript{17} Noonan, 20-21; Because the \textit{Decretals} were not formally replaced until the 1917 revision of canon law, Gregory IX’s declaration persisted into the 20\textsuperscript{th} century.
Furthering the popularity of this approach was its adoption by Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas, like many others before him, agreed that abortion was a sin.\(^\text{18}\) However, for him, inducing the termination of a pregnancy only qualified as homicide and a mortal sin once the fetus was ensouled. Before that point, aborting an unanimated fetus or embryo was a considered sin but held not the same gravity as acting later in the pregnancy. Aquinas follows Aristotle’s account of embryological development insofar as he correlates the gradual ensoulement of the fetus, which as a process of delayed animation progresses through vegetative and sensitive stages before attaining a spiritual soul, to the number of days past conception. This process took place according to different chronologies for males and females, with males becoming fully ensouled several weeks before females.

Despite the influence of Thomas and of Gregory IX’s *Decretals*, debate surrounding the morality of abortion continued in the centuries to come, particularly regarding the distinction between the animated and unanimated *conceptus*. As modern physicians increasingly began to weigh in, “the double effect” principle received greater attention as the question of “therapeutic abortion,” that is, terminating a pregnancy in order to protect the life of the mother, gained prominence.\(^\text{19}\) Though theological condemnations of aborting ensouled fetuses were firmly in place, Pope Sixtus V’s 1588 attempt to curb the practice of abortion through the threat of excommunication suggests that popular opinion and practice did not necessarily coincide with official teachings. Interestingly, his immediate successor, Gregory XIV, repealed the penalties set in place by Sixtus V.\(^\text{20}\)

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\(^{19}\) Noonan, 26–31.
In the early modern period, the cult of Mary continued to grow, culminating in the 1854 definition of the Immaculate Conception, which had implications for the importance attributed to the embryo from the time of conception. Prior to this, the 1827 discovery of the ovum had discredited Aristotelian and Thomistic embryology and had prompted a reconsideration of long-accepted ethical distinctions, and in 1869, Pius IX’s *Apostolicæ sedis* failed to distinguish between an ensouled and an unanimated fetus in apportioning the penalty of excommunication to abortion. Late 20th century authors attempting to draw attention to diversity within the tradition have emphasized the novelty of Pius’ action. In contrast, David Albert Jones argues that Pius’ declaration is more accurately understood as the recovery of the earliest church tradition from before the distinction based on ensoulment gained popularity.  

20th Century Developments

Regardless of the novelty or traditionalism of Pius IX’s action, it marked a shift in the ecclesiastical approach to the subject, and it became standard practice for church teaching to no longer draw distinctions based on fetal development and animation. Pius XI does not distinguish between the animated and unanimated fetus in *Casti Connubii* in 1930, and he speaks in personal, rather than technical, language, referring to the “innocent child” undeserving of “unjust aggress[ion].” He condemns any intentional prevention of procreation—either through contraception or abortion, for the health of the mother or

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20 Jones, *The Soul of the Embryo*, 71. Noonan notes that Sixtus V’s action was aimed at the prostitution trade within Rome.

21 Ibid., 72.

22 Pius XI, *Casti connubii* (December 30, 1930), no. 64.
otherwise—as “an offense against the law of God and of nature” that is accompanied by “the guilt of grave sin.” Furthermore, abortion is considered “a sin against conjugal faith” and is closely associated with “lustful cruelty,” an invocation of the words of Augustine. Once again, the issue of sexual immortality is interwoven into the ethical judgment of abortion, and those who fail to prevent abortions are warned to “remember that God is the Judge and Avenger of innocent blood which cried from earth to Heaven.”

Noonan argues that the importance of this encyclical in the development of the church’s stance on abortion must not be underestimated. In his words,

In this compact and sweeping statement, the tones of early Christianity were heard: embryonic life was sacred; God and man were grievously offended by its destruction; there was no exception. The strongest and most comprehensive denunciation of abortion made by papal authority, it did not constitute infallible teaching; but, addressed to the bishops of the whole Church and authoritatively proclaiming the moral law, it was of controlling force for Catholics.

In many ways, Casti Connubii served as the culminating word on centuries of magisterial consideration of the issue of abortion. Yet despite its clear stance against abortion under any circumstances, theologians and medical professionals continued to speculate about exceptions to the rule. Mostly this involved the reconsideration of old questions—regarding abortion for the health of the mother and the “double effect” principle, for

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23 Casti connubii, no. 56.
24 Ibid., no. 72.
25 Ibid., no. 65.
26 Ibid., no. 67.
27 Noonan, 44.
example—in light of new medical knowledge and capabilities. Nevertheless, the
pronouncement stood as the most complete official pronouncement on abortion to date,
and in large part, its essential content remained intact in the thought of Pius XI’s
immediate successors, Pius XII and John XXIII, though neither of them made statements on
the subject that carried as much weight as the encyclical.

Pius XII reiterated Pius XI’s basic position in a 1951 speech to Italian midwives in
which he asserted that the fetus receives the right to life “immediately” from God, not from
the parents nor any other human authority, and therefore, no earthly authority has the
power to permit the deliberate destruction of human life either as a means or an end. In
addition, “the life of an innocent is untouchable,” and “the baby, still not born, is a man in
the same degree and for the same reason as the mother.” Here the link made between
theological anthropology and morality is clear, and one can see the shift from focusing on
the immoral act and actor (the abortion itself and the one(s) procuring or causing the
abortion) to focusing on the object of the act, the fetus.

John XXIII’s contribution to the discussion is identified by later papal and
magisterial documents as the declaration of the sanctity of life in the encyclical, Mater et
magistra (1961). “Human life is sacred,” he asserts. “From its very inception it reveals the
creating hand of God. Those who violate His laws not only offend the divine majesty and
degrade themselves and humanity, they also sap the vitality of the political community of

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28 Connery, 284-303.

29 Pius XII, Address to the Italian Catholic Society of Midwives (October 29, 1951), part II,
paragraph 2.

30 Ibid., quoted in Noonan, 45.
which they are members.”\textsuperscript{31} For Pope John also, the morality of the issue is closely tied to theological anthropology. Yet while Mater et magistra’s concern for the human life is unambiguous, abortion remains an implicit object of critique, delivered within the context of extolling the dignity of marriage and the family and of condemning of artificial contraception.

Though John XXIII convened the Second Vatican Council, the credit for its condemnation of abortion should go to Paul VI who presided over the final years of the council. In the midst of controversy regarding whether or not to make a definitive statement about the church’s stance on contraception, Vatican II continued the tradition of Casti connubii in terms of its approach to abortion in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, Gaudium et spes. In contrast to Pius XI’s encyclical, however, greater attention is devoted to recognizing the social realities and hardships faced by married couples, and the goods of marriage are no longer ranked as primary or secondary. After noting the challenge increased family size can pose to couples, Gaudium et spes asserts,

\begin{quote}
To these problems there are those who presume to offer dishonorable solutions indeed; they do not recoil even from the taking of life. But the Church issues the reminder that a true contradiction cannot exist between the divine laws pertaining to the transmission of life and those pertaining to authentic conjugal love. For God, the Lord of life, has conferred on men the surpassing ministry of safeguarding life in a manner which is worthy of man. Therefore from the moment of its conception life must be guarded with the greatest care while abortion and infanticide are unspeakable crimes.\textsuperscript{32}
\end{quote}

Though the document as a whole takes an anthropological starting point, its comments on abortion steer clear of defining what precisely life is and focuses instead on morality in the

\textsuperscript{31} John XXIII, Mater et magistra (May 15, 1961), no. 194.

\textsuperscript{32} Second Vatican Council, Gaudium et spes (December 7, 1965), no. 51.
context of marriage and the family. Overall this approach is consistent with previous papal treatments of the subject. Still, Noonan draws attention to the inclusion of the phrase “from the moment of conception” as something novel at that point in time, but which would become common in future magisterial and papal writings. He notes, also, the distinction Gaudium et spes draws between abortion and contraception—the first such distinction of its kind. No longer were they treated as simply two aspects of the same issue.\textsuperscript{33}

In the end, Paul VI withheld from the conciliar agenda the issue of artificial contraception due to its “potentially explosive” nature.\textsuperscript{34} The council simply repeated what previous encyclicals and papal statements had declared on the subject and left the reconsideration of the issue to a special commission John XXIII had established in 1963 to study the issue. Three years after the conclusion of the council, Paul VI promulgated the encyclical, Humanae vitae, which deals directly with the question of contraception and touched briefly on abortion, and in that way, once again “blurred” the distinction noted by Noonan in Gaudium et spes between contraception and abortion. In our discussion of John Paul II we will return to the question of the supposed “blurring” of the two issues and the promotion of the idea of a so-called “contraceptive mentality.”

The central thesis of the Humanae vitae is that all marital, conjugal acts should be directed toward, or at the very least open to, the possibility of procreation. When this possibility is intentionally and artificially interrupted or thwarted in any way, it reflects a

\textsuperscript{33} See, for example, the Vatican’s Charter on the Rights of the Family, October 22, 1983; Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Donum vitae (February 17, 1987); Noonan, 46.

misunderstanding of the purpose of marriage and human sexuality. *Humanae vitae* concludes that “to use this divine gift while depriving it, even it only partially, of its meaning and purpose, is equally repugnant to the nature of man and of woman, and is consequently in opposition to the plan of God and His holy will.” As a result, “all direct abortion, even for therapeutic reasons, are to be absolutely excluded as lawful means of regulating the number of children.” Though *Humanae vitae*’s claims are rooted in the church’s understanding of Christian anthropology, its focus is on the purpose of adult human life and sexuality in evaluating the ethics of contraception and abortion, not on the nature of the being that is potentially conceived.

The next major magisterial treatment of the issue of abortion came in 1974 in the “Declaration on Procured Abortion” from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF). Citing the fact that “the problem of procured abortion and of its possible legal liberalization has become more or less everywhere the subject of impassioned discussions,” the CDF took up the topic for itself with the purpose of reminding Catholics of the church’s position in light of the challenges posed by “ideological pluralism,” as well as its influential derivative, “ethical pluralism.” The Declaration identifies itself as consistent with Catholic history and tradition in its prohibition of abortion, arguing there was never “any doubt about the illicitness of abortion...it was never denied at [any] time that procured

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36 Ibid., no. 14.

abortion, even during the first days [after conception], was objectively grave fault. This condemnation was in fact unanimous.”  

In making its case for the immorality of abortion, the Declaration draws heavily on the language of human rights discourse and of theological anthropology to discuss the nature of the fetus as a human person, which is described as created by and oriented toward God, as having a spiritual and immortal soul, and as being self-determining, among other features. As a human person, one’s “first right” is life, and life in utero is one phase of human life, just like any other, that deserves not to be discriminated against (i.e., treated as un-human, or at least non-yet-human) simply because it is in its earliest stages. The Declaration summarizes, “From the time that the ovum is fertilized, a life is begun which is neither that of the father nor of the mother, it is rather the life of a new human being with his own growth. It would never be made human if it were not human already.”  

In short, the Declaration marks the magisterium’s first modern attempt at addressing the nature of the human conceptus in an in-depth manner. At the same time, it shies away from addressing other anthropological questions and restricts itself to the ethical concern. Specifically, it brackets the subject of the timing of individual ensoulment, acknowledging that there is still scholarly disagreement on the topic and also

38 “Declaration on Procured Abortion,” no. 7.

39 Ibid., no. 8.

40 Ibid., no. 11, 12.

41 Ibid., no. 12, emphasis added.

42 One could still question whether the fetus is being address as a fetus or simply as a potential adult. I shall return to this question below in considering Karl Rahner’s and subsequent thinkers’ attempts to develop a Catholic theology of childhood.
arguing that the issue bears no relevance to determining the morality of abortion. For “even if a doubt existed concerning whether the fruit of conception is already a human person [meaning, that it is ensouled], it is objectively a grave sin to dare risk murder.” In this way, the Declaration attempts to settle the ethical questions involved in abortion while simultaneously leaving the philosophical problem open to further consideration.

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, with Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger at the helm, returned to the topic of abortion once again in 1987 in *Donum vitae*, the “Instruction on Respect for Human Life in its Origin and on the Dignity of Procreation: Replies to Certain Questions of the Day.” Citing inquiries from bishops, theologians, physicians and scientists as the impetus behind it, the document uses church teachings to analyze newly developed reproductive technologies. Consequently, abortion is treated principally as a byproduct of biomedical research and technologically-assisted reproductive efforts, rather than as primary intended outcome as such. Nevertheless, *Donum vitae* is clear that the intentional termination of embryonic and fetal life is morally illicit. It contends, “The human being is to be respected and treated as a person from the moment of conception; and therefore from that same moment his rights as a person must be recognized, among which in the first place is the inviolable right of every innocent human being to life.”

Like the *Declaration on Procured Abortion*, *Donum vitae*, despite the fundamental claims it makes regarding fetal personhood, identifies itself primarily as a moral rather than

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44 Ibid., no. 13.

45 Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Donum vitae* (February 17, 1987), I.1, paragraph 4.
philosophical statement. Its intent, then, is to discuss the ethical ramifications of abortion and reproductive technology without setting forth definitive conclusions regarding prenatal anthropology. Indeed, it affirms that “the Magisterium has not expressly committed itself to an affirmation of a philosophical nature, but it constantly reaffirms the moral condemnation any kind of procured abortion.”\(^{46}\) Several scholars picked up on the limited scope of the document as an opportunity for renewed speculation about the timing of ensoulment and its role in determining the morality of contraception and abortion. The CDF’s discomfort with this sort of speculation, however, became clear in *Dignitas Personae*, the “Instruction on Certain Bioethical Questions” issued in 2008 as an update to *Donum vitae*, which said,

> If *Donum vitae*, in order to avoid a statement of an explicitly philosophical nature, did not define the embryo as a person, it nonetheless did indicate that there is an intrinsic connection between the ontological dimension and the specific value of every human life...Indeed, the reality of the human being for the entire span of life, both before and after birth, does not allow us to posit either a change in nature or a gradation in moral value, since it possesses *full anthropological and ethical status*. The human embryo has, therefore, from the very beginning, the dignity proper to a person.\(^{47}\)

*Dignitas personae* mentions the interrelationship of the human and divine, rooted in creation and the Incarnation, as the central factor determining the “unassailable value” of human life.\(^ {48}\) Even so, precisely what “full anthropological status” and “person” entail remain to some extent undefined. Still, the document makes clear that simply because the magisterium has not designated an official church philosophical anthropology, it does not

\(^{46}\) Ibid., I.1, paragraph 3.

\(^{47}\) Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dignitas Personae* (September 8, 2008), no. 5; emphasis added.

\(^{48}\) Ibid., no. 8.
mean that the subject is open to unlimited speculation. Rather, there are certain fundamentals to which any anthropology must adhere, even if all the precise parameters of the issue are not yet determined. And until those parameters are determined, deference and obedience to the magisterium are expected.  

*The Pre-Embryo Debates*

Though clearly the question of what a fetus is ontologically speaking is not new, the discussion heated up in recent decades as the issues of artificial contraception and abortion have risen to prominence and as scientific advances involving embryos have sparked theological adjustments to new data. From *Humanae vitae* forward, papal and magisterial documents have devoted significant effort to reflect current scientific findings in theological and ethical pronouncements. As a result, one can see the increasing technical complexity of the Vatican’s responses to questions relating to reproduction. For example, the language of these documents has evolved from *Casti connubii*’s references to “the child” and “the innocent” to *Donum vitae* speaking of “the zygote” and “the embryo.”

Likewise, Catholic theologians have become wrapped up in finding ever more precise language with which to make their arguments. Yet under the guise of determining

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49 This point is made clear in the commentary of Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger and Tarcisio Cardinal Bertoni (prefect and secretary of the CDF, respectively) on John Paul II’s 1998 *motu proprio Ad Tuendam Fidem*, which states that even doctrines put forth by the magisterium as non-definitive teachings require “religious submission of will and intellect.” Such teachings are “set forth in order to arrive at a deeper understanding of revelation, or to recall the conformity of a teaching with the truths of faith, or last to warn against ideas incompatible with these truths or against dangerous opinions that can lead to error,” no. 10. Though the level of adherence required by non-definitive teachings varies, the tenor of the exhortation of *Dignitas personae* quoted above suggests that a relatively high degree of assent is expected regarding the anthropological status of prenatal life. “Doctrinal Commentary on the Concluding Formula of the Professio fidei,” L’Osservatore Romano (July 15, 1998), 3-4.
the individuality and personhood of the “pre-embryo” or “conceptus”, the same questions regarding the timing of embryological personhood as well as the process of ensoulment have persisted in dominating the conversation. Some of the leading voices in this debate include Richard McCormick, SJ, Norman Ford, SDB, Thomas A. Shannon and Allan B. Wolter, OFM, and Joseph Donceel, SJ. As Christian ethicist Lisa Sowle Cahill puts it, “The ultimate question [in this debate] is whether full moral status in the human community (‘personhood’) can be tied to a physiological indicator or developmental line.”

McCormick, Ford, and Shannon and Wolter take a more scientifically-based approach to argue that the attainment of full personhood (and thereby, full moral protection as a person) cannot be identified with “the moment of conception,” in part because no such single “moment” exists. Additionally, several developmental steps that must occur before the pre-embryo is definitively on track to become an individual human being. Before that point, which occurs one to three weeks into the pregnancy, there is still the possibility that the fertilized ovum will split into twins or develop into other sorts of tissue that do not lead to the formation of a new human individual. Physiological indicators of this developmental milestone include the implantation of the fertilized ovum.

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51 Lisa Sowle Cahill, “The Embryo and the Fetus,” Theological Studies 54 (1993): 124. See this article for a more comprehensive and thorough summary of these debates than I am able to offer here.
in the uterus, the appearance of the primitive streak, and the restriction of the totipotentiality of the embryological cells. Different scholars choose different indicators in making their arguments, yet all agree that before such indicators manifest, the pre-embryo should not be understood as a full person with full moral status.

In contradistinction to this biologically-focused approach, Joseph Donceel comes at the issue philosophically, invoking Thomistic hylomorphism to argue for delayed hominization, a theory that was revived in the 20th century by Karl Rahner.52 Building upon the work of Rahner, Donceel argues that following conception, the earliest structures of human development are unable to support immediate hominization, that is, a human soul. While a new life can be said to begin with conception, Donceel position is that it is not yet human life until hominization takes place at a later point developmentally when a rational soul becomes present.

In the end, both the scientific and philosophical approaches agree (along with the magisterium) that neither science nor philosophy can definitively determine when or how the process of ensoulment occurs. Both approaches also agree that even if pre-embryological life is not yet human, that does not signify that it lacks all moral value. Indeed, they argue that pre-embryos are must be afforded a certain degree of moral protection as a potential human life. Yet taking into account the variety of ways in which

52 In discussing procreation and the source of the human soul, Rahner argues that while Pius XII taught that the soul is directly created by God, this can be interpreted as contradicting the notion that God acts in the world through secondary causes. In order to avoid this contradiction, Rahner suggests that God creates the soul in cooperation with parents’ procreative act through which they self-transcend in order to create something more than themselves (that is, the soul) in an act of love. Thus, the creation of the soul is better understood as a natural rather than miraculous occurrence. Karl Rahner, *Hominisation: The Evolutionary Origin of Man as a Theological Problem* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1965), 94-101. See also Joseph T. Culliton, “Rahner on the Origin of the Soul: Some Implications Regarding Abortion,” *Thought* 53, no. 209 (1978): 203-214.
the fertilized ovum can fail to develop into a human individual and considering the likelihood of “wastage,”

scholars like those mentioned here argue they are erring on the side of probability in determining *in utero* personhood while the church teachings prefer to err on the side of caution.

*John Paul II and the Gospel of Life*

Admirers and critics of John Paul II agree that the call for the development of a “culture of life” was one of the hallmarks of his papacy. The 1995 encyclical *Evangelium vitae*, “The Gospel of Life,” attends to the theme in a holistic manner, addressing what it sees as the various threats facing human life and dignity today, including poverty, hunger, disease, war, drugs, sexual violence, and ecological irresponsibility. John Paul II writes, “It is impossible to catalogue completely the vast array of threats to human life, so many are the forms, whether explicit or hidden, in which they appear today!”

Consequently, he chooses to focus on “another category of attacks, affecting life in its earliest and in its final stages,” namely, contraception, certain reproductive technologies, abortion, and

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53 “Wastage” is the less than delicate term that refers to the significant number of pregnancies that spontaneously abort, quite often without the woman even realizing she had been pregnant, in the earliest stages following fertilization. Figures suggest that as much as 20-30% percent of all pregnancies end in miscarriage, making the argument that God directly creates a soul for an individual from the time of conception more difficult to comprehend. Interestingly, this is the same argument Anselm of Canterbury made in the 11th century. According to Donceel, “Anselm wrote that it is inadmissible that the infant should receive a rational soul from the moment of conception. This would imply that every time an embryo perishes soon after conception, a human soul would be damned forever, since it cannot be reconciled with Christ, ‘quod est nimis absurdum’,” Donceel, 78.

54 *Evangelium vitae*, 10.

55 The reproductive technologies decried by John Paul II include *in vitro* fertilization and other similar procedures that, according to the Catholic magisterium, isolate
euthanasia, which he argues are byproducts of a “conspiracy against life” forming a veritable “culture of death.” As in the previous sections, here again I examine the moral arguments presented in order to get at the anthropological vision embodied within.

At the heart of the problem is what John Paul II identifies as a “profound crisis of culture, which generates skepticism in relation to the very foundations of knowledge and ethics, and which makes it increasingly difficult to grasp clearly the meaning of what man is, the meaning of his rights and duties.” One way in which this “crisis” manifests is in the so-called “contraceptive mentality,” which he holds responsible for not only the prevalence artificial contraception but abortion as well. Initially the encyclical draws a clear division between the two issues:

Certainly, from the moral point of view contraception and abortion are specifically different evils: the former contradicts the full truth of the sexual act as the proper expression of conjugal love, while the latter destroys the life of a human being; the former is opposed to the virtue of chastity in marriage, the latter is opposed to the virtue of justice and directly violates the divine commandment ‘You shall not kill’.

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56 Evangelium vitae, no. 11-12.

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid., no. 13. In his social history of American Catholic anti-abortion groups, Michael W. Cuneo illustrates the prevalence of concern about the “contraceptive mentality” as an ideological underpinning of the movement. According to this view, “widespread contraceptive usage in the United Sates had created a distinctive cultural mentality...[which] made frequent recourse to abortion almost an inevitability.” Michael Cuneo, The Smoke of Satan: Conservative and Traditionalist Dissent in Contemporary American Catholicism (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 61.

59 Evangelium vitae, no. 13.
Yet shortly thereafter John Paul II goes on to “blur” (to use Noonan’s word) the contraception and abortion as merely two symptoms of one disease, writing, “despite their differences of nature and moral gravity, contraception and abortion are often closely connected, as fruits of the same tree,” that is, of the “contraceptive mentality.” 60 Another way in which John Paul II sees the crisis of culture manifesting is in how so-called “crimes against life” are interpreted either as open questions of moral ambiguity or as “legitimate expressions of individual freedom, to be acknowledged and protected as actual rights.” 61

These attitudes and the larger crisis of culture are reflections of a deep spiritual failure rooted in “the eclipse of the sense of God” that leaves humanity blind to “the mystery of [its] own being.” 62 The result, the encyclical argues, is an inability (or at least an unwillingness) to recognize that the “dignity of this life is linked not only to its beginning, to the fact that it comes from God, but also to its final end, to its destiny of fellowship with God in knowledge and love of him.” 63 In terms of induced abortion, the decision to terminate a pregnancy is tantamount to the “deliberate and direct killing...of a human being in the initial phase of his or her existence.” 64 The encyclical, invoking the Exodus commandment “You shall not kill,” explains that the intentional killing of an innocent

60 *Evangelium vitae*, no. 13. Likewise, the use of reproductive technologies, “which would seem to be at the service of life,” are symptomatic of the same disease and “actually open the door to new threats against life...[and] separate procreation from the fully human context of the conjugal act,” Ibid., no. 14.

61 Ibid., no. 18.

62 Ibid., no. 23, 22.

63 Ibid., no. 38.

64 Ibid., no. 58.
human being is always gravely immoral, and in the case of a prenatal life, “No one more absolutely innocent could be imagined.”

Within this broad critique of contraception, abortion, and the larger crises of culture and faith, John Paul II’s prenatal anthropology begins to emerge. First, the conceptus is a full human being from conception and is “absolutely equal to all others.” Second, it is “innocent” life. This appears to be a reference to prenatal beings as weak and defenseless non-aggressors rather than to the presumed sinlessness historically associated with infants due to a lack of personal sin. Third, in John Paul II’s overall description of human life descending from and returning to God in a Thomistic pattern of exitus-reditus, one can assume it includes prenatal life forms as well. This sheds light on the eschatology of John Paul II’s prenatal anthropology inasmuch as it suggests that unbaptized pre- and neonates will potentially receive eternal life in Christ despite their lack of sacramental incorporation into the Christian faith (I will explore this issue in greater detail in the second part of this chapter).

John Paul II’s condemnation of abortion brings together the arguments of his papal predecessors and takes them to a new level of intensity and centrality within the faith. He builds on Pius XI’s concern for “conjugal faith” by identifying abortion as symptomatic of the “contraceptive mentality” and by labeling the prenate as a non-aggressor. He follows in Pius XII’s footsteps in recognizing prenatal life as equal in value to all other human beings, and like John XXIII, John Paul II sees the creative will of God at work in the human

65 Evangelium vitae, no. 58.
66 Ibid., no. 57.
67 Ibid., no. 58.
life from its very beginning. And finally, like Paul VI, he acknowledges the underlying social factors play a role every decision to terminate a pregnancy, and even goes one step farther by addressing a message of hope and reconciliation directly to women who have had abortions.

Yet despite acknowledging major influence of social pressures and despite declaring both men (as fathers) and lawmakers in part responsible for the situations that lead to and facilitate (“painful and even shattering”) decisions to induce abortion, in *Evangelium vitae* the burden of responsibility falls on the woman involved, for “the unborn child is totally entrusted to the protection and care of the woman carrying him or her in the womb.”

And while cultural, social and political factors “can mitigate even to a notable degree subjective responsibility and the consequent culpability of those who make these choices which in themselves are evil,” post-abortive women are called on to “give [them]selves over with humility and trust to repentance” and ask for God’s mercy for “what happened was and remains terribly wrong.”

In order to be “truly at the service of life” John Paul II exhorts Christians to spread the message of the Gospel of Life, and in doing so, to strike at the foundations of the “contraceptive mentality,” the crisis of culture, the “culture of death.” He writes,

> Teachers, catechists and theologians have the task of emphasizing the *anthropological reasons* upon which respect for every human life is based. In this way, by making the newness of the Gospel of life shine forth, we can also help everyone discover in the light of reason and of personal experience how the

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69 Ibid., no. 18.

70 Ibid., no. 58.
Christian message fully reveals what man is and the meaning of his being and existence.\textsuperscript{71}

Certainly an essential part of Christian anthropology is rooted in the identification of Christ with humanity in the Incarnation, and for John Paul II, the early life of the Christ child established a particular solidarity with humanity by “sharing in the lowliest and most vulnerable conditions of human life.” Drawing a parallel to what he sees as the situation of early human life today, he writes, “In Jesus’ own life, from beginning to end, we find a similar ‘dialectic’ between the experience of the uncertainty of human life and the affirmation of its value. Jesus’ life is marked by uncertainty from the very moment of his birth.” But in contrast to “a world which remains indifferent and unconcerned about the fulfillment of the mystery of this life entering the world,” John Paul II explains that the Incarnation demonstrates how “truly great must be the value of human life if the Son of God has taken it up and made it the instrument of the salvation of all humanity!”\textsuperscript{72}

Since 2005 Pope Benedict XVI has continued the call for the protection and promotion of human life though it has not yet become the defining mark of his papacy as it was for his predecessor. Nevertheless, one cannot overlook his unrelenting assertion that human life begins and should be protected “even before [the embryo] is implanted in the mother’s womb.” In a 2005 address to the 12\textsuperscript{th} General Assembly of the Pontifical Academy for Life, which had a conference theme of “The Human Embryo in the Preimplantation Phase,” Benedict emphasized the “philosophical-anthropological” significance of the embryo in addition to its scientific import. Acknowledging the arduous nature of the conference theme, Benedict reflects,

\textsuperscript{71} \textit{Evangelium vitae}, no. 82; emphasis added.

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., no. 33.
It is certainly a fascinating topic, however difficult and demanding it may be, given the delicate nature of the subject under examination and the complexity of the epistemological problems that concern the relationship between the revelation of facts at the level of the experimental sciences and the consequent, necessary anthropological reflection on values.  

Benedict’s concern for ensuring ethical discourse progresses along with scientific and technological developments pre-dates his time as pope, and here he is quick to affirm that embryological studies must be subject to moral and theological reflection. “Even in the absence of explicit teaching [in scripture and Christian tradition] on the very first days of life of the unborn child,” he argues, much can be learned from scripture about the value of prenatal life. For example, in the book of Jeremiah (1:5) it explains how God came to Jeremiah saying, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you.” Similarly, in Psalm 139 honors God saying, “For it was you who form my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb.” For Benedict, these passages demonstrate “God’s love for every human being even before he has been formed in his mother’s womb.” Like John Paul II, Benedict XVI also points to the example of the Jesus as a model for interpreting the situation of prenatal life today. The gospel of Luke (1:41) tells of how, recognizing Jesus developing within Mary’s womb, John the Baptist “leaped in [his mother, Elizabeth’s] womb,” which Benedict believes “testifies to the active, though hidden presence of the two infants” and reveals the life inherent in every conception.  

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73 Benedict XVI, “Address to the Participants at the 12th General Assembly of the Pontifical Academy of Life and Congress on ‘The Human Embryo in the Pre-Implantation Phase’”, February 27, 2006. The full text of the speech can be found online at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/february/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060227_embrione-umano_en.html.

74 Ibid.

75 Ibid.
In his recent encyclical, *Caritas in veritate*, Benedict’s advocacy of defending and protecting early human life comes at the problem from a different angle. Here the issue of “respect for life” is raised in the context of social concerns such as international development, poverty and technology. He posits that “the social question has become a radically anthropological question,” insofar as a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of human life as well as an “anti-birth mentality”\(^7\) underlie many of the social ills facing the world today. Ultimately, he argues, the world must “appropriate the underlying anthropological and ethical spirit that drives globalization towards the humanizing goal of solidarity” and only in this way will the most vulnerable (such as the unborn) receive the respect and protection they deserve.\(^7\)

It is worth noting that some of the magisterial documents examined above, namely, *Donum vitae* and *Dignitas personae* were promulgated during the papacies of John Paul II (which included Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger’s tenure as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith) and Benedict XVI, respectively. Consequently, while in this section I have maintained a rather narrow focus on John Paul II’s and Benedict’s papal writings, arguably one can look to these other documents as broadly represented of their thinking on the subject of early human anthropology. In particular, themes such as recognizing the earliest embryonic stages as human life and the need for ethical oversight of scientific developments are common threads that run throughout the last thirty-five years of papal and magisterial writings on the subject.

\(^7\) On other occasions, such as in his address to African bishops in June 2005, Benedict has followed John Paul II in decrying the so-called “contraceptive mentality,” in which case greater emphasis is placed on the issue of sexual morality than on broader social problems.

\(^7\) Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate* (June 29, 2009), no. 42.
Where do we go from here?

While rooted in questions of personhood, ensoulment, and hominization, this historical survey shows that the much of the discussion on the ontological status of the fetus has been done within the context of debates regarding the morality of the act of abortion. According to Noonan, “The most fundamental question involved in the long history of thought on abortion is: How do you determine the humanity of a being?” Yet the positions outlined here draw attention to the diverse factors that go beyond strict concern for theological anthropology and orthodoxy that have contributed to Catholic thought on the subject. I identify three logics as having dominated the approaches to abortion over the course of history, each gaining prominence at different times and frequently overlapping one another. The first of these logics can be identified as the commandment approach (“You shall not kill”) in which the focus of the condemnation of abortion is on the immorality of the act of killing. In other words, the focus is on the offense (the abortion) and the offender (the person causing the abortion). The Exodus verses and Gregory IX’s Decretals can be seen as representing this sort of reasoning. In contradistinction, the second logic focuses on the victim, the “offended” so to speak, of the act of abortion. As one might expect, in this logic greater attention is paid to understanding the identity of the fetus. Tertullian and Aquinas are representative of this type of thinking. The third logic makes its case from the standpoint of proper sexual morality and understanding the goals of marriage. Anthropological claims are central to this approach as well though they tend to focus solely on adults. Casti connubii is a modern

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78 Noonan, 259.
example of this tact, though one can identify this strand of thinking as far back as Clement of Alexandria and Augustine.

In terms of the most recent papal and magisterial statements on the subject, each of these logics is interwoven throughout, with concern for the unborn taking priority overall. The proper ends of human sexuality and marriage continue to be emphasized as well. As for the admonition of the commandment (‘you shall not kill’) logic, while still present, it is tempered somewhat by the call for mercy and forgiveness for those caught up abortion and by the attention given to the social and economic factors that impact abortion decision-making. Recalling John Paul II’s *Evangelium vitae*, one can see how despite his broader cultural critique, in his condemnation of abortion these three logics continue to dominate the church’s argument.

In contrast to the majority of the positions outlined here, my concern is with the philosophical, rather than the ethical, side of the debate. That is, so far my focus has been the anthropological assumptions about prenatal life underlying the moral discourse on issues like abortion, contraception and reproductive technologies, and not on the morality of this issues *per se*. My specific interest is in the ontological status of prenatal beings and their eschatological status post-miscarriage, -stillbirth or -abortion. This is precisely the inverse of the approach taken by the CDF in the 1970s and 1980s, which attempted to bracket philosophical ambiguity so as to not distract from the certainty of its moral claims. Since that time, successive magisterial and papal attempts have been made to correct the previous approach by making philosophical and anthropological reflection a more explicit aspect of the discourse.
Were my primary concern considering the ethics of abortion, arguably one of the most discussed moral questions of the last century, the account I have given here would be woefully incomplete. There is certainly more involved in determining the morality of the abortion than just the three magisterial logics observed above. In particular, any focus on women has been conspicuously absent from our discussion so far. As Lisa Sowle Cahill rightly points out, “Abortion is not an issue only of killing, but also of women’s equality. Women’s ability to act as full moral persons is contingent on their ability to refuse the consequences of male sexual domination (and violence), and to reconcile their parental and domestic roles with public ones.” Historically, Catholic magisterial documents rarely reflect on these other issues centrally related to the ethics of abortion, and as a result, they play a relatively minor role in our discussion here so far.

In the second part of this chapter, my gaze widens beyond abortion, contraception, and reproductive technologies to include the cases of unintended miscarriage, stillbirth, and infant death in my consideration of the topic of pregnancy loss. In such instances, the moral (and political) morass of abortion slowly fades, and other factors contributing to notions of prenatal anthropology become more visible. A broader range of theological and cultural sources are examined, and in considering these sources, I ask precisely what or who the prenate or neonate is in order to gain insight into the broader Catholic cultural imagination that has shaped thinking prenatal anthropology and that inevitably has impacted ethical judgments as well. Avenues for better understanding the factors involved

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in the formation of this imagination include discussions of infant baptism, limbo, and beliefs that developed around the story of the Holy Innocents.

In addition, I explore an area of research initiated by Karl Rahner, which he called the “theology of childhood.” Other scholars have picked up this theme and continue to investigate how the Catholic magisterium interprets the theological meaning of children. For the most part, Rahner and his successors have found that little attention has been paid to the valuing children as children, rather than as future adults. In contrast, they argue that children and childhood have a particular theological value of their own and should not be valued only in light of future potential. The correlate point for the purpose of this dissertation is that child death should not be grieved only as a loss of potentiality, which touches on the issues involved in pregnancy loss itself as well as the memorialization of pregnancy loss.\textsuperscript{80} While the scope of theologies of childhood is limited to those who have already been born, I examine them in detail to gain insight into the value Rahner and others see in the life of the very young and thereby infer my own conclusions about prenatal anthropology. My goal in doing so is to uncover “who” or “what” exactly is lost in cases of pregnancy loss.

Despite being at the crux of the magisterial and papal argument against abortion, I suggest that prenatal anthropology has not yet received theological attention commensurate to its importance. Prenatal anthropology is typically presupposed as part of a larger moral argument rather than being thoroughly explicated for its own sake in the way that adult anthropologies have been. While the biological language used in Catholic magisterial and papal writings has become increasingly precise (i.e. what was once

universally referred to as “the child” is now identified as a zygote, an embryo or a fetus according to development stage), the precision of the philosophical language used has not kept pace. Instead of building upon greater scientific precision to further refine theological definitions, in the late 20th and early 21st centuries Catholic teaching has shied away from increased precision when discussing prenatal anthropology and has failed to move beyond vague statements like “from the moment of conception.” Consequently, the Catholic fetocentric argument for defending early human life forms rests on an unstable foundation insofar as it fails to communicate why prenatal life is important for reasons other than its potentiality.

In short, my purpose in trying to articulate a Catholic prenatal anthropology is to discover precisely why the human embryo and fetus are theologically significant in and of themselves. Part II of this chapter will build upon the theology and history established in Part I to work toward further articulation of a prenatal anthropology by drawing on other sources that deal with issues relating to infant and child life in an in-depth manner.

**Part II: Images of Childhood in Christian History**

The above survey of Catholic papal, magisterial, and theological treatments of the issue of abortion, and the related topics of sexuality and the family, illustrate the relative lack of attention that has been devoted to the precise anthropology of the human embryo, fetus, and infant. The focus, rather, has been on the morality of the act of abortion and on making the foundational, if still underdeveloped, claim that human life begins at conception. While certain fundamental characteristics of human nature are ascribed to life at all stages—autonomy, self-determination, etc.—the simple identification of these
attributes fails to inform why and how they are relevant and manifested in the context of early life, particularly prenatal life.

Overall, Catholic teaching, particularly in the 20th century, affirms the inherent value of all human life, regardless of its form or stage. Though scriptural, early church, and medieval treatments of pregnancy loss distinguished between in utero developmental stages—that is, between the formed and unformed fetus, the ensouled and the not-yet-ensouled—20th century accounts do not make such a distinction. On the one hand, refusing to distinguish between earlier and later development stages implies that the conceptus merits equal respect and protection regardless of age inside or outside the womb. On the other hand, blurring the distinction between developmental stages has led to a reduction in the amount of attention devoted to the consideration of the conceptus, or even the newly born, leaving early human life in a new sort of theological limbo, so to speak. Thus, one may ask whether, in the case of the earliest forms of life, such as the embryo, fetus, infant and, even child, Catholic teaching values them as such in their unique forms, or merely as developmental stages progressing toward adulthood, the normative focus of Catholic theological anthropologies.

*Theologies of Childhood*

In 1962, Karl Rahner asked a similar question in his article “Ideas for a Theology of Childhood,” which became the foundational work in the still-developing field of Catholic theologies of childhood.\(^\text{81}\) In it Rahner inquires, “in the intention of the Creator and

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Redeemer of children what meaning does childhood have, and what task does it lay up on us for the perfecting and saving of humanity?” He suggests that by and large childhood is overlooked as a preliminary, transitional stage preceding adulthood. By contrast, Rahner argues that length of life should not be confused with fullness of life and nor should transitoriness be mistaken for lacking ongoing value. He seeks explore the significance of childhood as such to uncover its lasting importance in the life of the individual and for humanity in general.

Rahner identifies the theological consideration of childhood as an underdeveloped aspect of Catholic thought, which is due in part to the fact that the definition of childhood is typically presupposed or taken for granted. Generally speaking, concepts like “children” and “childhood” are presumed to be universally defined and meaningful when in reality, research demonstrates that they are both historically and culturally specific. In order to investigate not only the intrinsic value of childhood for children but also the continued importance of childhood even after the transition into adulthood, Rahner revisits his transcendental anthropology in light of the particularities of child life. In doing so, he defines the child as a mystery, as one oriented toward and in direct relationship with God. Ultimately, this definition is not that different from the philosophical anthropology Rahner outlines elsewhere while focusing on primarily adults. Indeed, Rahner asserts “the child

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is a man right at the very outset.”84 That is, “right from the beginning he is already in possession of that value and those depths which are implied in the name of man. It is not simply that he gradually grows into a man.”85 He goes on to say that “for this reason [Christianity] protects the child while it is still in its mother’s womb.”86 Thus, despite Catholic teaching’s overwhelming tendency to privilege adulthood as the normative stage of human life, Rahner suggests identifying the inherent value of human life need not be restricted to more mature stages in life.

Building on the foundational claim that early life is equal in value and dignity to adult life, Rahner goes on to suggest why childhood is a theologically important phase in itself. He identifies radical openness to God as the central distinguishing feature of early human anthropology. In doing so, he dismisses the presumption that it is the relative innocence of children that makes them the model of the Kingdom of God held up by Jesus. For Rahner, children are born into the situation of sin before engaging in personal sin, making even the newborn lack innocence on some on level. Yet, in their curiosity and trust, “as examples of lack of false ambition, of not seeking for dignities or honors, of modesty and lack of artificiality in contrast to their elders, who are unwilling to learn anything from them,” children embody the means and the end of becoming Christ-like and

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84 Rahner, Ideas for a Theology of Childhood, 38; emphasis original.

85 Ibid., 37.

86 Ibid., 38.
of being worthy of the Kingdom of God, for “they are those with whom [Jesus] identifies himself.”

The intrinsic and enduring value of childhood, then, is rooted in the ongoing possibility for individuals to become child-like and to renew continually the relationship with God initially and adeptly established in childhood. Rahner writes, “we can be like children in being receivers and as such carefree in relation to God, those who know that they have nothing of themselves on which to base any claim to [God’s] help, and yet who trust that [God’s] kindness and protection will be extended to them and so will bestow what they need upon them.” Consequently, childhood is not a phase out of which adults mature, but is something into which individuals can grow and which reflects a fullness and wisdom that is often only appreciated at the end rather than at the beginning of life. Rahner’s contribution to developing the theology of childhood lies as much in the role his work plays in inspiring others to consider the topic as in the value of his writings in themselves. Though the attention to the subject is still quite limited, several authors have followed in his footsteps by studying how Catholic teaching understands the concepts of children and childhood. For the most part, these scholars remain heavily indebted to Rahner in their work. For example, Mary Ann Hinsdale’s work focuses on Rahner’s thought in general and his theology of childhood in particular in order to draw attention to his influence on post-conciliar religious education. Likewise, Nathan Mitchell adopts and

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88 Ibid.

89 Ibid., 43.
expands upon Rahner’s childhood anthropology in order to consider the distinctive role of children in the church as “its ‘original face’ and its future destiny.”

The most in-depth follow-up to Rahner’s initial study, Todd David Whitmore’s “Children: An Undeveloped Theme in Catholic Teaching” (1997), revisits the lacuna identified by Rahner in the 1960’s and argues that the theological question of children remains largely unexplored despite Rahner’s contribution. Whitmore contends that there is a discrepancy between Catholic teaching’s strong affirmation of the full personhood of children and the actual treatment of children, which often corresponds better to the needs of adults rather than to those of children. His work attempts to rectify this gap by drawing on Catholic social teaching in order to help the church respond to what he calls the “loud emergencies” and “silent emergencies” facing children in the world by developing an adequate and dynamic theology of childhood. Loud emergencies include the dangers of war and violence; silent emergencies are problems such as poverty, malnutrition, and disease. An additional threat Whitmore identifies is the overextension of the logic of the market in American society, which he believes has led to a market anthropology. In this way of thinking, individuals, including children, are valuable only insofar as they participate in the market as either “commodities” or “consumers.” In other words, individuals come to have no inherent worth outside of their ability to play a role in the market, and failing contribute to the market renders one a simply a burden, deadweight. The market roles typically assigned to children, according to Whitmore,

90 Mitchell, 433.

range from being a product to be shopped for, chosen, and bought through reproductive technology to a being a consumer to be wooed through enticing advertising during children’s television programming.\(^92\)

In order to challenge the logic of the market, Whitmore develops a theological account of childhood anthropology using the theological virtues of faith, hope and love. He writes, “Faith implies that children are gifts of creation (as opposed to being commodities), hope suggests that they are the signs of a future that extends beyond adult desires (as opposed to being present consumers for the profit of adults), and love illuminates the fact that children are our present responsibility in stewardship (as opposed to burdens).”\(^93\) Building on the Thomistic exitus-reditus anthropology at the heart of Catholic social teaching, Whitmore emphasizes that all humans come from and return to God and that the so-called “roles to be played” by humans are in the shared destiny of salvation history (not in the market place), which entails a high degree of mutuality and social responsibility.\(^94\)

Though Whitmore draws on Catholic social teaching to develop his theology of children, overall he identifies children as an “undeveloped theme” in Catholic thought. Catholic teaching, he observes, deals with children primarily within the context of the family (based on the principle of subsidiarity), which often leaves the specific identity of children overlooked in favor of greater focus on the roles of parents.\(^95\) Similarly, despite

\(^92\) Whitmore, 171-175.

\(^93\) Ibid., 176.

\(^94\) Ibid.

\(^95\) Ibid., 161.
increased focus in the 20th century on children’s issues relating to the rights of children (to education, to culture, to life), “the language of rights still does not inform us who children are and why we should care for them in particular.” 96 Whitmore also points to the “excessive natalism” of church teachings that “tends to focus on the gift of creation expressed in procreation at the expense of how it manifests itself at other stages of life.” 97 As a result, several Vatican documents focus on the questions of contraception, artificial reproduction and abortion, that is, on considering human life at its earliest stages, while significantly less attention (particularly philosophical consideration) is devoted exclusively to broader topic of children. For these reasons, Catholic magisterial treatments of children are seriously lacking, yet fortunately, according to Whitmore, the resources for developing a well-rounded theology of children and childhood, such as his approach based on the theological virtues, are already a part of Catholic tradition. They must simply be tapped and mobilized in order to create a proper theological understanding of children capable of rivaling the dominant cultural logic that often functions to the detriment of child life.

Other Sources for Understanding the Child in Christian History

The achievements of Rahner and his successors in recognizing and attempting to correct the gap within Catholic teaching regarding a theological understanding of childhood, while certainly relevant to this dissertation, have had a limited impact overall on the “Catholic imagination” of children, both doctrinally and popularly. Andrew Greeley suggests Catholics live in “an enchanted world” in which stories, symbols, saints, images,

96 Whitmore, 162.
97 Ibid., 177.
and objects inform “a deeper and more pervasive sensibility” that influences how they interpret the world around them. He argues that “religious sensibilities do not depend on scholars or bureaucrats for continuity. They are passed on locally, intimately, without any particular regard for what may be going on in the high tradition.” Thus, beyond theological writings, one can look to liturgical, literary and artistic sources to get a better sense of how children (and by extension, prenates and neonates) have been understood in Christian history.

For example, an interesting source for understanding the Catholic imagination of the earliest stages of life is theological and cultural tradition surrounding the story of the Holy Innocents. In the early and medieval church, the fate of the Holy Innocents, the infants of Bethlehem who perished by order of Herod in his attempt to eliminate the Christ Child announced by the Magi (Matthew 2:16-18), was the subject of extensive speculation as various bishops and theologians grappled with the question of Christian martyrdom prior to the Incarnation. The primary problem was finding a way to vindicate the suffering endured by the Holy Innocents, which many came to interpret as a proto-baptism by blood. In the 5th and 6th centuries, under the Augustinian influence, these infants were often held up as being fortunate in some sense for having passed from life into death before being physically capable of committing personal sin despite being eternally trapped by original sin. Later thought, however, shifted from Augustine’s essentially negative evaluation

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99 Ibid., 174.

100 Paul A. Hayward, “Suffering and Innocence in Latin Sermons for the Feast of the Holy Innocents, c. 400-800,” in *The Church and Childhood: Papers Read at the 1993 Summer*
and emphasized instead “the Innocents’ inward purity and virtue.”

This shift is best understood as an additional interpretation of the theological anthropology of children rather than a replacement of the Augustinian view, which persisted well into the 20th century. Hence, the difference between these approaches is primarily a function of emphasis, rather than essence. Endeavoring to find the right balance between original sin and personal innocence is the common thread that runs through both.

Beginning in the sixth century, the feast of the Holy Innocents was commemorated annually on December 28, suggesting a close connection with the celebration of the birth of Christ on December 25. This liturgy became an opportunity not only to mourn the lost children, whose eschatological fate remained somewhat ambiguous, but also to grieve along with the mothers of those children, themselves participants in the passion of their children. In addition to liturgical commemoration, reflections of the Christian imagination of the massacre of the Holy Innocents can be found in art. For instance, a mosaic in Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome and a sarcophagus in Provence depicting the subject survive from the 5th century. Likewise, an illuminated manuscript from 10th century Trier, part of present day Germany, illustrates the scripture narrative. Though the subject fell out of fashion in gothic art, it regained prominence among Renaissance artists returning to the Roman classics for inspiration, such as Giotto, Raphael and Bruegel, and continued to be a

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Ibid., 77.


subject of work for artists following the Renaissance like Rubens and Reni. Most of works focus on the depicting the massacre itself, though some also include images angels hovering above the violence, suggesting a heavenly fate lies in store for the slain children. No matter the artist or the style, the shared images of children ripped from their mothers’ arms and of piles of the victims’ plump bodies lying dead have a haunting effect. One can speculate that these works not only reflect but also likely informed views of childhood in their own eras and over the course of history.

In literature, the paradoxical situation of the Holy Innocents is incorporated into Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. 104 “[T]hey did not sin,” the pilgrim’s guide Virgil says, yet “though they have merit, that is not enough, for they were unbaptized, denied the gateway to the faith...”105 According to Dante’s topography, these infants, along with the so-called ‘noble pagans’ like Virgil, are fated to spend eternity in the Inferno, yet their melancholy experience is markedly different from the horrendous suffering of the Inferno’s other inhabitants. Virgil explains, “There is a place down there, not sad with torments but only darkness, where lamentations sound, not loud as wailing but soft as sighs. There I abide with the innocent little ones seized in the fangs of death before they could be cleansed of mortal guilt.”106 Dante refers to the place of “grief without torment” they occupy as

104 In crafting his account of the fate of unbaptized infants, Dante drew on the writings of Honorius of Autun, whose *Elucidarium* was used to train clergy and religious, which in turn, led to its use for general catechesis between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries. George J. Dyer, *Limbo: Unsettled Question* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1962), 41-42.


“Limbo,” (a concept I will return to below), and he mourns for the “beings of great worth”—blameless yet condemned—“suspended” there.  

The story of the Holy Innocents redeems the infants killed in the gospel narrative as martyrs for Christ. Considering the historically high incidence of miscarriage and infant mortality, such a tale of unjustified, premature death undoubtedly resonated among audiences throughout the ages. While it is difficult to quantify the precise impact of the story of the Holy Innocents on the Christian imagination of children, the variety of liturgical, artistic and literary attention dedicated to the subject suggests that it was a consistent object of interest. In contrast to the doctrinal discussions of children, these sources were more accessible and arguably more influential through their stirring use of drama and imagery to capture and speak to what was likely a very personal subject for many Christians over the course of history.

**Limbo and Infant Baptism**

Without a doubt, the arenas in which infants and children have received the greatest theological attention are debates about limbo and infant baptism, two discussions whose histories are intertwined. Neither is mentioned explicitly in scripture or the earliest Christian sources, yet they became the focus of significant attention following the Pelagian controversy of the 5th century. However, as Dante’s inclusion of limbo in his *Divine*
Comedy illustrates, limbo became more than just an object of theological speculation, and interest in the eschatological destiny of unbaptized infants persisted well into the 20th century.

In what was a surprising move to many Catholics raised in the era preceding the Second Vatican Council, in 2007 the International Theological Commission (ITC), a division of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, released a document affirming that the idea of limbo, as the eternal eschatological destiny for unbaptized infants, presents an “unduly restrictive view of salvation.”109 “The Hope of Salvation for Infants Who Die Without Being Baptized” attempts to balance claims of universality and particularity in Christian soteriological teachings to encourage a better understanding of the fate of unbaptized infants. “[E]ven though it has long been used in traditional theological teaching,” the ITC document asserts that the notion of limbo “has no clear foundation in revelation.”110 Nor has it ever “entered into the dogmatic definitions of the Magisterium, even if that same Magisterium did at times mention the theory in its ordinary teaching up until the Second Vatican Council.”111 As a result, it continues to be “a possible theological hypothesis,” but one that the magisterium is interested in clearly moving away from based on the arguments made in the text.

Traditionally limbo, or limbus infantium, was thought of as the eternal destiny of unbaptized infants, worthy of neither salvation nor damnation. Though the term “limbo” was not coined until the 13th century by Albert the Great, earlier theological speculation

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110 “Hope of Salvation,” no. 3.

111 Preface to “Hope of Salvation.”
points to a similar “middle place” concept without calling it by name. Literally “hem” or “edge,” *limbus* describes the in-between state in which unbaptized infants find themselves after death, outside the borders of the usual eschatological topography of heaven and hell, for having not been sacramentally incorporated into the Christian faith or church while also, like the Holy Innocents, not guilty of personal sin. A study of limbo from 1964 summarizes the problem as follows:

(1) Baptism, by martyrdom, by water, or by desire is necessary for salvation in the present dispensation. (2) But it would seem that an infant is incapable of placing an act of desire, and hence baptism of desire is ruled out, leaving the infant in original sin. (3) The infant who dies in original sin, but without personal sin, will suffer the loss of the Beatific Vision, but not suffer any positive sufferings in addition to that.

At the heart of the question of limbo is the issue of baptism, particularly infant baptism. Limbo, it seems, developed as a sort of compromise doctrine that held in tension the doctrines of original sin and the necessity of baptism with a belief in the general innocence of newborns and faith in the mercy of God. While the Pelagians believed that baptism was essential for entry into the kingdom of God, they argued that it was not necessary for eternal life. Hence, a child who died before baptism could have eternal life free from suffering despite not gaining access to the kingdom of heaven. Drawing on the practice

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112 “Hope of Salvation,” no. 24.

113 The similarities between Catholic limbo and Japanese *Sai no kawara* are notable. I will touch on the parallels between the two briefly in Chapter 7.


115 Dyer, 12.
of infant baptism, which was among the earliest Christian practices, Augustine responded to the Pelagians by asserting the unconditional necessity of baptism for any hope of salvation or eternal life, effectively damning unbaptized infants whom he considered neither guilty nor innocent but non-innocent. For him, the only options after death were heaven and hell, and as he put it, “there is no middle place left, where you can put babies.” Without receiving the sacraments and formal incorporation into the Christian faith, unbaptized infants were automatically excluded from heaven. He conceded that children’s experience of damnation was perhaps less severe and less painful than others’ based on the fact that they were there through no fault of their own. However, his certainty regarding the absolute necessity of baptism obliged him to reject the Pelagians’ claims.

Despite Augustine’s enduring influence on later theology, the severity of his approach would gradually be tempered over time as others tried to find ways of understanding the problem of unbaptized infants that are more consistent with broader

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118 Augustine, Sermo 294.3, quoted in “Hope of Salvation,” no. 17.

119 Augustine’s response to the Pelagians was actually a reversal of an earlier statement he made (c. 396) in which he praised the Holy Innocents as martyrs. According to his later thought, the Holy Innocents, like all other unbaptized newborns and children, were condemned, Stortz, 78.
scriptural and doctrinal affirmations of God’s mercy. As a result, belief in an eschatological middle ground grew, and medieval theologians developed different accounts of what precisely limbo entailed. Generally speaking, this was accomplished through a reinterpretation of original sin that saw it as a matter of deprivation, rather than presence of wickedness, which led scholars like Peter Abelard and Peter Lombard to conclude that the fate of unbaptized infants was also a matter of deprivation, namely darkness, and not the presence of punishment.

In the theological anthropology of Thomas Aquinas, one scholar observes, “infancy seems fraught with extraordinary degrees of both spiritual peril and spiritual potential” inasmuch as baptized infants are capable of spiritual maturity while the unbaptized are subject to demonic powers. Holding Augustinian pessimism in tension with Aristotelian optimism (which posits that children are essentially blank slates capable of developing virtue and rationality), Thomas argues that divine justice demands that salvation be reserved for those who have been cleansed of original sin through baptism. At the same time, divine justice also dictates that the innocent—in this case, infants who die before baptism—not be held accountable for not receiving the sacraments before death insofar as “actual sin” is beyond their physical and rational capabilities. For Thomas, then, limbus

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120 Still, Augustine’s more immediate successors, such as Fulgentius and Isidore of Seville, held the more harsh view that unbaptized infants would be condemned to hell upon death. Dyer, 33-34.

121 Ibid., 37-40. In contrast, Anselm of Canterbury likewise adopted a deprivation view of original sin, yet nonetheless did not conclude that an in-between place, such as limbo, existed.

puerorum, or children’s limbo, is the only proper fate for unbaptized infants. There they neither endure the sufferings of hell nor enjoy the glory of union with God.  

The development of a less harsh (in comparison to Augustine) interpretation of the fate of unbaptized children is not necessarily reflective of a positive anthropology of childhood. In his “reconsideration” of infant baptism, liturgical theologian Mark Searle argues that Augustine’s response to the Pelagians took the pre-existing practice of infant baptism as its starting point, and from there deduced the notion of original sin. In other words, in the case of Augustine “the practice of baptism gives rise to theological reflection rather than being shaped a priori theological principles.” By the 9th century, however, the direction of the argument’s progression had been inverted, and the necessity for baptizing infants came to be based on the doctrine of original sin, not the other way around as Augustine had initially argued. Searle posits that this inversion is representative of the negative anthropology of children that has dominated for the majority of Christian history. It found its roots in late patristic thinkers, like Augustine, who ascribed concupiscence, desire and grasping to the nature of the young. Case in

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123 Traina, 114-115.


125 Ibid., 150.

126 Prior to Augustine, Irenaeus of Lyons in the 2nd century C.E. has a more positive approach to children based on his theology of the Incarnation. Christ, he writes, “sanctifies all ages by his assimilation to human nature. It is in effect all, I say, who by him are born again in God: newborn, children, adolescents, young people, older ones. This is why he passed through all the ages of life; making himself newborn he has sanctified the newborn; by becoming a child among children he has sanctified those who are this age and has become at the same time a model of piety, justice and submission...” This Incarnational
point, Christian hagiographies from the early Middle Ages through the twelfth century
often demonstrated a saint’s inborn holiness by describing his or her refusal to suckle at
the breast of either the mother or a wet nurse, which in turn suggests that nursing is
somehow wicked.\footnote{István P. Bejczy, “The \textit{sacra infantia} in Medieval Hagiography,” in \textit{The Church and
Childhood}, 1994.} For Augustine and others that followed, an infant was innocent only
insofar as its physical incapability forced it to be, not according to its nature.\footnote{Stortz, “‘Where or When Was Your Servant Innocent?’ Augustine on Childhood,” \textit{The Child in Christian Thought}, 78, 82. This conclusion comes, in part, out of Augustine’s
reflections on his own youth in his \textit{Confessions}.} In contrast, theological accounts of
children and childhood today tend to presuppose infants’ innocence, rather than deprivation, as in John Paul II’s \textit{Evangelium vitae}, for example, which says that “no one more absolutely innocent could be imagined” than an embryo or fetus in
the womb.\footnote{\textit{Evangelium vitae}, 58.}

Despite the prevalence pessimistic anthropology of children, this is not to say that
the inverted Augustinian argument lacked its own liturgical support, for as Searle writes,
“History shows for the most part that where the sacraments are concerned, practice is
invariably a step or two ahead of theology.”\footnote{Searle, 143.} In the first few centuries of the Common
Era, Christian initiation practice had a strong eschatological and apocalyptic orientation,
giving a sense of urgency to the rites.\textsuperscript{131} The sacraments of baptism, Eucharist, and confirmation were received together, typically in the context of familial initiations that inevitably encompassed children and the newly born. As time went on, the general sense of eschatological urgency diminished while the particular urgency brought on by the threat of dying before baptism prompted the development of an emergency initiation rite. This emergency practice, approved by the Council of Elvira in 305 CE, permitted a layperson to baptize an individual (adult or child) facing imminent death in the absence of clergy. Should the individual survive, he or she was to follow-up with a bishop in order to complete initiation by receiving the Eucharist and confirmation, though often this second step of was never fulfilled. Overtime, the practice of “clinical baptism” intended for use only in cases of emergency became standard procedure, particularly for infants for whom death was a very real threat.\textsuperscript{132} Put simply, the exception became the rule.

How did this affect the Christian interpretation of children? The separation of the sacraments from one another encouraged a diminished view of children as full members of the church. Additionally, as the completion of the Eucharist and confirmation eventually came to be delayed until children reached an “age of discretion,” which exacerbated the attenuation of children in the church by further implying that not only were children not yet full members of the church, they were not yet even \textit{worthy} of full Christian belonging. Thus, in the context of the late patristic and medieval theology addressed here, paradoxes surface regarding the status of children, or for our purposes, the pre- and newborn. They are seen as both innocent and guilty, deserving of neither heaven nor hell. They are the

\footnote{\textsuperscript{131} Jeremias, 23.}

\footnote{\textsuperscript{132} Searle, 144-147.}
object of both divine mercy and condemnation, meriting neither glory nor punishment.

Baptism is required to guarantee their salvation, yet even with baptism they remain
unworthy of full church membership until they mature out of their nature as children.
Consequently, the reasoning behind the development of limbo becomes clear: it was a
paradoxical place for those with paradoxical status.

“The Hope of Salvation”

It is out of all of this (and much more) history that the International Theological
Commission’s “The Hope of Salvation” (2007) emerges. The document takes pains to
balance the necessity of baptism and the church with universal salvific will of God while
also acknowledging that in the case of infants and the pre-born, it is particularly difficult to
grasp how individuals who have not even had the slightest opportunity to be
sacramentally incorporated into the faith and into the church could be deliberately
excluded from the salvific will of God. Thus, it is with sensitivity to precisely this sort of
problematic, as well as with an acute awareness of “Jesus’ tenderness toward children,”
that the ITC broaches the subject.133

The document identifies itself as both speculative and pastoral in nature insofar as
it explores a complex question involving fundamental theological truths (about which
nothing can be definitively said), but which at the same time, is a practical, often heart
wrenching, concern for parents who suffer the loss of a child. In trying to keep these two
poles, the speculative and the pastoral, in balance, the document states,

there are theological and liturgical reasons to hope that infants who die without
baptism may be saved and brought into eternal happiness, even if there is not an

133 “Hope of Salvation,” no. 5.
explicit teaching on this question found in Revelation. However, none of the considerations proposed in this text to motivate a new approach to the question may be used to negate the necessity of baptism, nor to delay the conferral of the sacrament. Rather, there are reasons to hope that God will save these infants precisely because it was not possible to do for them what would have been most desirable—to baptize them in the faith of the Church and incorporate them visibly into the Body of Christ.¹³⁴

A central purpose of the document, then, is to dispel any sense of culpability from the infants themselves, who cannot be held responsible for not receiving baptism due to their inability to decide the matter on their own. “Being endowed with reason, conscience and freedom, adults are responsible for their own destiny in so far as they accept or reject God’s grace. Infants, however, who do not yet have the use of reason, conscience and freedom, cannot decide for themselves.”¹³⁵ Consequently, “The Hope of Salvation” asserts, “infants, for their part, do not place any personal obstacle in the way of redemptive grace.”¹³⁶ Confronting the beliefs that contributed to the development of the idea of limbo, the document downplays the significance of original sin in favor of emphasizing the power of the Incarnation: “humanity’s solidarity with Christ (or, more properly, Christ’s solidarity with all humanity) must have priority over the solidarity of human beings with Adam, and that the question of the destiny of unbaptized infants who die must be addressed in that light.”¹³⁷

Equally important in the ITC document is the affirmation God’s justice and mercy, which it acknowledges are sometimes difficult to comprehend with child loss, particularly

¹³⁴ “Hope of Salvation,” preface.
¹³⁵ Ibid., no. 2.
¹³⁶ Ibid., no. 7.
¹³⁷ Ibid., no. 91.
when there is worry about the eschatological fate of the infant.\textsuperscript{138} The document assures parents who did not have the opportunity baptize their child that “God does not demand the impossible of us,”\textsuperscript{139} and hence, despite not being sacramentally incorporated into the faith, hope for their child’s redemption is not lost.

God’s power is not restricted to the sacraments...God can therefore give the grace of Baptism without the sacrament being conferred, and this fact should be particularly recalled when the conferring of Baptism would be impossible. The need for the sacrament is not absolute. What is absolute is humanity’s need for the \textit{Ursakrament} which is Christ himself.\textsuperscript{140}

On this point, the approach of the International Theological Commission marks a clear departure from the thinking of Augustine and his successors who placed an unconditional value on the necessity baptism. Instead, the emphasis is on the freedom and power of God to act in surprising ways, ways that perhaps defy the sacramental logic of early and medieval theologians. Still, the ITC makes every effort to ensure that the significance of baptism is not diminished as a result of the admission that there is reason to hope that unbaptized infants will not be excluded from the promises of salvation. This admission should not be interpreted as a concession to the pastoral over the demands of the speculative, but as a clarification of ambiguities that have long persisted in Catholic belief and practice.

In addition to these theological reasons, “The Hope of Salvation” suggests that there are strong liturgical reasons for trusting in the salvation of unbaptized infants. First and foremost, it says, “taking account of the principle \textit{lex orandi lex credendi}, the Christian

\textsuperscript{138} “Hope of Salvation,” no. 2.

\textsuperscript{139} Ibid., no. 82.

\textsuperscript{140} Ibid.
community notes that there is no mention of Limbo in the liturgy.” In other words, despite the fact that there has been speculation about limbo for centuries, its exclusion from the liturgy is significant for understanding limbo’s relatively minor and unsubstantiated place in the tradition. Yet the text goes further than just dismissing the idea of limbo by arguing that other liturgical developments suggest salvation for unbaptized infants is a reasonable Christian hope. For instance, the celebration of the Feast of the Holy Innocents, which praises the massacred unbaptized infants as martyrs for Christ, is used as a counterpoint to the claim that unbaptized children are ill-fated.

Furthermore, the post-conciliar development of a funeral rite specifically for children who die without baptism implies a unique place for the very young and unbaptized (presumably prenatal as well as neonatal) within the plan of salvation. Prior to the Second Vatican Council’s liturgical reforms, no such rite existed, and in what was undoubtedly a troubling reality for Catholic parents who had intended to baptize their new child, “such infants were buried in unconsecrated ground.” Building on the creation of a funeral rite specifically for unbaptized infants, however, the International Theological Commission develops a new theological understanding of the situation in which the liturgical recognition of unbaptized infants who have died becomes grounds for believing that they are potentially saved. That is because, as the ITC document asserts, “We [Catholics] do not pray for those who are damned.” Thus, if liturgical practice is the key

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141 “Hope of Salvation,” no. 5.
142 Ibid.
143 Ibid., no. 100.
144 Ibid., no. 5.
to unlocking belief, much can be learned about the church’s understanding of limbo and unbaptized infants from what the liturgy reveals, namely, that the existence of limbo is questionable based on its omission from the liturgy and that unbaptized infants, as the object of liturgical attention, are not to be overlooked as unworthy of salvation.

In the end, “The Hope of Salvation” argues that limbo, as a methodological and speculative strategy for holding baptism, original sin, and personal innocence in tension, is a superfluous hypothesis, and conjecture about the existence of such an eschatological middle ground between heaven and hell is unnecessary. The document concludes,

There are two possible ends for a human being in such an order: either the vision of God or hell. Though some medieval theologians maintained the possibility of an intermediate, natural, destiny, gained by the grace of Christ (gratia sanans), namely Limbo, we consider such a solution problematic and wish to indicate that other approaches are possible based on hope for a redemptive grace given to unbaptized infants who die which opens for them the way to heaven. We believe that, in the development of the doctrine, the solution in terms of Limbo can be surpassed in view of a greater theological hope.  

Thus, while demonstrating an appreciation for why the notion of limbo developed, the International Theological Commission emphasizes grace over original sin and sacramental necessity in its speculation on the salvation of unbaptized infants. Ultimately, it says, there is reason to hope.

**Conclusion**

By considering limbo, infant baptism, and the Holy Innocents in conjunction with the ITC document, a vision of children emerges that is less sterile than what we saw in the papal and magisterial statements examined in Part I of this chapter. There we saw that the Catholic church, while defending children as having a right to life and an important place

145 “Hope of Salvation,” no. 95.
in the church, nevertheless fails to provide a complex account of what children are and what childhood means. Since Donum vitae bracketed the philosophical question, speculation about prenatal and childhood anthropology has been scattered over a variety of writings and as a result, no consistent picture has materialized. Thus, the same problem Rahner diagnosed in 1962—that the meaning of children is simply presupposed—remains true almost half a century later. I suggest this gap is primarily a lack of articulation rather than the absence of any such understanding, though some aspects certainly remain underdeveloped. In Chapter 6, I shall argue that emerging pregnancy loss rituals help fill this gap through the prenatal anthropology that manifests by means of the acts of memorialization. I will also demonstrate how pregnancy loss memorials seek to re-frame miscarriage, stillbirth, and abortion experiences within the Catholic narratives of community, grace, and forgiveness. In doing so, these memorials create opportunities for healing from the wounds of pregnancy loss while also attempting to advance the American Catholic church’s opposition to abortion.
In Chapters 3 and 4, I investigated Buddhist and Catholic ways of imagining prenatal life. My reason for doing this was to establish a broad framework for examining how the nature of prenatal life has been understood within each tradition. Because my focus is on pregnancy loss, I was concerned with perspectives on the ontological status of prenates while in the womb and after death. Do they share the same nature and soteriological fate as adult humans or is there something distinct about prenatal existence based on its unique stage of development?

My research showed that early Buddhist sources warn against harming a fetus or terminating a pregnancy at any point during gestation due to the value ascribed to a womb-being from the time of conception. Both medical and religious texts emphasize the role of karma throughout the reproductive process, which was believed to condition conception and fetal development to such a degree that it could even bring about a miscarriage in some cases. The emphasis on fetal karma is less prominent in contemporary Buddhist thought relating to prenatal anthropology. Instead, questions about how to understand Buddhist embryology in light of technological advances have arisen as well as concern for how to balance women’s reproductive rights with Buddhist prohibitions against abortion.

In Japan, Buddhist mizuko kuyō remains connected to foundational, pan-Buddhist concepts like karma, rebirth, and the postmortem intermediate state (antarābhava), but it also incorporates features specific to the evolution of Buddhism within the broader Japanese religious and cultural milieu. These include beliefs about the shape of the
intermediate state, the potential of memorial rites to impact the posthumous destiny of mizuko, and the “fluidity” of fetal life and death.

To date, a significant portion of research on mizuko kuyō has tended to focus on the “authenticity” of the rituals. LaFleur mines Buddhist and Japanese history to find precedents to justify its practice while Hardacre uses the lack of a Buddhist canonical source for mizuko kuyō to undermine its practice. Reviews of LaFleur’s and Hardacre’s books and several other articles attend to this question as well. Harrison and Underwood also focus on the issue of authenticity, though from the perspective of the agency of ritual participants acting on their own genuine intent and not as naive victims of social and religious coercion. All this is to say that the legitimacy of mizuko rites has been in question in the major scholarly studies of the ritual.

Perhaps because scholars are either playing offense to challenge mizuko kuyō or defense to vindicate its practice, relatively little attention has been devoted to understanding mizuko rites from the perspective of Japanese Buddhist logic itself. Nor have the insights of ritual studies been drawn on to interpret the work of mizuko kuyō. Building on the prenatal anthropology outlined in Chapter 3, this chapter does both of these things. I look at the structure and goals of Japanese funerals and memorial rites to situate the form and function of mizuko kuyō within the context of Japanese Buddhist ritual in general. Then I bring the insights of ritual studies to bear on mizuko kuyō as I analyze the emic objectives of the rites in greater detail.

In the first part of this chapter, I survey the general features and values of religion in Japan today. This sets the stage for Part II in which I examine Buddhist funerals and other memorial rites to get a sense of the ritual logic underlying these practices and of the
central place of ritual practice within Japanese religion. From there, in Part III, I focus specifically on *mizuko kuyō*, its goals, and its outcomes. I argue that *mizuko kuyō* aims to be instrumentally effective, which, as will become clear in the next chapter, is distinct from the ritual goals sought in Catholic pregnancy loss memorials. By instrumentally effective I mean that, as a result of the *mizuko kuyō* performance, an ontological change is believed to be brought about. If successful, this change impacts the soteriological status of the *mizuko*, who through the ritual transitions out of the intermediate state and into the Pure Land or into the human world once again.

Ontological efficacy is a key feature that sets Japanese *mizuko kuyō* and American Catholic pregnancy loss rituals apart. Based on interviews I conducted at Tokyo temples that offer *mizuko* rites, the ontological goal of impacting the status of the *mizuko* is the reason most frequently given by priests and ritual participants to justify the performance of *mizuko kuyō*. It is also at the heart of doctrinal justifications for the performance of memorial rites. Yet because most scholars have focused on the social implications of *mizuko kuyō*, the *emic* ritual logic underlying the performance of *mizuko kuyō* typically has been downplayed. I explore that logic in detail and show that, like other Japanese Buddhist mortuary practices, *mizuko kuyō* is premised upon the notion that memorial rituals effectuate important changes in the postmortem destiny of lost *mizuko*.

I argue that *mizuko* memorials “work” on an *epistemological* level as well. They do so by attending to the grief and wellbeing of *kuyō* seekers. They facilitate communication between the living and lost *mizuko* that helps calm the distressed spirit of the *mizuko*, which in turn helps to comfort the ritual participants. The memorials give participants an
opportunity to re-frame experiences of miscarriage and abortion, transforming loss and trauma in stories of the ongoing concern of mothers for their lost children.

Finally, in part four of this chapter I examine the agency of women who take part in *mizuko kuyō*. While *mizuko* rites fit well within the memorial-centered culture of Japanese Buddhism, they should not be interpreted as merely replicating the status quo. Rather, along with Meredith Underwood and Elizabeth Harrison, I argue that women’s participation in *mizuko kuyō* manifests their role as “negotiators of culture” who draw on the symbolic and ritual resources of Japan in mediating their own pregnancy loss experiences.

**Part I: General Features of Japanese Religion and Ritual Practice**

To a *gaijin* (foreigner) visiting Tokyo, opportunities to take part in ritual appear to be everywhere. From the ancient temples that hold their own against the backdrop of modern skyscrapers to the small shrines tucked into neighborhood streets, one is never far from a chance to bow or make an offering to a favorite *kami* or buddha. In their book *Practically Religious*, Ian Reader and George Tanabe identify practice—things like visiting the neighborhood shrine or making offerings, no matter how small—a the central feature of Japanese religiosity (Buddhism and Shinto as well as the New Religions). In doing so, they resist the so-called “Protestant bias”\(^1\) of Buddhist studies by arguing that attending to

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\(^1\) Ian Reader and George J. Tanabe, Jr., *Practically Religious: Worldly Benefits and the Common Religion of Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1998). Reader and Tanabe pull this idea from Gregory Schopen’s essay “Archaeology and Protestant Presuppositions in the Study of Indian Buddhism.” In that essay, Gregory Schopen draws attention to the so-called Protestant assumptions underlying much of early Western scholarship of Buddhism (19th-20th century), which privileged texts as the most authoritative sources for learning about the tradition. Schopen argues this heavy reliance on texts is a reflection of
rituals and customs, not texts, reveals the more accurate picture of religious life in Japan. Because of the primacy of practice, they insist, even explicit non-believers can both participate in and benefit from religious rituals.²

Against the background of practice, Practically Religious emphasizes “this-worldly benefits” (genze riyaku) as a “normative and central theme in the structure and framework of religion in Japan.”³ While some scholars resist this characterization due to its potentially negative implications (e.g., that seeking practical goods is not true religion or that it makes Japanese religions seem materialistic), Reader and Tanabe argue that the focus on “this-worldly benefits” has been at the heart of Japanese religion since the introduction of Buddhism into Japan in the 6th century. Hence, to claim that seeking “this-worldly benefits” is not true religion glosses over the majority of Japanese religious history. Moreover, to seek practical benefits, Reader and Tanabe contend, is not simply, nor even primarily, directed at achieving material boons, but rather is part of a larger vision of wellbeing. It is connected to the virtues of peace of mind and faith and is built on a solid moral foundation that stresses leading a good life guided by strong ethical principles.

Seeking worldly benefits through ritual and other religious practices form the core of what Reader and Tanabe call the “common religion” of Japan. According to their

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² Reader and Tanabe, 7-8.

³ Ibid., 14-15. They define “this-worldly benefits” as “shorthand for the interlocking framework of themes, concepts, practices, and meaning that are associated with the seemingly simple act of asking a deity to provide one with something of practical use in one’s life.”
characterization, Japan’s common religion “refers to a set of sentiments, behavior, practices, beliefs, customs, and the like that is shared by the vast number of people and is common to all classes and groups in society, including the elites (aristocratic, economic, religious) and ordinary people.” As its name suggests, this common religion transcends religious and sectarian boundaries, and it incorporates elements from a wide range of sources—from the canonical writings of Buddhism to the folk beliefs native to Japan. As Reader and Tanabe summarize it,

this common religion involves common acceptance of various spiritual entities, such as gods (kami) and buddhas, as well as ancestral spirits and spirits of powerful humans who have become deities after death. It also includes the idea that such spirits can confer protection and success on the living and that petitioning for such benefits is a fundamental and highly ethical religious value.

This communal body of beliefs and values suffuses diverse religious practices with a shared structure, orientation, and sense of purpose. It makes all forms of liturgies, prayers, and festivals accessible to “virtually all Japanese” without any formal religious affiliation and with “no substantial gulf” in understanding between clergy, religious elites, and ordinary practitioners.

Satsuki Kawano, in her study of ritual in modern Japan, puts forward a similar account of Japan’s common religion and the nature of Japanese religious practice. Like Reader and Tanabe, she asserts “the well-being of ritual practitioners and their families figures centrally as a motivation for ritual activity.” For the “religiously uncommitted” as

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4 Reader and Tanabe, 29.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid., 31, 24.

7 Kawano, 21.
well as the devout, the impetus to take part in ritual emerges out of a sense of obligation to
one’s family, ancestors included, and out of the hope of obtaining benefits in one’s life.
Securing the good health, safety, comfort (spiritual and material), and happiness of oneself
and one’s family are among the manifold objectives that underlie ritual participation.

Kawano argues that ritual “links ritual actors to other aspects of life”\(^8\) through the
connection between ritual action and the commonplace gestures and values that structure
Japanese day-to-day interactions. Through these actions—bowing, making offerings, and
cleaning—ritual actors “embody” the central moral order of Japanese culture.\(^9\) They
express and cultivate the cultural values of respect, gratitude, and obligation. Additionally,
they help ritual transcend a purely cognitive function insofar as the “cultural meaning
rooted in these practices can make ritual emotionally engaging by evoking what feels good
and right in everyday life.”\(^10\) At the same time, Kawano observes, “ritual not only links but
differentiates.”\(^11\) Other actions unique to the ritual framework set ritual action apart from
the everyday. Joining one’s palms together, burning incense, and chanting, for example,
are frequently reserved for the ritual setting, and the distinctiveness of these actions
endow the ritual with a power that emerges from a sense of discontinuity with ordinary
life.\(^12\)

\(^8\) Kawano, 116.

\(^9\) Ibid., 40-48. She contrasts this physical embodiment of the moral order with the
manifestation of the moral order in a sacred text or doctrine; Kawano, 53.

\(^10\) Ibid., 114.

\(^11\) Ibid., 116.

\(^12\) Ibid., 49, 70.
Along with Reader and Tanabe, Kawano identifies interaction with the *kami* and buddhas as an essential feature of Japan’s common religion. Though originally distinct, the *kami* and buddhas were assimilated together into the universal pantheon of Japanese religion over the course of Japanese history. *Kami* are the deities native to the indigenous beliefs of Japan (known today as Shinto). They are spirits or forces—sometimes benevolent, sometimes malevolent—that inhabit natural as well as human-made structures and that often require regular ritual attention from humans. The buddhas (*hotoke*) encompass not only enlightened beings but also the Japanese dead in general, especially one’s ancestors. So, for instance, the term *hotoke* is used to refer to anyone who has died. This is done out of respect for the dead and presumably, in hope that they have reached the Pure Land. Kawano describes the “complementary coexistence”\(^{13}\) of the *kami* and buddhas in the Japanese religious imagination with *kami* considered “honored outsiders” while the buddhas are seen as “cherished insiders.” Typically Japanese houses contain a both a small shrine devoted to the *kami* (*kamidana*) and a *butsudan*, or home altar, where the familial ancestors are remembered and honored. Likewise, Buddhist temple grounds frequently house a smaller Shinto shrine, revealing the harmonious relationship between the two types of beings as well as the dynamic ability of Buddhism to adapt and thrive alongside the native beliefs of Japan.\(^{14}\)

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\(^{13}\) Kawano, 24.

\(^{14}\) Reader and Tanabe, 150. Reflecting on what has made the gathering together of the *kami* and buddhas possible, Reader and Tanabe argue, “it is the ritual and conceptual framework of practical benefits that is central. People seeking benefits see the equal and interchangeable statuses of the deities: praying to a *kami* at a shrine is as good as praying to a Buddha at a temple; the only meaningful difference is their respective reputations for providing certain specialized benefits.”
The common religion principle articulated by Reader, Tanabe, and Kawano asserts that Japanese religious practice relies on the generally held habits, customs, and relationships rather than on specific theological beliefs, and helps account for the continued relevance of Buddhist rituals within the lives of those who remain uncommitted to a particular religion. Because the moral order embodied in ritual action is founded, according to Kawano, upon “proper social relations,” foremost of which are the familial relations spanning generations of the living and the dead, taking part in ritual is not a matter of belonging to a specific religion but part of “what it means to be a good Japanese person.”

The state of Japanese religion and ritual practice today has much today with the dynamics of how the nation emerged from the Second World War. During that era, Kawano notes the prevalence of rituals focused on national prosperity, caring for the war dead, and seeking personal benefits. As a result of the conditions of the Japanese surrender, however, the nature of religious life took on a new orientation. She explains, “not only did the emperor announce to the public that he was human, but the very idea of his divinity officially became taboo.” This, in conjunction with the new constitution granting religious freedom, opened up religion and ritual to new interpretive possibilities that were no longer bound to the state. Additionally, a growing concern developed within

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15 Kawano, 48.

16 Ibid., 10-11.

17 Ibid., 10.
the national discourse regarding the role of “superstition” in impeding Japan’s progress as a cultured and rational country. ¹⁸

Other social changes after the war brought about shifts in the patterns of religious practice as well. Specifically, the rapid urbanization of the postwar era cut off many people from their ancestral temples and traditional habits of ritualization. Yet as Kawano observes, “this did not lead to the disappearance of ritual activity.” Rather, “some urbanites found new channels [of ritualization], while others utilized certain preexisting ones on a new scale or with a new twist.”¹⁹ This approach stands in contrast to previous generations that moved to cities and plugged into the existing community and customs. Without forming these communal connections, in the new patterns of ritualization long-term relationships with a particular temple or shrine came to rely more heavily on the success of one’s prayers at that site.²⁰

As a result of these shifting circumstances, Kawano contends that in Japan today, “neither a meaningless formality nor mere custom, ritual potentially, rather than automatically, provides contemporary urbanites with culturally significant ways of constructing meaning and power.”²¹ While it undoubtedly draws on long standing Japanese beliefs and customs, ritual today is more than a simple repetition of the habits of the past. It addresses very modern concerns and appropriates new themes and symbols into long-standing systems of meaning. In a certain sense, the notion of a common religion

¹⁸ Kawano, 10.

¹⁹ Ibid., 11-12. The rise of the New Religions of Japan can be attributed in part to this process of urbanization and the need for new channels of ritualization.

²⁰ Ibid., 108.

²¹ Ibid., 2.
implies a generic quality or universality to Japanese religious practices that obscures the agency of ritual participants and the reality of change and novelty within contemporary rituals. Kawano challenges this view, arguing that within the context of the common religion “people’s ritual bodies and environments provide fertile ground for nurturing diverse yet culturally patterned interpretive possibilities and for producing engaging moments of personal significance.” In other words, the common religion establishes a framework that makes meaningful ritual action possible within the broader milieu of Japanese action (think back to the ritual import of bowing) without inhibiting the creativity and agency of participants. Within this framework, the roots and value of mizuko kuyō starts to come into focus.

Part II: Japanese Buddhist Funerals and Memorial kuyō

As we saw in Chapter 3, scholars like Harrison, Hardacre, and Norgren point to the changing social conditions following World War II (such as changing family structures, the deritualization of reproduction, and the proliferation of abortion, respectively) to account for the development of mizuko kuyō. Satsuki Kawano further situates the rise new practices like mizuko rites within the shifting patterns in Japanese ritualization resulting from postwar urbanization. Looking beyond the influence of social factors on religious practice, the work of Reader and Tanabe and Kawano provides insight into the essential features and values of Japanese religion in general. When it comes to mizuko kuyō, the principles they outline shape and inform the ritual structure and individual motivations for taking part. Building on their work, in this section I examine the structure and goals of Japanese

22 Kawano, 2-3.
Buddhist funerals and memorials to further articulate the ritual dynamics in play in mizuko kuyō. Here in particular the issue of ritual efficacy comes into focus. Without precluding the ritual goals explicated by Reader and Tanabe, namely, seeking this-worldly benefits, Buddhist funerals and memorials purport to effect real ontological changes in the posthumous, soteriological destiny of the dead. Because “the liminality of death itself is thought to offer an unparalleled opportunity for liberation,”23 Buddhist funerals in Japan capitalize on this opportunity to influence the next rebirth, or ideally the liberation, of the deceased through the work of the ritual action itself.

Buddhist Orthodoxy and Funerals in Japan

Within the Japanese religious division of labor, Buddhism has long been responsible for caring for the dead. Today funerals provide not only the primary source of temple income, they also serve as one of the key ways in which Buddhism remains connected to the lives of average Japanese people. Closely linked to funerals are the memorial services for ancestors that are often performed each year (if not more frequently) up until the thirty-third year after the death.

Since the early 1960s, following the publication of Taijō Tamamuro’s Funeral Buddhism (Sōshiki bukkyō, 1963), temple priests have been the focus of repeated allegations of corruption and moral turpitude for their involvement in mortuary rites. The charge of corruption grew mostly out of the fact that temples profit, often substantially, from funerary practices. As a result of this commercialization of funerals, the public came to see priests as preying on the vulnerabilities of the bereaved and of perverting Buddhist

tradition to such a degree that it has been rendered unable to meet the spiritual needs of the Japanese today.\textsuperscript{24}

As Stephen Covell notes, however, the view of temple Buddhism as corrupt does not derive from strictly popular perceptions of priests and their work. Some scholars of Japanese Buddhism, including many priests, have long considered modern Buddhism degenerate as well. Covell cites several reasons for this, many of which have their roots in the Meiji era penetration of Western religious studies into Japan. For instance, he notes a consistent Weberian skepticism toward “magic” among Japanese scholars, which has resulted in a view of Buddhism as “backward” and adverse to modernization.\textsuperscript{25}

Additionally, there has been a Protestant-like tendency in Japanese religious studies to privilege written doctrine over practice as the measure of “authentic” religion. Covell observes, “this emphasis on past doctrine over contemporary teachings and practices has led to a large body of excellent scholarship on classical doctrine and a dearth of scholarship on Temple Buddhism today.”\textsuperscript{26} It has exacerbated the view that temple Buddhism today is in decline by promoting an idealized picture of the tradition based on a “rhetoric of renunciation” in comparison to which Japan’s householder-priests inevitably fall short. In short, Stephen Covell writing together with Mark Rowe asserts,

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{25} Stephen G. Covell, \textit{Japanese Temple Buddhism: Worldliness in a Religion of Renunciation} (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2005), 12. Covell defines “magic” as “the utilization of supernatural entities or powers to bring about an effect or the beliefs systems associated with such acts.”
  \item \textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 11.
\end{itemize}
there remains an implicit assumption among scholars and the general public that late twentieth-century Japanese Buddhism represents a moribund tradition, bereft of spiritual potency, whose only purpose is to offer formalized, over-priced mortuary services for an increasingly dissatisfied public in order to assure the continuity of the sects and to secure the lifestyle of temple priests.27

In contrast to this view, Covell and Rowe argue, “contemporary forms of Buddhism are not degenerations of a pure, original essence, but rather represent a varied and complex tradition in the midst of important challenges.”28

Compounding the charge that Buddhist mortuary rites are overly commercialized, empty rituals is the allegation that funerals and memorials for the dead are not an “orthodox” part of the Buddhist tradition in the first place. Because Śakyamuni Buddha rejected the existence of an enduring personal self or soul after death, many scholars and priests contend that the Buddhist funerals of Japan are doctrinally problematic. In his essay “The Orthodox Heresy of Buddhist Funerals,” George Tanabe suggests that one way to resolve this problem is to look to the historical examples within early Buddhism that establish precedent for the Japanese funerary practices that developed much later.29 For example, the Mahā-parinibbāna-sutta tells of the funeral held after the death of the Buddha himself, and Gregory Schopen’s archaeological research has demonstrated that ritualized mortuary practices were customary within early monastic communities.30


28 Ibid., 245.


30 Ibid., 329-330.
Nevertheless, Tanabe points out, finding orthopraxic funerary precedents within the tradition still fails to resolve the doctrinal problem that “if Śākyamuni, the historical Buddha, taught the truth of no-self, then the mortuary celebration of the surviving self cannot be true.” Various techniques have been used to respond to this concern for orthodoxy. Some scholars have turned to the distinction between ultimate and conventional truth to account for the discrepancy between the teaching of anātman and the logic of Japanese funerals. Others point to the syncretism of Buddhist teachings and indigenous Japanese beliefs about the tama, or soul. Tanabe challenges these approaches, which he identifies as representative of a sort of “Protestant Buddhism” that is bound to particular doctrines and texts to the exclusion of other elements of the tradition. In each of these cases, the “orthodoxy” of Japanese funerary practices is measured against an idealized vision of “authentic” Buddhism.

Tanabe resists narrowly defining the category of Buddhist orthodoxy because he believes that multiples orthodoxies co-exist within the Buddhist tradition. Because Tanabe sees the scriptural canon as “support[ing] any number of conflicting positions,” clinging to an imagined standard of singular orthodoxy that casts off centuries of Buddhist practice seems unjustified and naïve. Thus, for example, he looks internally to the notion of the antarābhava, or intermediate being, rather than to indigenous Japanese ideas about the soul and syncretism, as a foundation for justifying Buddhist funerals. This leads him to

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31 Tanabe, 331, 328.

32 Ibid., 332.

33 Ibid.
conclude, “The problem of heresy lies not in funerals per se but in the choice of the lenses by which to view them.”34

Tanabe’s preferred “lens” is rooted in orthopraxis as the standard for authenticity. Over and against those who ground their notion of authentic Buddhism in privileged early texts or doctrines, he argues, “Thought, in this case, must be molded to fit action, which, apparently heretical, actually functions as the unchanging standard to which orthodoxy must conform. The heresy of funerals is thus orthodox.”35 From a pragmatic standpoint, Tanabe sees scholarly attempts to fashion a pure tradition as simply unproductive. He observes, “the doctrinal assault against funerals...does little to change the practice, which remains entrenched in custom, tradition, and a view of what Buddhism is, not what it should be.”36 Ultimately, Tanabe believes that the “profoundly simple, eminently human attachment to remembrance” trumps the elite scholarly attachment to an abstract standard of doctrinal purity.37

34 Tanabe, 329-332.

35 Ibid., 327.

36 Ibid., 327. In the context of debates about the orthodoxy of Buddhist funerals, one can see how some of the critiques of mizuko kuyō I examined in Chapter 2 coincide with general skepticism of so-called funeral Buddhism. Specifically, Hardacre’s critique of mizuko kuyō for its lack of a canonical anchor proves unconvincing in light of Tanabe’s argument for the primacy of orthopraxis.

In her detailed study, “The Structure of Japanese Buddhist Funerals,” Mariko Namba Walter asserts that centuries of history support Tanabe’s argument. She writes, “whatever one may argue the normative purpose of Buddhism should be, the firm reality remains that Japanese Buddhism today is centered around death rituals.” She shows that despite doctrinal differences between various contemporary sects regarding the nature of enlightenment and salvation, Japanese Buddhist mortuary rites share the same essential structure. This structure evolved over time as the deathbed rituals of dying monks gradually transformed into posthumous mortuary practices open to the laity as well as monastics. Today it is believed that if a person is a devout practitioner of Buddhism while still alive, it is that person’s own faith and efforts that dictates her or his postmortem destiny. Yet, if a person does not actively practice or is only an occasional religious practitioner (as is the case with the majority of Japanese people), the funeral and memorial rites are thought to play a much greater role in determining her or his fate after death.

The structure of funerary rites involves four main parts, which Walter identifies as the initiatory stage, the ordination of the dead, the process of leading the dead into the otherworld, and the transfer of merit to the dead. The initiatory stage entails the bathing and preparation of the deceased’s body and recitation of a “pillow sutra.” Which sutra is chanted varies depending on the sect, but the purpose of the recitation is to begin the

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39 Duncan Williams notes that regional, rather than sectarian, values played a greater role in shaping funerary customs; Williams, 212.

40 Walter, 249.

41 Ibid., 270.
ritual purification of the deceased and start the journey of the dead into the next phase of existence. Through the actions of this first stage, “the way to buddhahood is ritually opened for [the dead].”42 Next, through the posthumous ordination that takes place in the funerals of most sects, the deceased is made into a monk or a nun and thereby gains easier access to enlightenment.43 This step also entails ritual repentance performed by the family members and presiding clergy that then is transferred to the deceased.

The third element of the Japanese funeral structure is the indō, or the process by which “the priest ritually guides or leads the dead person to the Buddha’s realm.”44 As Jacqueline I. Stone notes, “notions that the dead traverse an interim state have also been closely linked to Buddhist funerary and mortuary practices, and to rites for placating unhappy ghosts.”45 The form of this stage varies depending the sect. In Zen funerals, for example, the priest often recites a koan and lights a torch that is understood to light the way of the deceased during its posthumous journey. By contrast, Nichirenshū funerals include an indō sermon that touts the ability of the wisdom of the Lotus Sūtra and the sect’s founder, Nichiren, to lead the deceased to the Pure Land.46 According to Walter’s analysis, “indō represents the central element of the Japanese Buddhist funeral rites...., [which]

42 Walter, 264, 261-269.

43 For a description of the origins of posthumous ordination, see Bodiford’s “Zen in the Art of Funerals: Ritual Salvation in Japanese Buddhism.” It provides an excellent summary of the history of Buddhist funerals in Japan, including an account of how funerals transitioned from being a strictly monastic practice to include the laity as well.

44 Walter, 267.


46 Walter, 267-268.
guides the deceased to the right path within the geography of the afterlife, enabling that person to realize buddhahood.”

In order to understand the logic of Japanese Buddhist ritual in general, it is important to recognize that the actions undertaken in these first three stages are neither merely symbolic nor expressive (though neither symbolism nor expression are necessarily precluded). Rather, they are believed to effect real changes in the fate of the deceased. They transform the dead into hotoke-sama, the Japanese honorific title meaning both “buddha” and “the dead.” Each step is considered instrumentally effective in bringing about salvation, particularly for those who did not attain buddhahood during the normal course of life.

The final component of the funerary structure Walter outlines is also believed to help the deceased reach an enlightened state. It is comprised of the transfer of merit via ongoing memorial rites performed by the living on behalf of deceased ancestors. Like the other three elements of funerary structure, memorial rites are understood to be instrumentally effective insofar as they help bring about enlightenment for the dead. The first forty-nine days after a death, identified in Japan with the intermediate state (chūū), presents a particularly powerful window of opportunity in which the fate of the deceased can be influenced by the ritual effort. These efforts, however, do not cease at the end of the forty-nine days. Instead, memorial rites aimed at transferring merit to the dead

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47 Walter, 268.

48 The exception to this, of course, is Jōdo Shinshu funerals, which are understood “not as effecting the dead person’s salvation, but simply as an expression of gratitude [to Amida Buddha];” Walter 263.

49 Williams, 228.
continue on for years, if not decades, to come. As Kawano explains, “the funeral is only the beginning of a long journey for the deceased on the road of achieving full ancestorhood: often they go through the first, third, seventh, thirteenth, seventeenth, twenty-third, twenty-seventh, and thirty-third memorial anniversaries.” She attributes these ongoing rites to the fact that “Japanese people have a fear of being ritually neglected and forgotten after death, which is regarded as a truly miserable condition.” As a result, the dead in Japan always seem to having a living relative looking out for them.

While the memorial rites cohere with the other elements of the death rituals in the overall structure of Japanese Buddhist funerals, both Mariko Namba Walter and Duncan Ryūken Williams note that memorial rites follow a different ritual logic than the other components of mortuary rites. As Walter summarizes it,

> While the funeral itself assumes that rites performed by the officiating priest will at once lead the deceased to an enlightened state, the series of subsequent memorial offering rites seems to assume instead that the deceased are in need of ongoing assistance to eradicate their sins and ensure their postmortem well-being until they can be guided, via a prolonged ritual process, to a stable condition of enlightenment.  

In other words, there appears to be a degree of redundancy within the structure of funerary practices as a result of the distinct yet cohering goals of funeral and memorial rites.

Walter attributes this gap in ritual logic to the fact that memorial rites “have tended to incorporate a wider range of non-Buddhist afterlife concepts.” Williams agrees,

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50 Kawano, 28-29.

51 Ibid., 29.

52 Walter, 269.
but based on his research on Sōtō Zen funerals in the Tokugawa (or Edo) period (1603-1868), he also sees it as an outgrowth of the diverse objectives funeral participants bring to rituals. He explains that sometimes the combination of sectarian doctrines with “generic Buddhist, and local beliefs and practices concerning death conflicted, occasionally producing contradictory goals and rituals.”

Hence, the priestly responsibility of saving the dead from the hell realms and helping them attain buddhahood came to coexist with the familial task of transitioning the deceased into the community of ancestors. In the case of Zen funerals, Williams demonstrates how the aim of immediate enlightenment and belief in the effectiveness of funeral rituals for achieving this goal came to stand alongside “trans-sectarian ideas about the afterlife” and gradual enlightenment. So even though the funeral was understood to be definitively efficacious for ensuring the salvation of the dead, the necessity of ongoing memorial rites perdured in the Japanese religious imagination as a result of both folk and Buddhist beliefs about the liminality of the spirits of the dead. Williams summarizes the diverse objectives of the rites in the following way:

On the one hand, then, the goal of such funerary rites was to help the dead spirit settle down and become purified through the ritual intercession of the living, thus transforming the polluted body of the newly deceased into a venerated ancestor. On the other hand, the goal was not only to help the dead join the collective ancestral body of the household; through the cancellation of karma, the deceased—often thought to be dwelling among the hungry ghosts or in the hell realms—could

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53 Walter, 269.
54 Williams, 212.
55 Ibid.
56 Ibid., 211.
57 Ibid., 230.
also be transformed into the body of the Buddha or at least, into a resident of the higher of the six realms in Buddhist cosmology.\textsuperscript{58}

Today, these contradictory logics continue to coexist mundanely within the scope of Buddhist funerary practices.

For the purposes of this dissertation, understanding the logic of funeral and memorial rites is essential for grasping the ritual dynamics of mizuko kuyō. The goals of funerary memorial rites outlined by Williams hold true for mizuko kuyō, especially the belief that the continued efforts of the living can have a real impact on the situation of the dead. In other words, the memorial rites are seen as ontologically efficacious by means of their performance. At the same time, as a relatively new practice and because the mizuko holds a somewhat ambiguous place in society, mizuko kuyō is often interpreted as being different than memorial rites that follow the death of a mature adult (senzo kuyō, ancestor offerings). In turn, scholars often group mizuko kuyō among the multitude of non-funerary memorial rites rather than as a part of funeral practices.

In his book on the material culture of Japanese Buddhism, Fabio Rambelli writes, “the vast and fluid field of memorial services is arguably one of the most significant social and cultural contributions of Buddhism in contemporary Japan.”\textsuperscript{59} The roots of today’s kuyō, a term meaning “to give offerings to nourish”\textsuperscript{60} (供養), are traced back to the early Indian and Buddhist practice of pūjā, or offerings to made to the Buddha, the Dharma, or the Sangha to honor special beings, venerable Buddhist masters, and beloved family

\textsuperscript{58} Williams, 230.


\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 211.
members. As Rambelli notes, an essential feature of kuyō is the idea that “giving offerings to beings and things...could affect the salvation of the donor,” and thus, an element of mutual benefit underlies many kuyō practices.\(^{61}\)

In contemporary practice, kuyō are offered for all sorts of reasons and in various forms. Rambelli’s work focuses on rites offered for inanimate objects that are seen as having served their owners particularly well over the years. Such objects have typically exhausted their utility yet the owner, out of a sense of gratitude or emotional attachment, cannot bear to dispose of them like ordinary trash.\(^{62}\) Examples include seamstresses’ sewing needles, children’s dolls, and calligraphers’ brushes among many, many others. The formats of the rites range from Zen funeral ceremonies for the objects to Shingōn fire sacrifices where the honored objects are cremated as part of a communal offering. They are intended to give the objects a proper send off, but they also are a merit-making exercise for the ritual participants.\(^{63}\)

The precise origin of object-centered kuyō is unknown, though most scholars agree that these sorts of practices increased exponentially during the twentieth century.\(^{64}\) In addition to mizuko kuyō, petto kuyō, memorial services for beloved pets, have skyrocketed in

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\(^{61}\) Rambelli, 211.

\(^{62}\) Ibid., 214-215.

\(^{63}\) Ibid., 216-217, 211. In line with their overall approach to ritual, Jōdo Shinshū kuyō are understood to be strictly ceremonies of gratitude that have no greater degree of ontological efficacy.

\(^{64}\) Ibid., 225. One scholar that Rambelli cites, Sen’ichi Tanaka, suggests that memorial ceremonies for some objects can be traced back to the Edo period (1600-1868).
popularity as well.\textsuperscript{65} As for the goals of the rites, Rambelli suggests that the performance of kuyō is intended to help the designated objects “become buddhas” (jōbutsusuru), “the term usually employed to refer to the final transformation of human being after their death and after proper funeral memorialization.”\textsuperscript{66} In other words, memorial rites for inanimate objects share the same ultimate goal as memorial rites offered for ancestors. Rambelli situates this aim of achieving buddhahood for the inanimate within the common tendency to “humanize” objects, particularly those objects that that help sustain human life in some way. He speculates that in the popular Japanese imagination kuyō objects are often not truly seen as inanimate (in the sense of lacking a soul and religious destiny). Rather, while many priests and scholars remain agnostic on the issue, the pervasiveness of ritual activities on behalf of inanimate objects suggests that popularly they are seen as possessing some sort of spirit worthy of honor and ritual attention.\textsuperscript{67}

Thus far, this chapter has elucidated the general values and goals of Japanese religious and ritual practices. Examining the objectives of funerals and memorials in Japan reveals that Buddhist rites for the dead are meant as more than just commemoration. Indeed, both funerals and memorial rites are purported to have a direct impact on the postmortem destiny of the deceased on whose behalf the rites are offered. This impact arises from the emergent potential of the rituals in the context of their performativity. In the next section, I will analyze mizuko kuyō in detail with a particular focus on its claims of


\textsuperscript{66} Rambelli, 218.

\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., 218-225.
efficacy in light of the ritual dynamics of other Buddhist memorials and in relation to the prenatal anthropology formulated in Chapter 3.

**Part III: Mizuko kuyō and Ritual Efficacy**

So far in this chapter, several qualities have emerged as defining features of Japanese Buddhist religious practice today, including seeking practical benefits and the peaceful coexistence of kami and buddhas within a common religious pantheon. For the purposes of this project, two other features stand out as particularly relevant, namely, (1) the general concern for caring for the spirits of dead and (2) the belief that both the living and the dead can benefit from ritualized memorialization. It is within this context that I situate mizuko kuyō.

While the precise roots of mizuko kuyō are unknown, scholars have put forward various etiological accounts to explain their rapid rise to popularity in the 20th century. William LaFleur links today’s mizuko rites to precedents within Japanese history for dealing with childhood death, including mabiki (“thinning” or infanticide) as a form of population control going back to the Edo period. Helen Hardacre specifically challenges LaFleur’s historical claims and argues instead that mizuko kuyō is a byproduct of the deritualization of reproduction that began with the reforms of Meiji Restoration in 1868. She sees it as a profit-driven practice that preys on women during vulnerable times in their lives. Elizabeth Harrison’s account of mizuko kuyō falls somewhere between LaFleur’s naturalism and Hardacre’s skepticism. Though she concurs with connections LaFleur draws to

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68 LaFleur, 51, 100.

69 Hardacre, 12-14.
historical precedents that reflect similar sentiments as mizuko kuyō, she also argues that the practice as we know it today is a outgrowth of the myriad changes faced by Japan in the postwar era.

Even if the exact origins of mizuko kuyō remain undetermined, the previous section’s overview of Japanese Buddhist funerary and memorial practices shows that the newly developed mizuko rites resonate well with the memorial-centered culture of Buddhism in Japan. They cohere with the common religion of Japan identified by Reader and Tanabe as well. Indeed, these ideas came across time and again during my field research in Tokyo even as Buddhist priests and practitioners remained keenly aware of the complaints commonly lodged against the practice. The relative novelty of these rites, the ambiguity raised by death before birth, and the connection between mizuko rites and abortion have made the relationship between mizuko kuyō and Buddhism tense at times. Moreover, kuyō providers (Buddhist and non-Buddhist) who appear profit-driven or who emphasize quelling tatari, or spirit attacks, as the main reason for performing mizuko kuyō have engendered broad skepticism within Japan for the practice as a whole. Nevertheless, the priests I interviewed and the rites I observed demonstrated a firm commitment to mizuko kuyō and viewed their work as a providing a service to those suffering from pregnancy loss.

Before proceeding in my discussion of mizuko kuyō, a note about the sources I use in this section is in order. My field-based data is drawn from research conducted in Tokyo and the surrounding area during the summer of 2010. Over the course of several weeks, I visited dozens of temples, observed various mizuko rites, and interviewed several clerics who offer kuyō services. I spoke with mostly male priests, young and old, about the
practice, and I witnessed persons of all ages taking part in different types of mizuko memorials. Though couples and individual men often take part in mizuko kuyō, due to the gendered nature of pregnancy loss and grief, I chose to focus my research on women who seek out mizuko services. Additionally, at the kuyō I attended, women comprised an overwhelming majority of the participants, suggesting that the women are more likely to take part in mizuko kuyō than men. Though “religious entrepreneurs” (to use Hardacre’s term) of all sorts offer mizuko memorial rites, my research focuses explicitly on mizuko kuyō facilitated by Buddhist temples and priests.

The internet also proved an invaluable resource for gathering data on mizuko kuyō services and participants. Temples wishing to advertise their kuyō have started developing websites that give not only logistical information about their services (times, location, train directions, etc.), but also brief explanations or FAQs about mizuko kuyō and why it should be performed. In some cases, the temple websites even host message boards where kuyō participants can post brief notes to their mizuko or to the temple. These messages serve as electronic versions of the ema (votive tablets) that hang by the hundreds on temple grounds, and they point to how the “sites” of religious practices are changing with the rise of the digital era. 

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70 For more on this, see Underwood, 750.

71 An interesting type of public memorialization that I found in both the Japanese Buddhist and American Catholic settings is (what I am calling) e-memorials, or web-based commemorations of pregnancy losses. Some of these e-memorials are message boards hosted by organizations that provide non-virtual pregnancy loss memorials, such as Fudōsan temple in Tokyo or the American Project Rachel network; others are blogs that serve as a forum through which individuals make public and commemorate their pregnancy losses. Though these e-memorials do not comprise a significant portion of my data, I occasionally turn to them because they include women’s first-person reflections on
Encountering Mizuko Kuyō in Tokyo Today

I began this dissertation with the image of the mizuko garden on the grounds of Zōjōji Temple in central Tokyo. There, rows upon rows of 2-foot-tall stone Jizō statues sit in neat lines. Each statue is adorned with its own hat and bib, and the playful air observed by so many visitors to Zōjōji undoubtedly comes from the brightly colored pinwheels spinning in the wind next to each little Jizō. Upon entering, one notices the multitude of matching red knit hats and bibs that came from the small kiosk at the temple gate, but upon closer examination, it is the personalized adornments—the Winnie the Pooh infant sunhat worn by one statue and the Snoopy bib covering another—that reminds the visitor that each little Jizō represents not just a mizuko but someone’s mizuko.

Zōjōji’s mizuko Jizō statues are among the more iconic Buddhist images in Tokyo, but several other spots in and around the metropolitan area also attract individuals interested in performing their own mizuko kuyō. Purple Cloud Temple (Shiunzan Jizōji) in Chichibu, for instance, is a temple dedicated strictly to mizuko kuyō and has over 140,000 mizuko Jizō statues ensconced in the surrounding hillsides. They hold daily kuyō with several ceremonies offered on special days of the month. Though the kuyō take place within a small enclosed room in the main temple building, the chanting and prayers are broadcast over a sound system that echoes throughout the grounds, which has the effect of incorporating each little Jizō into every kuyō. Hasedera in Kamakura (near the famous Great Buddha statue) is also known for its collection of mizuko Jizō statues, though for the

their own experiences of pregnancy loss. Jeff Wilson utilizes such e-memorials throughout his book, Mourning the Unborn Dead.

Purple Cloud Temple has received more attention from Western scholars and authors than any other mizuko kuyō site, due in part to the attention draw to it by Lafleur’s Liquid Life.
most part these figurines are significantly more diminutive than the statues at either Zōjōji or Purple Cloud Temple. The mizuko memorial at Hasedera seems less focused on formal kuyō officiated by temple priests and more centered on providing opportunities for individuals to make their own offerings and remembrances. Everything one might need to make an offering (candles, incense, water, Jizō figures that can be personalized) is provided on-site. Those seeking a kuyō on their behalf can also fill out forms requesting their mizuko be remembered in a rite held at the temple at a later date.

Zōjōji, Purple Cloud Temple, and Hasedera are probably three of the most renowned mizuko kuyō sites in the greater Tokyo area and in Japan in general. Smaller mizuko memorials can be found throughout the city on individual temple grounds. At these smaller of sites, mizuko kuyō are performed privately upon request rather than at regularly scheduled times. Typically these more discrete memorials are comprised of one large Jizō figure or a line of six smaller Jizō statues (rokudo Jizō) donning the traditional red hats and bibs. Sometimes, however, one will be surprised to find tucked within a busy Tokyo neighborhood a temple overrun with Jizō statues. This was my experience at one Tendai temple and one Jōdo temple, each of which advertised their mizuko services online. At each site, centuries worth of Jizō figures had been gathered together, populating the space with the quiet and friendly presence of the watchful bodhisattva. While Jizō is the patron of many causes, mizuko Jizō can be recognized by the sorts of offerings placed at Jizō’s feet, such as children’s drinks and snacks, pacifiers, baby cups and chopsticks, and all sorts of small toys.

One temple known for its monthly mizuko kuyō is Chingodō, a small side shrine connected to the famous Sensōji in the Asakusa neighborhood of Tokyo. On the 24th of each
month, Jizō’s special day, a large public mizuko kuyō is held with at least five priests officiating the rite. The visual focus of the rite is a tall Jizō figure surrounded by tiny bare-bottomed infants holding close to the hem of his robe, which calls to mind the image of the Jizō rescuing mizuko along the forsaken riverbank of the Sai-no-Kawara legend. For the monthly kuyō, a temporary altar and stools are set up around Jizō, and a small fire for burning memorial tablets is lit at his feet. At the kuyō I had the opportunity to observe at Chingodō, the number of lay attendees varied from 20 to 60 people. (The vastly different number of participants seemed contingent on the day of the week the 24th happened to fall on each month, with weekend rites drawing a significantly bigger crowd than weekday kuyō.) At this temple, there is a mix of one-time kuyō attendees and those who participate on a regular basis. Some are commemorating recent miscarriages and abortions; others remember losses long past or belonging to family members. One woman in her late-60s told me that she had been coming to Chingodō’s mizuko kuyō for close to 25 years. As we spoke, she was saving a seat for a woman who had become her friend over the course of years and years of seeing each other at the Chingodō rites. Another woman sitting nearby who appeared to be in her early 30s told me that she had been coming to the monthly mizuko kuyō for less than a year. She was commemorating a pregnancy loss that had taken place several years ago. Initially she had not been interested in taking part in mizuko kuyō. Recently, however, in part out of feelings of regret, she felt she wanted to attend, and now she hoped to keep attending until she had been coming as long as the older kuyō regulars.

The stories of these two women are not uncommon at places like Zōjōji, Purple Cloud Temple, and Chingodō, which are all renowned for their mizuko kuyō services. Sites like these, and now others thanks to the ease of internet advertising, draw in a high
volume and wide variety of visitors. This is due in part to the fact that there is a long history in Japanese religion of particular shrines and temples being known as especially effective or powerful in certain areas. Consequently, Zōjō-ji, for instance, is not just known as someplace that performs mizuko kuyō but as one of the best places for it. Additionally, because preserving one’s privacy is also important to many mizuko kuyō seekers, visiting a place that is not one’s “home” or ancestral temple helps maintain one’s anonymity.

Several priests mentioned that the typical mizuko kuyō client is not someone who is a regular temple parishioner but rather a person who comes to the temple on just one occasion to request a kuyō. Though all the priests I interviewed agreed that ideally mizuko kuyō should be an ongoing practice like ancestor memorial rites, they acknowledged that the majority of participants do not return again after performing their first kuyō. If they do return, it may be informally for a walk through a mizuko statue garden or to make a food or incense offering before a mizuko Jizō.

Common Features of Mizuko Memorials

Identifying a common ritual form for Japanese Buddhist mizuko kuyō is a difficult task. For the most part, various temples and sects developed their own rites independently as individuals (sometimes temple parishioners, sometimes newcomers) started asking for mizuko kuyō. The structure of mizuko kuyō corresponds to that of other traditional memorial rites, especially senzo kuyō, the memorial rites performed on behalf of ancestral spirits.73 Noting the parallels between senzo kuyō and mizuko kuyō, Elizabeth Harrison

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73 Richard W. Anderson and Elaine Martin, “Rethinking the Practice of Mizuko Kuyo in Contemporary Japan,” Japanese Journal of Religious Studies 24, no. 1-2 (1997): 129. On this point, the authors of this article cite interesting examples of women who regularly attend
identifies the most common features of *mizuko kuyō* as “an invocation, a verbal listing of the dead or of those commissioning the service, chanting of texts as offerings to accrue some kind of merit for the dead, prayers to the appropriate deities to watch over the dead, [and] an invitation to participants to come forward to make an offering.” Harrison’s summary accurately describes the temple *kuyō* I attended during my time in Tokyo. At each memorial, however, slight variations occurred depending on the sect-specific customs of the host temple. For instance, the texts that are chanted vary from site to site, depending on the sectarian and doctrinal commitments of the host temple. Some places, like Purple Cloud Temple, have created their own *mizuko*-focused hymns for use in *kuyō*. Others fall back on more traditional scriptures like the *Heart Sutra* or *Lotus Sutra* as the centerpiece of the rite. Sect-based variations also occurred in terms of the mantras chanted during the rites. The Pure Land (Jōdo) temple *kuyō* I observed included the *nembutsu* mantra (“Namu Amida Butsu”) while at Nichiren *kuyō* the title of the *Lotus Sutra* (“Namu Myōhōrengekyō”) was chanted. Frequently, mantras dedicated directly to Jizō were incorporated into the rites as well since he is typically seen as the primary actor on behalf of *mizuko*.

Other elements of the rites also varied depending on the typical ritual customs practiced by a given sect. At the once-Tendai affiliated Chingodō, burning wooden tablets (*tōba*) inscribed with the posthumous names of the dead signals the climax of the rite when

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75 For a history of each of these mantras in Japan, see Donald W. Mitchell, *Buddhism: Introducing the Buddhist Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 254-262, 267-272.
participants come forward and make an offering on behalf of their *mizuko*. According to Rambelli, in the process of burning, “objects undergo a metamorphosis that enables them to escape this world’s conditioned reality and reach the invisible realm of the buddhas, and thereupon, all participants receive spiritual and material benefits.”\textsuperscript{76} (Burning *tōba* is not typically included in the *kuyō* of other sects if it is not already part of their normal ritual customs.) Food offerings presented both to the *mizuko* and to Jizō were also a consistent part of all the memorial rites I observed, which is reflective of the prominent role food offerings play in Japanese religious practice as a whole. These practices—chanting, mantras, ceremonial burning, food offerings—are all part of the core of the Japanese ritual framework. It is by drawing on this framework that *mizuko kuyō* gains its “performative potency” to create a meaningful ritual experience for participants.\textsuperscript{77}

Some *kuyō* services include a sermon by the officiating priest on the importance of performing *mizuko kuyō*. In the case of Purple Cloud Temple, head priest Hashimoto Yōtarō regularly speaks at length on the social and personal perils that arise from abortion and ritually neglected *mizuko*.\textsuperscript{78} Most of the priests I interviewed, however, were more focused on the individuals who came to them seeking *kuyō* services and less concerned with macro social issues sometimes associated with *mizuko kuyō*. For them, *mizuko kuyō* is one among

\textsuperscript{76} Rambelli, 217.

\textsuperscript{77} Tambiah, 161.

\textsuperscript{78} Harrison’s article “Strands of Complexity: The Emergence of ‘Mizuko Kuyō’ in Postwar Japan,” details the history of the Purple Cloud Temple and the political and social concerns of its founder, Hashimoto Tetsuma. Today the temple is run by Hashimoto’s son, Yōtarō, who shares his father’s beliefs social and personal ills can arise from abortion and from having *mizuko* who have not been attended to ritually. Hashimoto Yōtarō, interview with author, Chichibu, Japan, June 12, 2010.
many duties of a temple priest, and it becomes an opportunity to interact on a pastoral level with people suffering from a loss.

One prominent feature of mizuko kuyō commonly shared across sectarian lines is the practice of posthumous naming. This practice is not unique to the mizuko kuyō rite, but rather is part of the posthumous ordination stage of most Japanese Buddhist funerals. The posthumous, or precept, names that are assigned to deceased individuals were once meant only for high-ranking priests, but like other mortuary practices, they eventually trickled down to include the laity as well. The names themselves often reflect the profession or special skills of the deceased and can include honorific characters indicating that the deceased was particularly faithful or generous to a temple. They are inscribed on tombstones and on the memorial tablets (ihai) that are kept on home altars (butsudan) to honor ancestors until the thirty-third year anniversary of their death. Quoting Robert J. Smith, Steven Covell notes, “the memorial tablet plays a critical role in making sure that the dead are not ‘cut off from normal intercourse with the living members of [their] household.’” He posits that “the posthumous name marks the social status of the deceased in his or her new relationship with the living family.”

In mizuko kuyō, the process of posthumous naming serves roughly the same function as it does in funerals for deceased adults. That is, it identifies the mizuko as a follower of the Buddha and is believed to help ensure the safe passage of the spirit of the deceased to the Pure Land. Additionally, however, its function is somewhat distinct insofar as the

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79 Covell, “The Price of Naming the Dead,” 298-300.

80 After that point, “it is thought that the deceased has lost his or her individuality and has merged into the larger corporate family ancestor.” Ibid., 299.

81 Ibid., 300.
posthumous naming is often the first and only name given to many mizuko whereas deceased adults had various names during their lifetimes. In the case of pregnancy loss in particular, posthumous naming is important for establishing a stable identity in the face of the “fluidity” of the nature of the mizuko itself. It gives a lasting presence to the mizuko in the face of permanent absence. It also creates a more concrete point of contact whereby merit accumulated by living family members through memorial and devotional practices can be directed toward the now-known mizuko. Tall tōba identifying the names of mizuko dominate some kuyō sites. Hundreds (presumably awaiting a ceremonial burning) lined the mizuko memorial area at Chiba Yakuyoke Fudōson Jizōdō just outside of Tokyo. They far outnumbered the temple’s Jizō statues, most of which were also inscribed with the family and posthumous names of mizuko.

Though posthumous names and tōba may be one of the more doctrinally significant features of mizuko kuyō, it is the informal offerings that give mizuko memorials their personal dimension and sense of intimacy. In addition to formal mizuko kuyō, private, informal acts of memorialization make up a significant portion of mizuko practices. These take place without clerical assistance or guidance, and, as I mentioned above, can involve doing something as simple as strolling through a mizuko garden while remembering one’s own mizuko. One young woman (mid-20s) walking through Zōjōji’s Jizō statues told me that she has come back to Zōjōji two to three times a year since she first took part in a formal kuyō upon the suggestion of a friend following a pregnancy loss. She and countless others leave gifts for their mizuko next to individual Jizō statues or beside the central bodhisattva statue that watches over this special area. These gifts include treats that a child might enjoy eating or drinking, like candy or juice fresh from one of the innumerable vending
machines that populate Japanese streets; or items that would bring a child joy or comfort, like small toys, books, paper cranes, booties, or stuffed animals. Interestingly, the gifts offered to mizuko do not seem to age as the mizuko would have aged had it been born. Instead, the gifts always appear to be appropriate only for very young children, and mizuko always remain water babies in the minds of those who remember them.

Goals of Memorialization

Formal or informal, public or private, mizuko memorial practices serve many purposes at once. Ritually speaking, they follow the same emic logic outlined in Part II regarding the function and goals of Japanese Buddhist funerals and ongoing memorial rites. Through the prescribed, ritualized actions of the priest and memorial participants, real changes are believed to be effected in the postmortem destiny of the mizuko. In other words, their efficacy is premised upon proper ritual performance. Like other mortuary rites, mizuko kuyō is rooted in the belief in the unsurpassed potential of ritual intervention to benefit the deceased, particularly in the liminal antarābhava period immediately following death. Jacqueline Stone attributes this to the fact that “Buddhism holds out the promise of mastery over death, both in its ‘official’ ideal of liberation from saṃsāra and by claims that its meditative and ritual practices—whether performed by the individuals concerned or by others on their behalf—are sufficiently powerful to intervene to soteriological advantage in the death process.”

Stuck in the space of death before birth, mizuko never have the opportunity to earn merit on their own behalf and consequently, rely entirely on the living acting on their behalf for any sort of posthumous benefit.

Elizabeth Harrison notes that despite variations between the *mizuko* rites—public and private, one-time and ongoing—the ritual and personal goals of *mizuko* memorialization share two key goals: giving *mizuko* a name and form.\(^83\) The name can be a posthumous Buddhist name that serves a role ritually, or it can be a personal name that singles out a lost *mizuko*, counterbalancing its fluidity by projecting a stable identity. As for form, the *mizuko* most commonly is given the form of the bodhisattva Jizō. *Mizuko* Jizō figures are noted for both monklike and childlike appearance. In the dual identity of the statues, Harrison sees “the deity and the child mutually represented by the figures, suggesting that no matter what the image looks like, it serves as a nexus between a caring deity and a spirit construed as needing help.”\(^84\) In *mizuko* gardens, rows of these identical figures are punctuated with personal touches left as offerings to Jizō himself and for the lost *mizuko’s* comfort or enjoyment.

Whether formally dedicating statue on behalf of a *mizuko* or simply leaving a private offering at the feet of communal Jizō, these acts of memorialization are aimed at establishing a connection between a *mizuko* and living family members commemorating a pregnancy loss. Yet to create a bond, there needs to be something, someone, on the other end of the connection. Statues, names, hats, bibs, food, and toys *materialize* the *mizuko*. On the level of ritual as well as the personal level, the process of memorialization constructs a

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84 Ibid.
permanent *mizuko* identity that can appreciate gifts, receive apologies, bear secrets, and benefit from the merit of the living.  

Historically, funerals were not performed for Japanese children who died while still very young. As Harrison points out, “Aborted, miscarried, and stillborn children, as well as those who died while still very young, had been, until the advent of *mizuko kuyō*, ‘left out’ of the usual Japanese Buddhist funeral and memorial services for the dead.” LaFleur, Hardacre, and Harrison all attribute this to Japanese ideas about the precariousness of childbirth, the fluidity of life, and the potential for those who died very young would be reborn to their “real” lives soon. For these reasons, a mortuary ritual was unwarranted as the primary aim of Buddhist funerals—to help the individual reach the Pure Land and attain Buddhahood—was not the immediate goal for those who died before fully coming into the human world. Instead, rebirth in the human realm was presumed to be the best possible outcome for fetuses that died before birth.  

In today’s *mizuko kuyō*, one witnesses the flipside of that same logic at work. Ritual practices are still believed to play an integral role in determining the postmortem fate of the *mizuko*, yet now the emphasis seems to have shifted from passively allowing the *mizuko* another chance at a human birth to actively influencing its soteriological destiny. According to the doctrinal principles examined above, mortuary rites have the potential to help the *mizuko* reach the Pure Land. (In the minds of some *kuyō* participants, however, the rites are aimed at helping the *mizuko* be reborn as a human in the future, perhaps even to 

85 Votive tablets, or *ema*, hanging opening at *mizuko* memorials frequently include apologies to lost *mizuko* or take a very intimate tone in explaining the circumstances of the pregnancy loss, making them simultaneously very public and very private offerings.  

86 Harrison, “Women’s Responses to Child Loss in Japan,” 68.
the same family.) I say that this is the “flipside” of the pre-mizuko kuyō logic because one can see that both ways of responding to prenatal and early childhood death hinge on the notion that funerary rites at their core are efficacious.

Before mizuko kuyō emerged, funerals for the very young were eschewed not because people believed the rites would not work; rather, the concern was that they would work too well. Today mizuko kuyō are premised on that same idea that rituals work. Each of the temple priests I interviewed asserted the ontological efficacy of mizuko rites as the doctrinal key justifying their performance. Additionally, temple literature stresses the importance of performing kuyō on behalf of lost mizuko. At the Purple Cloud Temple in Chichibu, the songbook containing a special mizuko-centered chant explains that the purpose of the chant is to apologize to the mizuko in order to bring about family happiness and to help the mizuko become a buddha. It paints a sad picture of lonely and abandoned mizuko that are trapped in darkness until a kuyō is done to save them. On the website of Yakuyoke Fudōson Jizōdō in Chiba, they promise that their kuyō will help the mizuko become a buddha that will protect the family and be peaceful in the Pure Land as a result of the prayers and offerings (incense, sweets, pinwheels) given to the deceased.87

In each of these explanations of the outcomes of mizuko kuyō, one can see that the wellbeing of the family is linked to the wellbeing of the mizuko, and an unhappy mizuko can lead to an unhappy family. In its most extreme form, this correlation materializes in threats of tatari, or spirit attacks, that can occur if a mizuko is not properly memorialized. Most priests I spoke with, however, were hesitant to speak too much about the question

87 From Chiba Yakuyoke Fudouson’s website, mizuko-kuyo.com (Accessed July 11, 2010). This website divides its attention fairly equally between explaining the doctrinal justifications of mizuko kuyō and touting the practical benefits of coming to this particular temple, especially its large parking lot and low kuyō prices.
the *tatari*. Still, many of them did suggest that more subtle repercussions for the parents and future children were a possibility should proper *kuyō* not be performed. With the exception of the head priest at Purple Cloud temple, most remained vague about what precisely these repercussions would be and seemed unsure about the orthodoxy of such claims.

One recurring theme over the course of my fieldwork in Tokyo was that *mizuko* need to have memorials offered in their honor in order to “calm” them. For instance, a young priest I interviewed at Chingodō explained that without being calmed through a *kuyō*, *mizuko* have a more difficult time becoming a buddha (*jōbutsusuru*). He said that a *mizuko* often longs to be held by its mother or simply wishes to have been born. Because the *mizuko* would remain attached to its parents and the parents attached to the *mizuko*, it would be difficult for the *mizuko* to be separated from its family and reach the Pure Land. The distress of *mizuko* is also a central theme in the *Sai no kawara* legend. In that story, it is the warm cloak and soothing rattle-staff of Jizō that brings the *mizuko* comfort once he intercedes on their behalf.

Though the priests I spoke with affirmed that *kuyō* were meant to bring peace and healing to those who had lost *mizuko*, only one priest I interviewed told me that he dedicates a special part of the rite specifically to the healing of *kuyō* participants. In the *kuyō* offered at this temple, he first makes an offering for the *mizuko* and for the ancestors so that the *mizuko* is able to reach Pure Land. He then invites the parents (usually couples) to make an offering in front of a 300-year-old statue of Kannon. This statue is credited with giving people good health, and so he incorporates devotion to the statue into the *mizuko*

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88 Mr. Kamimura, interview with author, July 24, 2010.
kuyō at his temple as well. This portion of the rite is aimed at bringing them health and healing and helps then get over the sadness they are feeling. Many kuyō seekers, he said, feel regret about how things turned out regardless of the circumstances of the pregnancy loss. In short, the first two parts are for the benefit of the mizuko and the last part is for the benefit of those who suffered the loss.\textsuperscript{89}

Summary of Ritual Efficacies

This dual-concern for the wellbeing of the mizuko and the wellbeing of kuyō seekers represents, from an analytical perspective, the two main levels of ritual efficacy at work in Japanese Buddhist pregnancy loss memorials. The first and primary level is that of ontological efficacy. This sort of efficacy is grounded in the doctrinal principles underpinning all manner of Japanese Buddhist mortuary rites. It centers on the idea that by their very performance, memorial rites can impact the postmortem destiny of the deceased. Though only one priest I interviewed used technical language to describe the “intermediate state” occupied by mizuko immediately following death,\textsuperscript{90} most alluded to the idea that mizuko exist in some sort of “in-between” state in which they are able to benefit from the ritual efforts of the living. This is the same sort of liminality credited with creating powerful opportunities for liberation following the death of an adult.\textsuperscript{91}

\textsuperscript{89} Toshimichi Suzuki, interview with author, July 27, 2010.

\textsuperscript{90} Junkyō Narita, interview with author, August 3, 2010.

\textsuperscript{91} According to Jacqueline Stone, “Buddhist funerary ritual of this kind in effect collapses the distinction, outlined above, between the ‘enlightened’ death of spiritually cultivated individuals and the samsaric death of ordinary people. By the power of the ritual performance—whether it derives from the officiant’s personal attainments, from the authority of his school or lineage, or from the ritual itself—the dying or deceased person is
The second level of efficacy at work in *mizuko* rites serves an epistemological function. It is aimed at bringing about healing for those who feel wounded by a pregnancy loss, and I suggest that it does so by re-framing the pregnancy loss experience according to a new narrative or a new sort of “knowing.” In Japan today, pregnancy is seen as the first stage of parenting and “to be a woman means to be a mother.” In situations of loss—whether spontaneous or deliberately induced—one’s identity as a woman and as a mother are called into question for arguably having failed in both roles. By taking part in a *mizuko* memorial, the story of one’s loss, of one’s failure as a woman and a parent, can be transformed into a story of tender and ongoing care. The process of memorialization *materializes* the *mizuko* in a way that facilitates the formation of a personal connection between the lost *mizuko* and the person, usually the mother, mourning its loss. The *kuyō* ritual itself as well as the objects and images offered as and to *mizuko* make the lost fetus present in a tangible way. They create a point of contact that makes communication and relationship possible. In this way, pregnancy loss memorialization recognizes the never-seen *mizuko* as a cherished child and acknowledges as a mother the woman who never had a chance to parent that child.

Both of these forms of efficacy connect back to broader themes and goals at the heart of Japanese religiosity, especially the commitment to ritually caring for one’s ancestors and the practical concern for personal wellbeing. Against the background of

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93 Elizabeth Harrison advances a similar argument in “Women’s Responses to Pregnancy Loss in Japan.” This theory is supported by the countless votive tablets left at *mizuko* memorials that are tenderly addressed “To baby” and signed “Mama.”
Japanese Buddhist memorial customs and the common religion of Japan, *mizuko kuyō* seems right at home. The emergent quality of the rites lies in their ability to bring about effects greater than the individual components of the memorials suggest. The performance of the chants, offerings, prayers, and other elements of the rites transcend the confines of the actions themselves and have the power to effect ontological changes in the status of lost *mizuko* after death. Ideally, *mizuko* memorialization is also successful in bringing about epistemological changes for participants by re-framing stories of loss in ways that ultimately can bring healing.

**Part IV: Women’s Agency and Mizuko Kuyō**

In his study of the contemporary practice of posthumous naming, Steven Covell writes of shifting popular views about the value of Buddhist mortuary rites. While priests and Buddhist organizations still tout the importance and the efficacy of funerals for helping the deceased reach the Pure Land, lay family members tend to see funerals mostly as an opportunity to “say goodbye” to lost loved ones.\(^9^4\) This shift is characteristic of overall changes within the funeral customs of Japan, which increasingly have come to emphasize the personalization of an individual’s last rites.\(^9^5\) At times begrudged by Buddhist authorities, these changes reflect a certain agency on the part of lay Japanese as they actively transform the time-honored memorial culture.


In many ways, *mizuko kuyō* exists in that same space of overlapping ritual motivations. On the one hand, the doctrinal justification behind *mizuko kuyō* lies in the same logic of instrumental efficacy underpinning other mortuary rites. Indeed, it is their connection to traditions perceived as both timeless and effective that imbues the new *mizuko* rites with the same power as the long-standing funeral rituals. On the other hand, individuals may have additional reasons for wishing to participate, particularly personal concerns related to grief, forgiveness, and healing that can feel ignored within the seemingly unchanging structure of funerary rites. These ritual aims are best understood as complementary rather than competing.

Reflecting on the recent proliferation of new memorial rites, Rambelli writes, “temples try to present a form of the sacred that is more directly connected to the everyday life of people in contemporary Japan by drawing on traditional rituals (e.g., funerals and sacrifice) and doctrines (inanimate objects becoming buddhas, effects of the rituals) applied to contemporary situations.” This notion of enduring systems of meaning being brought to bear on current situations resonates well with the insights of practice theory, yet Rambelli’s emphasis on the role of “temples” in doing this work glosses over the efforts of individuals in bringing about this shift. As temple priests make strides in reaching out to meet the everyday needs of the laity, lay ritual participants also deserve credit for their role in engaging familiar symbols and practices in new ways in order to mediate their own experiences of loss and trauma.

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97 Rambelli, 218.
Rambelli is not the only scholar to understate the agency of individuals in the development of new ritual practices; Helen Hardacre has also been challenged on the same point in her work on *mizuko kuyō*. In light of the relative novelty of *mizuko kuyō* and its association with provocative issues like reproduction, gender, and abortion (to a name a just few), the critical eye Hardacre’s research brings to *mizuko kuyō* is warranted. Yet, in her drive to unmask the negative aspects and implications of *mizuko kuyō*, Hardacre fails to acknowledge any of the beneficial facets of the practice. She ignores the ways in which these practices grow out of the memorial culture of Japan, and she belittles the agency of women who take part in *mizuko* memorials.\(^9^8\)

In Hardacre’s account of the practices, women are depicted as unwitting victims of manipulation by religious entrepreneurs that prey on women’s naiveté and vulnerability. Meredith Underwood critiques this portrayal as one in which women are seen as either “religious ‘dopes’ or at best ‘dupes’” who get sucked into a practice that is really about subjugating and disciplining them according to the patriarchal values of the culture. It should be noted that Underwood concurs with Hardacre’s analysis on many points. Like Hardacre, she believes that the ideology underlying *mizuko* practices is frequently misogynistic, “targeted against women,” and “demonize[s] women’s sexuality.”\(^9^9\) In the end, however, Underwood’s interpretation of *mizuko kuyō* diverges from Hardacre’s insofar as Underwood highlights the ways in which the practice can be “productive” despite also being “constraining.”

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\(^9^8\) Underwood, 751.

\(^9^9\) Ibid., 758.
Underwood views *mizuko kuyō* as a practical, strategic response to the social pressures facing Japanese women caught between traditional expectations and the everyday realities of life.\(^{100}\) Noting how womanhood and motherhood are so closely tethered in Japan, she points out that “the majority of Japanese women who have abortions are either women who have already borne one or more children or women who have every intention of becoming mothers at a later time.”\(^{101}\) Pregnancy loss, then, especially elective abortion, calls into question women’s maternal and female identity. In turning to *mizuko kuyō*, Underwood suggests “Japanese women use the ritual and symbolic resources available to them in order to overcome the predicaments of their sex.”\(^{102}\) The rites’ social efficacy hinges on their ability to serve as a public form of penance and as a forum for righting prescribed gender roles whose boundaries have been trespassed.\(^{103}\) It provides a socially and religiously sanctioned way to redress the disorder caused by pregnancy loss.

In contrast to Hardacre, Underwood argues that women’s participation in *mizuko kuyō* need not be interpreted as the product of external manipulation but rather reflects women’s agency as “negotiators of culture.”\(^{104}\) She insists that “[w]e must seriously consider the possibility that women have instituted by popular demand a ritual that meets their religious needs in a context where their sexual and reproductive freedom is severely

\(^{100}\) Underwood, 760.

\(^{101}\) Ibid.

\(^{102}\) Ibid., 161.

\(^{103}\) Ibid., 762.

\(^{104}\) Ibid., 741.
By taking part in mizuko rites, women tap into the existing framework of meaningful cultural actions, and deploy those familiar actions in creative ways to address a “new” problem. In the language of practice theory, mizuko memorials are “strategic practices for transgressing and reshuffling cultural categories in order to meet the needs of real situations.” In this view, then, women “are not passive recipients but active participants in the ongoing struggle over cultural meaning and power.”

Like Underwood, Harrison argues that there is a tendency in both scholarly and popular writings on mizuko practices to eclipse the agency of women. She traces this tendency to the widespread stereotype of Japanese women as passive. Yet, recognizing the challenges of living in a male-dominated Japanese society, Harrison looks for the ways that Japanese women can be seen as creative actors. She believes the issue comes down to the question of “whether women can be seen to have some control of their lives even within a patriarchal system that conditions or otherwise limits their choices.” Her answer to that question, as one might suspect, is yes. In affirming the agency of women, however, she is hesitant to boil down the specific efficacy of mizuko kuyō to simply one factor or another. She writes,

*Mizuko kuyō* is not simply about men taking advantage of women to make money. It is not simply about women trying to assuage guilt after an abortion or after losing a child. It is about women and men doing all of these things and more, constructing systems, adapting resources, negotiating spaces, and actively addressing important issues in their lives—for women, the silencing of their child-loss experiences; for men, perhaps the maintaining of distance from and control over those experiences.

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105 Underwood, 740-741.

106 Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*, 78.

107 Underwood, 740.

Mizuko kuyō is not a resolution of these issues. Rather, it is the site of one more skirmish along the way.\textsuperscript{109} It is clear from this quote that Harrison is responding to both Hardacre’s and LaFleur’s accounts of mizuko rites. Her words can also be read as a challenge to Underwood’s confidence in the power of mizuko kuyō to resolve social turmoil. Harrison’s point is not to provide an alternative account of what mizuko kuyō is really about, though her own argument that kuyō give a name and form to mizuko that women are then able to mother does that in some ways. Rather, she aims to show that mizuko kuyō is not about any one thing.

Practitioners and priests weave together a multitude of motivations and justifications for crafting and taking part in mizuko memorials. By participating in mizuko kuyō, women navigate their way through a web of difficulties and resources, both of which impact the loss and memorial experiences. Reducing the function of mizuko kuyō to just one purpose fails to appreciate the complexity of the practice and does a disservice to ritual participants who bring their own intentions and objectives to the rituals. To truly recognize and value the agency of women who take part in mizuko kuyō, the diversity of pregnancy loss experiences and reasons for taking part in pregnancy loss memorials must be honored.

Conclusion

Just as mizuko kuyō cannot be boiled down to assuaging women’s guilt or to resolving social conflict, neither can it be reduced to the ontological and epistemological efficacies I argued for in this chapter. Yet, analyzing mizuko memorials through these

\textsuperscript{109} Harrison, “Women’s Responses to Child Loss in Japan,” 92.
theoretical categories helps articulate both doctrinal and individuals’ reasons for taking part in the memorials and shows how they intertwine with one another.

On the whole, *mizuko* rites’ ontological efficacy has been neglected by most scholars studying *mizuko kuyō* despite its relevance to Buddhist doctrinal justifications underlying these practices. Examining the ontological rationale underpinning *mizuko* practices illustrates the origins of these rites within the broader funeral and memorial culture of Buddhism in Japan. Though *mizuko kuyō* is an innovation of the 20th century, *mizuko* memorials harness the long-standing symbols, actions, and logic of other mortuary rites on behalf of lost *mizuko* and loved ones who grieve them. It is from this connection to the seemingly timeless traditions of Japanese Buddhism that *mizuko kuyō* derives its authority and power. At the same time, *mizuko* memorials are about more than just the doctrinal principles justifying their practice. They are concerned also with the wellbeing of women mourning pregnancy losses. They are aimed at bringing healing to those who have suffered losses, and one of the ways that they do so is by re-framing the pregnancy loss experience within a new narrative of care for one’s *mizuko*.

In the next chapter, I employ the categories of ontological and epistemological efficacy in my analysis of emerging American Catholic pregnancy loss memorials. In that context, the memorials are not purported to impact the soteriological status of lost fetuses. Consequently, epistemological efficacy takes center stage inasmuch as the liturgies, monuments, and post-abortion retreats I survey seek to frame pregnancy loss experiences within the broader Catholic narratives of grace and healing.
This chapter returns to the issue of the imagination of prenatal life in Catholicism, now from the perspective of American Catholic pregnancy loss memorials. I examine these emerging memorials in relation to the category of ritual efficacy. Using performance and practice ritual theories, this chapter considers some of the ways in which these new memorial practices can be interpreted as efficacious. Part I situates pregnancy loss memorials within the broader context of Catholic memorials for the dead, highlighting the ways in which the development and form of these new rites taps into the customs and logic of more traditional memorial rites. Here I concentrate on how the question of instrumental efficacy has evolved within the context of prayers for the dead, and I show that varying degrees of ontological effectiveness have been ascribed to Catholic acts of memorialization over the course of history.

In Part II, I describe in detail the different types of pregnancy loss memorialization currently in practice. I show how these memorials confront the ambiguity that surrounds prenatal life and grieving death before birth by ritually recognizing both of these things. I argue that Catholic pregnancy loss memorials are first and foremost aimed at epistemological efficacy, meaning that they aim to effectively change how pregnancy loss experiences are understood or “known” by ritual participants. The memorials re-frame miscarriage, stillbirth, and abortion experiences within Catholic narratives of forgiveness and healing, and thereby transform from them from situations of isolating loss into stories of grace, community, and shared sorrow. They enact a new form of “knowing” in which the hidden brokenness of women’s bodies and absence of lost prenates come to light and
are opened up to a healing imagination through the ritual process in ways that are meant to be therapeutic.

Moreover, American Catholic pregnancy loss memorials situate pregnancy loss within another framework as well. My examination of various pregnancy loss rites and memorial practices and my interviews with memorial facilitators (Catholic priests as well as lay ministers) uncovered a genuine commitment to creating healing opportunities for women who have suffered pregnancy losses. Yet typically this concern for helping women along in the healing process is situated within a broader narrative about the ethics of abortion, even when miscarriage and stillbirth are included in the focus of a particular act of memorialization. This narrative often has political overtones as well. For instance, the date of the *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision is frequently inscribed on public monuments commemorating pregnancy loss that have been erected by Catholic groups. Additionally, many of the organizations that sponsor memorials are also engaged in anti-abortion activism of some sort. While some Buddhist *mizuko* memorials try to situate individual abortion experiences within a broader narrative of social ills, the theme is muted in the Japanese setting overall. In the Catholic setting, by contrast, the American abortion debate took center stage in each interview I conducted and at each memorial I observed.

The breadth and diversity of memorials examined in this chapter point to the growing presence of pregnancy loss memorialization in American Catholicism today. While still far from ubiquitous, pregnancy loss memorial practices are being developed by wide-range of communities throughout the United States. The goals of the individuals and groups behind the memorials vary greatly. Some are concerned with supporting women in
their reproductive choices; others are focused on recognizing the lives of prenates who have been lost through abortion. Regardless of motivation, all are committed to addressing this long-overlooked part of women’s lives, and they draw on the ritual resources of the Catholic tradition to do so.

Part I: Ritual Efficacy and Catholic Memorialization of the Dead—Historical and Contemporary Perspectives

Because pregnancy loss memorials are a recent development within American Catholicism, in this section I look to longstanding liturgical traditions as resources for understanding these emerging practices. Catholic funerals, prayers for the dead, and liturgical theology are among the resources to be explored. Pregnancy loss memorials build on the liturgical logic and structures characteristic of time-honored Catholic devotional and memorial practices. Thus, even in their novelty, they tap into feelings and habits familiar to American Catholics, thereby drawing their power to heal from the well-established matrix of Catholic ritual action.

A number of the memorial facilitators I interviewed told me that they developed their own pregnancy loss rites in response to calls from women looking for religious ways to address to their loss experiences. It seemed right to those women to turn to the church at a time of grief and death. Christian history shows that death memorials have been a part of the tradition since its foundations. Archaeological evidence drawn from early Christian burial sites reveals that many of the symbols and customs characteristic of contemporary funerals and memorials service have their roots in the practices of the earliest Christian communities. That said, there also have been significant changes over time in Catholic memorialization due to waxing and waning cultural and theological influences. In this
section, I review the major trends and themes that have shaped liturgies for the dead over course of Christian history, concentrating key shifts in theological thinking about the instrumental potential of memorial prayers to impact the soteriological fate of the deceased.

*Prayers for the Dead and Ritual Efficacy in Early and Medieval Christian History*

The early Christians had so much faith in the power of baptism to bring about new life in Christ that exhibiting too much grief or despair during a funeral rite was considered “unchristian.”¹ Megan McLaughlin, in her history of the evolution of Christian prayers for the dead, argues that trust in the efficacy of baptism was so strong among the early apologists that the idea that the dead might require ritual intervention from the living (via prayers or offerings) never crossed their minds.² As a result, “the rituals the church performed for the dead [were] primarily affirmatory in nature, rather than instrumental;”³ that is, they were not believed to impact the eschatological destiny of the dead simply because they were not needed to. They celebrated the salvation already brought about through baptism and the paschal mystery,⁴ but were not expected to bring about salvation for the deceased by means of their performance.

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³ Ibid. McLaughlin uses the term “instrumental” much like I use “ontological” to refer to changes in the postmortem situation of the dead effected through ritual.
By the time of Augustine, a more pessimistic tone began to prevail. It came to be held that the dead could benefit the prayers of the living. Not only that, the dead needed the help of the living, for only martyrs were assured salvation. Everyone else went to his or her death in some degree of sin and, therefore, all were in need of God’s forgiveness and mercy, beyond the grace already bestowed through baptism.\(^4\) During this period, the dominant theology shifted from a primarily ecclesial (church-focused) eschatology to an individual one, and with it, concern about the instrumental effectiveness of prayer grew as personal salvation seemed to be in jeopardy.\(^6\)

Following Augustine and moving into late antiquity, the themes of judgment and expiation began to take center stage as greater attention came to be paid to the individual’s personal worthiness of salvation. The emphasis was on saving the dead from the scourges of hell and purgatory—the very idea of which was undergoing its own process of development—rather than on celebrating their assured union with Christ.\(^7\) During this period, “confidence in God’s mercy toward the faithful departed steadily ceded to fear of divine judgment; [from] the hopeful going to sleep in Christ, to the dread of Christ the all-powerful judge.”\(^8\) As a result, funerals and memorials came to be seen more and more as the last chance opportunity to intercede on behalf of the deceased, and as McLaughlin

\(^4\) The “paschal mystery” refers to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.
\(^5\) Rutherford, 18.
\(^6\) Rutherford, 26; McLaughlin, 191.
\(^7\) Rutherford, 24-28.
\(^8\) Morrill, 232.
asserts, the instrumental function (or ontological efficacy) of prayer came to overshadow its affirmatory purpose definitively by the eighth century.\(^9\)

Continuing into the early medieval period, the belief developed that memorial practices produced an “automatic” benefit for the dead, “as if by performing so many prayers and Masses, the release of the soul from the purifying fire would be achieved, provided the deceased had earned the right to such help during life.”\(^10\) The funeral mass, in particular, came to be seen as the “most effective expression” of prayer offered on behalf of the dead as the locus for dealings with the dead shifted from the home to the church, which led to the increasing centrality of the \textit{requiem} mass within the burial process.

McLaughlin argues that early medieval prayers for the dead were enactments of a thick web of relationship that existed between living communities and their deceased members. She suggests that the prayers themselves were the primary source for the formation of the popular imagination about their efficacy, rather than theological sermons and treatises by Augustine and others like him. She notes that theological interpretations about the instrumental efficacy of prayers and rituals for the dead did not necessarily correspond to popular ideas about the benefits of their performance. In general, theological and doctrinal sources were more hesitant about promoting the instrumentality of prayers for securing benefits for the deceased, while popular belief confidently asserted

\(^9\) McLaughlin, 194.

\(^{10}\) Rutherford, 25. In \textit{ Consorting with Saints: Prayer for the Dead in Early Medieval France}, Megan McLaughlin points out that ideas about the instrumental efficacy of prayer for the dead was among the beliefs challenged during the Reformation. She writes, “Catholics, of course, asserted that prayer could liberate the dead from their purgatorial sufferings, while Protestants rejected the doctrine of purgation after death and denied that prayer had any effect at all on the condition of the dead in the next world;” McLaughlin, 10.
their effectiveness for easing the sufferings of souls in hell or for affecting God’s judgment of a soul.

As with so many other areas of medieval culture, Christian liturgical practices were revolutionized by the invention of the printing press. The increased ease of production and distribution of texts created the opportunity for greater standardization of rites across broad geographical areas. In the post-Tridentine period of the Counter-Reformation, this sort of universal standardization was precisely what Roman authorities sought. An example of this movement toward increased centralized control over rites is the liturgical manual, the Roman Ritual, promulgated by Pope Paul V in 1614. While the Roman Ritual expresses appreciation for local customs and traditions, it effectively homogenized Catholic liturgical practices by presenting its contents as the normative rites of the church. Consequently, according to Richard Rutherford, “Not only did the rite of burial in the Roman Ritual become the norm, but local rites were made to conform to that norm, with the result that liturgy was becoming a matter of correctly executing appropriate rites.”

The effect of this shift was that ritual efficacy became wholly dependent on the proper performance of specific rites, which had an impact on all ritual practices including funerals and prayers for the dead.

Ritual Efficacy in Contemporary Catholic Liturgical Rites and Prayers for the Dead

Jumping ahead to the 20th century, liturgical theologian Bruce Morrill, following Louis Marie Chauvet and others, sees this emphasis on the proper performance of rites as a step along the path toward the overly metaphysical and overly clericalist interpretation of

11 Rutherford, 94.
the liturgy and sacraments that dominated Catholic theology in the centuries leading up to the Second Vatican Council. In Morrill’s estimation, the journey to an inappropriately instrumental interpretation of the sacraments grew out of the jumbling of medieval metaphysical categories by later theologians. In particular, the manualist tradition of the 19th century privileged theological theory over practice as the source of the liturgy, which had the effect of diminishing the performative and symbolic power of Catholic ritual to a set of prescribed formulas that would produce grace. “Such formulas as instrumental cause and principal effect,” writes Morrill, “came to reduce each of the seven official sacraments to narrowly defined objectives and results focused upon the minimum of material and formulary needed to assure, canonically, that the imperceptible dispensation of grace had indeed occurred.”12 A consequence of this mechanistic approach to ritual was that it “cut off the divine presence and action from human bodily participation” and made it seem “as if Christ through his vicars were dispensing something of utilitarian value that can ‘get results’.”13

For Morrill, the liturgical reforms of Vatican II were a necessary corrective to the warped sacramental theology that had taken root in Catholic liturgical theory and practice.14 They focused attention on the liturgy as the source of renewal in Christian life and tempered what Morrill sees as excessive instrumentalism by retrieving some of the earliest Christian symbols and practices.15 Sacrosanctum concilium, the council’s Constitution

12 Morrill, 19.

13 Ibid., 17.

14 Ibid., 18.

15 Ibid., 233.
on the Sacred Liturgy, grew out of the liturgical reform movement that began in the 19th century. Limited reforms initiated by Pius XII and John XXIII before Vatican II would come to fruition in the work of the council, especially things like encouraging greater lay participation, reducing repetition in the mass, revising the process of Christian initiation, and simplifying the structure of rites.16

The conciliar text devoted relatively little specific attention to funerary and memorial practices, but the general reforms initiated by the council impacted all aspects of the ritual life of the church. On the subject of funerals, Sacrosanctum concilium said that the rite of Christian burial “should express more clearly the paschal character of Christian death, and should correspond more closely to the circumstances and traditions found in various regions.” This entailed de-emphasizing historically dominant death themes like judgment and purgation in order to stress the importance of the resurrection of Jesus for the life of the dead. It also instructed that a special funeral liturgy be designed for use in cases of infant death.17 These changes reflect a renewed intellectual concern for reconnecting Catholic funerals to the foundational doctrine and symbols of the church as well as greater pastoral commitment to attending to the needs of the living, not just those of the dead.

Broadly speaking, the reforms of Vatican II re-oriented the focus of sacramental theology within Catholic theological discourse. Greater attention started to be devoted to recognizing the presence of grace in all sacramental actions rather than simply looking for


17 Second Vatican Council, Sacrosanctum concilium (December 4, 1963), no. 81-82.
specific outcomes effected by specific prayers and rites. This shift was not meant to diminish the “real,” ontological efficacy claimed by the seven official sacraments of the church.\(^{18}\) Rather, it was intended to broaden the Catholic awareness of God’s work and engagement in all aspects of human life as well as the role of humans as active participants in the liturgy.\(^{19}\)

This re-orientation of sacramental theology impacted Catholic views regarding the purpose of funeral rites for the dead. Magisterial discussions of eschatology published since the time of the council continue to affirm the “validity and necessity of praying for the dead.” This assertion is premised on the principle *lex orandi, lex credendi*, “the law of prayer is the law of belief,” and is rooted post-conciliar Christian burial rites’ connection between the Eucharist, the paschal mystery, and the hope that the prayers of the living will benefit the deceased.\(^{20}\) Yet the precise effects of these prayers remain nebulous and muted compared to the priority given to the instrumental causality and ontological efficacy of prayers for the dead for most of Christian history leading up to Vatican II.\(^{21}\) Instead, greater stress is now placed on the effect sacramental rituals are meant to have on

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\(^{18}\) Whereas the sacraments are believed to have been “instituted by Christ and to bring about, i.e. effect, what they signify[,]” sacramentals are signs that point to, rather than effect, the grace of Christ. Distinctions between the sacraments (the seven official sacraments of the church) and sacramentals (objects or prayers that facilitate an encounter the grace of Christ) go back to the 13\(^{th}\) century CE. Patrick Bishop, SJ, “Sacramentals,” *The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship*, 1115.

\(^{19}\) Peter Fink, “Sacramental Theology After Vatican II,” in *The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship*, 1109-1110.


participants, that is, on the living. The liturgy is not “supernatural instrument delivering a guaranteed product” to ensure the salvation of the dead, but rather is a “revelatory sign engaging the participants in a way that changes their perception of themselves and their world.”

It orients individuals to the order of grace and brings about an “aware[ness] of oneself and others as the very site of the loving faithfulness and gracious mercy of God, in whatever condition we find ourselves.” In the language of my analysis, bringing about this sort of awareness can be interpreted as a form of epistemological efficacy. In the next section, I explore how pregnancy loss liturgies and other memorials attempt to create a similar awareness of grace for participants engaged in memorializing the unborn dead.

Part II: American Catholic Pregnancy Loss Memorials—Re-Narration and Epistemological Efficacy

In cases of illness and death, the Catholic church has rich and deeply rooted traditions in the sacrament of the sick and the Rite of Christian Burial for addressing what are considered some of life’s most difficult situations. But what about the other trying, if less visible, moments in life? Where is the communal recognition of the sad and painful dissolution of a marriage? Where is the blessing to reintegrate a soldier into a church community following service in a war? Where is the healing ceremony for victims of domestic violence? The same question can be asked for countless other circumstances of loss and brokenness. The lack of any sort of public acknowledgement of these losses could lead one to presume that these sorts of situations—occasions of distress and despair, affliction and alienation—are best dealt with in private.

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22 Morrill, 20.

23 Ibid., 17.
In *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World*, Serene Jones challenges the notion that such experiences are strictly personal, private matters. Rather, she argues, the community, the church, and God share in them, for neither God nor the church are strangers to trauma. Indeed, according to Jones, the Christian faith was born out of the interstices of trauma and grace in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, and reveals “the incredible insistence on love amid fragmented, unraveled human lives.”

Jones proposes that instead of suffering alone, the faith community engages in the individual's recovery and in the mending of a violent, fragmented world through the development of what she calls a “healing imagination.” She observes, “as human beings we constantly engage the world through organizing stories or habits of mind, which structure our thoughts. Our imagination simply refers to the thought stories that we live with and through which we interpret the world surrounding us.” In cases of trauma, the ability to imagine and narrate life stories in ways that are healthy and promote flourishing can be severely impaired. By developing a “healing imagination,” Jones suggests, victims, individual and communal, have the potential to “renarrate” their traumatic experiences within the larger context of the Christian narrative of grace. She writes,

> Though different strands of Christianity may form imaginations somewhat differently, there is a common imaginative landscape that most Christians inhabit. In that landscape agency, embodiment, diachronic time (the time of our real histories), coherence, and interrelation are central. A Christianly formed imagination thus tells stories about people who are agents in their own lives, with God-given grace to act, moving through concrete embodied history in time, coherently connected to their own pasts and to other people and to the good creation that sustains them.

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25 Ibid., 20.
This view of the role of the Christian narrative of grace differs greatly from the “rupture and disorder” of trauma narratives, which are characterized by “a loss of a sense of self, a breakdown in normal knowing and feeling, and a paralyzing lack of agency in the threat of the harm suffered.”

Bruce Morrill’s book, *Divine Worship and Human Healing: Liturgical Theology at the Margins of Life and Death* overlaps with Serene Jones’ work on trauma, though from the perspective of Catholic sacramental theology, in his emphasis on the power of the Christian story to impact how illness and affliction are experienced. Like Jones’ concept of imagination, “[n]arrative enables people to situate their experience of pain in a consoling, and at times empowering, company of voices, breaking the silence modernity has imposed on suffering.” For Morrill, this narrative is not simply a matter of story and imagination, but comes through the visible and tangible signs of Catholic liturgical practices and offers a “comprehensive sense of meaning” capable of responding those in need of healing. In short, it is not just about words and verbal expression; it is about ritual. In the face of “disorienting, alienating, and often life-threatening situation(s),” the liturgy and the sacraments, he explains, are “an encounter with the divine origin and final end of all creation, a real and nourishing foretaste of the fullness of life in the divine presence.”

Through story and ritual, grace penetrates wounds—physical, psychological, and spiritual—and gives a new way to imagine and to live amidst pain and fragmentation.

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26 Jones, 21.
27 Ibid., 19, 15.
28 Ibid., 55.
29 Ibid., 4.
Morrill’s perspective on suffering emerges in concert with reflections on the Catholic sacrament of the sick and Rite of Christian burial, and he deals with illness, pain and death in very broad terms. By contrast, Jones’ accounts of suffering are deeply personal and are rooted in the specific details her own as well as friends’ experiences of trauma. These traumas range from domestic abuse to witnessing a violent crime to beholding as a nation the attacks of September 11th, 2001. She shows that “just as the shattering effects of trauma are painfully particular to each person who suffers them, so the healing power of grace is specific to each imagination it soothes and heals.”

Among the “everyday traumas” Jones identifies is the suffering of women struggling with reproductive loss. Whether miscarriage, stillbirth, or the even less visible losses of infertility, experiences of reproductive loss are characterized by what Jones calls “the death of hope.” For many women, this grief is real and life altering, and yet socially, reproductive struggles are either cloaked in silence or ignored completely. Traditionally, neither churches nor feminists have attended to this often central, defining feature of a woman’s life. In Jones’ opinion, much of this silence is rooted in “the inability of feminists to think about this loss as real because of the constraints placed on our discourse by the abortion debate and by the failure of Christian communities to face what happens to a woman’s sense of identity when her body—her womb—becomes a living grave.”

30 Jones, 22.

31 Jones prefers the term “reproductive loss” to other similar terms for its ability to encompass infertility as well as problems during pregnancy.

32 Jones, 131.

33 Ibid., xiv.
Jones sets out to uncover a healing narrative capable of responding to the complex emotions and commitments that factor into reproductive loss grief. While recognizing that life is much messier than her neat categories imply, Jones brackets cases of abortion in her discussion of reproductive loss, and instead focuses on situations in which she says the “hoped-for child” does not come. She seeks feminist as well as theological resources for understanding the experiences of women devastated by an inability to bring forth life from their bodies despite a desire to do so. In doing so, she rejects looking to Mary, the mother of Jesus, as a healing narrative resource for addressing reproductive loss. That is because, despite Mary’s role as the Christian archetype of motherhood and the fact that she experienced the death of her son, reproductive loss is a wholly different experience than that of maternity and child loss. Because “the mother’s barrenness and her bodily disintegration are not at issue”\(^\text{34}\) in child loss, the grief it produces has a very different texture than when pregnancy fails, bodies betray, and children remain unborn.

Instead of focusing on the maternal Marian image, Jones looks for what she calls the “antimaternality,” for an image capable of addressing maternal loss. For this she turns to the experience of the Trinity in the death of Jesus in which “God takes this death into the depths of Godself.” Jones contends that when Jesus dies, “death...happens deep within God, not outside God but in the very heart—perhaps the womb of God.”\(^\text{35}\) She compares this experience to that of a woman in the midst of a miscarriage or stillbirth who “carries death within her...but she does not die.”\(^\text{36}\) It is a loss not only of another physical being, but also

\(^{34}\) Jones, 144.

\(^{35}\) Ibid., 148.

\(^{36}\) Ibid., 138.
of an imagined future. In the wake of feelings of both guilt and helplessness, it forces the re-imagination of one’s body and one’s plans, and it strikes at the core of one’s sense of self.

For the Trinity, miscarriage becomes an opportunity for redemption, and trauma is transformed through grace. For women affected by reproductive loss, however, their suffering should not be misunderstood as being in any way redemptive. Rather, in drawing a comparison between the Godhead and women who struggle to conceive and give birth, Jones strives to establish a bond rooted in the shared experience of maternal loss. The image of the miscarrying Trinity addresses reproductive loss specifically and goes beyond the meaningful, if generic, image of a compassionate God who suffers with humanity in all its struggles. It is “an image of God ‘standing with’...the woman ravaged by grief at the loss of her hoped-for children.”

According to Jones, knowing that God stands in solidarity with those affected by reproductive loss allows for the development of a healing imagination and permits grace to break into the innermost spaces of hurt and isolation.

*Catholic Pregnancy Loss Rituals and Memorials Today*

Serene Jones’ work explores theologically how experiences of pregnancy loss can be interpreted. Her account of the Trinity experiencing death within its very being in the dying of Christ, while moving and theologically insightful, is significant for its intellectual rather than its pragmatic contribution to addressing pregnancy loss. In *Trauma and Grace*, Jones recounts a story of how on a rainy day, in the wake of her own failed pregnancy, she was called by friend who was in the midst of miscarrying for a fourth time. She tells of how

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37 Jones, 146.
in their grief and confusion, they longed for more than just a conceptual or intellectual way to understand their loss. She writes,

What we yearned for was more basic. We wanted images, a drama, a story, a vivid language that could draw together our strange experience in the rain and the faith and feminism, which have so profoundly formed us. What we sought, I believe, was the barest outlines of theological, visual poetry. We needed a form or a genre of knowing that, crossing the multiple borders of our complex lives, could give meaningful shape to this particular event.38

In the remainder of this section, I examine new Catholic pregnancy loss memorial practices and how in many ways they attempt to fill the gap Jones identified in the midst of her own suffering. While Jones’ notion of re-narration implies a discursive response to the trauma experiences she identifies, her reflections on her own experience of pregnancy loss call out for a more embodied response that goes beyond literal, verbal discourse. I suggest that the new “genre of knowing” she seeks is manifested ritually in Catholic pregnancy loss memorials and their potential to be epistemologically efficacious. The memorials examined below create and enact the healing imagination Jones proposes in order to re-frame loss experiences within the broader Christian narrative of grace and reconciliation. They employ the Catholic sacramental imagination, like that extolled by Morrill, to address situations of tremendous loss and fragmentation. By bringing the Catholic ritual resources to bear on pregnancy loss, these memorials have the potential to transform how memorial participants understand and relate to their own loss experiences. In contrast to discursive argument, ritual allows tension and ambiguity to be embraced rather than clarified. This feature of ritual is particularly important in the case of pregnancy loss memorialization since it is an area in which complexities—theological, ethical, emotional, and political, to name just a few—abound.

38 Jones, 129.
In the absence of an official ritual for addressing miscarriage, stillbirth, and abortion, individuals, and organizations have taken it upon themselves to develop a meaningful Catholic response to the issue. Although Catholic acts of pregnancy loss memorialization are not yet pervasive in the United States, there is an increasing awareness of the issue within Catholic communities, and widespread efforts are being made to draw on the rich symbolic and ritual resources of the Catholic tradition to promote healing for those suffering from miscarriage, stillbirth, and abortion losses. These efforts bring hidden pregnancy losses to light and bring the long-standing Catholic sacramental imagination to bear on experiences that historically have fallen outside the ritual purview of the church.

Informal conversations with American Catholics quickly reveal that most are unfamiliar with Catholic pregnancy loss rites. This is understandable considering the memorials developed only within the last few decades and that these practices are still far from ubiquitous. Even the very possibility of post-abortion rites seems unfathomable to many familiar with the church’s stalwart stance against abortion. To the individuals and groups developing Catholic post-abortion services, however, this latter concern is a fundamental misunderstanding of their mission. Rather, organizations like Project Rachel and Rachel’s Vineyard understand their work as supporting the anti-abortion position of the Catholic Church. Their mission is to provide an opportunity for reflection and reconciliation for women who have, in their view, suffered the trauma of abortion. They see their healing rituals as in line with centuries of Catholic memorial practices, which they draw on in the development of their own rites. The same goes for rites developed to address the less controversial issues of spontaneous miscarriage and stillbirth.
Based on my research, I discern four main types of pregnancy loss memorialization.

The first type is the integration of the theme of pregnancy loss into the mainstream, typical Catholic mass on either a large or small scale. These masses can be one-time or recurring events, and they frequently include miscarriage, stillbirth, and abortion together as the special focus of the liturgy. Masses like these that I will discuss here were undertaken by pastors in response to inquiries from women who have experienced pregnancy losses.

The second type of memorialization includes feminist liturgical rites aimed at commemorating pregnancy losses and supporting abortion decisions. I will discuss two examples of this sort of liturgy. The first comes from Catholic feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether’s 1985 book, *Women-Church*. The second was developed more recently by Diann Neu, co-founder of *Water: Women’s Alliance for Theology, Ethics, and Ritual* in Silver Spring, Maryland, just outside of Washington, D.C. Both Ruether’s and Neu’s rites are included books of feminist liturgies designed to honor life-changing events in women’s lives (e.g., menstruation, domestic violence, menopause, divorce, widowhood).

The third category of memorialization includes public monuments, memorials, or shrines. These structures can be found throughout the United States. As part of my research, I interviewed two of the memorial facilitators (one priest and one lay pastoral associate) at the Patron of the Unborn memorial at the Shrine of St. Joseph in Santa Cruz, California. I also visited the Memorial of Mourning in Naperville, Illinois, which is a jointly sponsored project of the anti-abortion organization Victims of Choice and the local chapter of the Catholic Knights of Columbus, and interviewed the woman behind the memorial’s design and construction.
Finally, the fourth major form of pregnancy loss memorialization is programming sponsored by Project Rachel, the main Catholic post-abortion healing ministry in the U.S. With diocesan affiliates across the country, Project Rachel is a network of clerical and lay ministers engaged in providing spiritual and psychological counseling for women and men who have been involved with abortion in some way. They also host retreats throughout the country in conjunction with a related organization, Rachel’s Vineyard. In researching this part of the project, I participated in a post-abortion ministry training program led by the founder of Rachel’s Vineyard, Theresa Burke. I also obtained educational and promotional materials for Project Rachel leaders and post-abortion ministers published by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. These sources reflect a genuine commitment to helping women heal from traumatic abortion experiences as well as commitment to the anti-abortion message inherent in many Catholic pregnancy loss healing ministries.

*The Miscarriage Mass*

An early example of an individual priest proactively responding to pregnancy loss can be found in Thomas Turner’s short article, “A Rite for Miscarriage,” published in 1987. In the article Turner writes, “A child who is lost during pregnancy is grieved by the entire family, but especially by the mother. In many cases, the family has already named the child. Because this lost child is never directly seen by the family and friends, it is often

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presumed that the loss is not that significant. This is a false presumption.”40 Turner’s article details a liturgy he developed in order to address and rectify this presumption.

The article and the rite it details grew out of a late night telephone call Turner received a year or two earlier. In one of his first years as a diocesan priest in Kansas City, Missouri, Turner received a call from a woman named Mary who was at a local hospital. Mary explained that she had just had a miscarriage, and she was wondering if the Catholic church had any sort of liturgy or memorial service to honor miscarriages. Caught a bit off guard by the question, Turner replied that he knew of no such liturgy, he apologized, and the conversation ended. The next day Turner recounted his conversation with Mary to a religious sister who worked at his same parish. After listening to Turner’s story, the sister replied, “Next time you get a call like that, you make one [a liturgy] up.”41

So that is exactly what Turner did. First, he placed an announcement in the parish bulletin saying that in two weeks time, a mass would be held to recognize “pregnancies that did not come to term.” Though the request for such a service that Turner initially received from Mary only referred to miscarriage, he intentionally left the wording of the announcement open so that it could include abortion as well.

As Turner prepared for the special mass, he set out to model it after the Catholic funeral liturgy with minor changes wherever appropriate. He chose readings that were designated for use in children’s funerals, and he altered the standard funeral prayers to make them fit the particular circumstances of memorializing pregnancy losses. Turner

40 Turner, 18.

41 Thomas Turner, interview by author, Kansas City, MO, August 26, 2010. Turner is no longer a priest.
also asked a couple from the parish who he knew had suffered a miscarriage to reflect on their experience before the congregation.

On the day of the mass, Turner arranged the church as he would have for a funeral liturgy. Instead of having a casket, however, he placed a long rectangular table draped with a funeral pall at the front of the sanctuary. In preparing for the liturgy, Turner had planned to have several votive candles placed on the altar rail still present at his suburban church. He intended to invite those in attendance to place the candles on the pall-covered table, one for each child that they had lost. He initially planned to have a small number of votives available, but again, the sister working at his parish warned him that would be surprised by the number of people in attendance and by the number of losses they had experienced. In the end, he placed 100 votives there just to be safe.

As the appointed time for the liturgy approached, the church filled with women seated alone and with couples sitting together, exceeding the usual attendance of the Saturday morning mass by about 50 people. Turner opened the mass by saying that the liturgy was intended “to recognize the presence of their lost children as members of our community.” He did this not only to acknowledge the grief and sense of loss that those in attendance felt, but also to remind those present that “the Catholic tradition has always emphasized that its community consists of both living and dead members, that is, the community of the saints.” In Turner’s view “affirming these two realities—the full church membership of these unborn children and the mothers’ pain—is at the heart of this ritual.” The prayers and petitions he developed for use during the mass all reflected these goals.

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42 The pall is the large sacred cloth that is placed over the coffin at a Catholic funeral mass. Today, palls are typically white in color to call to mind the baptism of the deceased.

43 Turner, 18.
He asked those who were there to commemorate pregnancy losses to take the candles from the altar rail and place them on the pall-draped table in order to represent children that had died in the womb. During my interview with Turner in 2010, twenty-five years after the original liturgy, he was still struck by the number of women and couples that came forward to gather the votive candles from the altar rail. He recalled that the candles came to cover the table completely and that many women were grabbing three or four votives at a time to commemorate multiple pregnancies that had ended in loss. Turner had incorporated this element into the rite very deliberately, wanting to make those in attendance active participants in the liturgy. He explained in our interview that it also served a secondary purpose. As women and couples came forward to take the candles, they began to see one another doing the same thing. Consequently, not only were their losses then made public, but they also became shared losses. It showed that others shared in the experience of pregnancy loss, and each individual loss came to be seen as a loss for the community. In addition, bringing the votives forward to the pall-covered table made it “the symbolic locus of the souls of the lost children.”

Turner went on to sprinkle the table and candles with holy water (just as the coffin is sprinkled during the Catholic funeral rite) saying that the water was meant to bless, not to cleanse, the spirits of the “most innocent” children. At the end of the mass, he returned to the table, this time with incense, to emulate the final funeral commendation by symbolically “sending up” the souls of the lost children to God. He also invited the congregation to extend their hands and arms (a customary Catholic gesture of blessing) as he prayed, “Children, may you share your gifts of life, happiness and peace with each of us

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44 Turner, 19.
as we share our pains and struggles of life with you.” When the service was over, he says, he received many “tear-eyed ‘thank you’s’.”

According to Turner, the mass was intended as an opportunity for healing and closure, particularly for those who had never felt as though they could mourn their pregnancy losses in the past. When I asked if attending this sort of liturgy should be a one-time event or an ongoing practice, he said he thought it would only need to take place once, just like there is only one funeral for a person. At the same time, he believes liturgies of this sort should become a part of the church’s regular practice so that they can be done on request (like a funeral) “instead of playing catch up” by offering communal services like the one he developed.

During the course of my research, I had the opportunity to observe a pregnancy loss liturgy first-hand, also in Kansas City, Missouri, that was based on the rite Thomas Turner developed. A few alterations were made based on the preferences of the presiding priest, Mark Gary, whom I also had the chance to interview before the liturgy took place.

Designated the “Memorial Mass for our Unborn Children,” this liturgy was held on January 1\textsuperscript{st}, the feast of the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God, and just after December 28\textsuperscript{th}, the Feast of the Holy Innocents. The timing of the service was both deliberate and coincidental. Gary found significance in the fact that the mass was being held so close to these two particular days in the liturgical calendar, one honoring motherhood and the other commemorating the deaths of innocent children. Nevertheless, he attributed the real timing of the event to the fact that recently seven people (4 women, 3 men) in a span

\begin{itemize}
\item Turner, 19.
\item I have changed the name of this priest.
\end{itemize}
of 2 weeks had told him about their past abortion experiences. He was also aware of a parish family who had lost a baby at 38 weeks gestation in recent months. For these reasons, Gary felt as though the time was right for the parish community to recognize these losses and to try to bring healing to those suffering from them. The fact that this special liturgy overlapped with the Solemnity of Mary holy day of obligation (a day when all Catholics are supposed to attend mass) made it difficult to discern precisely how many of those in attendance were there for the purpose of memorializing a pregnancy loss. My best estimation is that of the 65 attendees, at least half were there because of the special focus of the mass.

Before the service began, an announcement was made about ways to personalize and take part in the liturgy. Following the model of Turner’s rite, a pall-covered table had been placed at the front of the church where the coffin normally would rest during a funeral, and those who were commemorating lost pregnancies were invited to place candles on the table in honor of each loss. Around a dozen attendees took advantage of this and brought forward candles. Attendees were also invited to write the names of lost children on cards provided at the church entrances. Small and purple, these cards had a picture of hands holding up a heart and had the words, “[Name] is remembered today in the gifts at Offertory.” After being personalized, the cards were gathered in the “basket of remembrance,” which was later brought forward to the altar along with the bread and wine before the Eucharistic prayer. When I had the chance to look at these cards after the conclusion of the mass, I found 23 cards placed inside. About half of the cards identified personal names (e.g. Thomas, Marie Ann Martin) and some even listed dates going back to the 1970s. Most of the other cards referred to specific losses but without individual names.
(e.g., Baby Girl Williams, Two Johnson Babies). One of the cards even listed “Anderson babies 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10 lost through miscarriage.”

The liturgy’s scripture readings, petitions, and prayers all focused on the theme of pregnancy loss (rather than on the Solemnity of Mary), and the sermon combined doctrinal and pastoral insights the subject. For instance, Gary reassured those in attendance that their lost children would be included in God’s plan of salvation even though they died without being baptized. He also described pregnancy as a unique relationship that embodies ultimate intimacy and the sense of presence, and thus, grieving the loss of that relationship is natural.

Some of the issues Turner addressed during his liturgy and subsequent article were taken up in this mass as well, especially the idea that the lost children were still a part of the church community. The Eucharistic prayer in particular emphasized this point. During the blessing over the bread and wine, Gary asked God to accept the spirits of the innocent children and gave thanks for their short lives. He prayed that the Eucharist would strengthen the bonds between the living and the dead and would make the unborn present as lost members of the parish family. Adding poignant and visceral quality to this petition was the sound of a crying baby spreading over the congregation from the back of the sanctuary.

Like Turner’s rite, this liturgy ended with a traditional funeral commendation using holy water and incense over the table of candles representing losses. Gary explained that the sprinkling of holy water represents new life and that the incense represents prayers.

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47 Each of these names has been changed from those written on the original remembrance cards.

48 The prayer said over the bread and wine during the Catholic mass.
rising to God. In times of loss, confusion, and mystery, he said, we turn to symbolic action to deal with things for which we have no words or answers. Ritual action, he said, fits grief and loss into the broader context of God’s work and the cycle of life and death. For the final blessing, the presider invited the community to extend their hands in blessing toward the table with the candles representing lost children.

The language of the liturgy focused mostly on miscarriage rather than on abortion. Though Gary mentioned abortion in passing, he did not draw any special attention to it and stood in contrast to how focused on abortion he was during our interview a few days before the liturgy. In our conversation before the mass, his references to abortion were somewhat paradoxical. On the one hand, he said that the liturgy was not meant as a statement against abortion or as an opportunity to condemn women who had had abortions. On the other hand, he spoke in a manner that implied great disgust when discussing a particular woman in the parish who had an abortion for health reasons, even calling her a “flit” and “spoiled brat” and making reference to her “lack of generosity” and “irresponsibility.”

As I noted in Chapter 2 in the summary of performance theory, it is the power of ritual performances to “create the very social realities they enact” that sets them apart from other sorts of activities, like theater performances or discursive communication. 49 The pregnancy loss liturgies do this, first, by creating a community of support for those who have suffered miscarriages, stillbirths, and abortions. As Linda Layne suggests, American social reticence and uncertainty about how to address pregnancy losses has left

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women feeling isolated and confused during times of great sadness and suffering. Turner in particular sought to recognize and respond to these feelings during his liturgy. By inviting women to participate in the liturgy by bringing forward candles representing their losses, the ritual acknowledged lost pregnancies and created a community of shared sorrow rooted in shared experience. Additionally, in their liturgies Turner and Gary sought to reassure women who had suffered pregnancy losses that their lost children remained a part of the church community. But in doing so, they did more than just verbally affirm the general Catholic teaching about the communion of the saints. Rather, the liturgical performance endowed absent prenates with a sense of presence and produced the community between the living and the dead that the priests sought to affirm. I suggest that these ritual enactments of a pregnancy loss community of support has the potential to be epistemologically efficacious, meaning that it has the ability to enact a new sort of “knowing” among ritual participants and the broader community that transforms the alienation and brokenness of loss in order bring about healing.

Feminist Liturgies

Catholic writings on the subject of pregnancy loss memorials are relatively few and far between, particularly scholarly treatments of the subject. An exception to this is the work of Rosemary Radford Ruether. In Women-Church (1985), Ruether lays out an argument for the importance of rituals that attend to the specific life experiences of women. She offers her own examples of the forms such rituals could take, including one healing rite for after an abortion and another for after a miscarriage or stillbirth.
Ruether’s “Rite of Healing from an Abortion” begins with a communal prayer that expresses not only sadness but also anger over conflicts “between life and life, between the affirmation of a potential new life which was barely begun and the ongoing life that we must nurture and sustain.” It acknowledges that we live in a world of imperfect circumstances and are often forced to make imperfect choices. Yet, it affirms the abortion decision of the woman who is the central ritual actor, saying, “we don’t want to pretend that this choice was easy or simple, without pain and hurt.” The woman sits at the center of a circle of women, all friends and supporters. Following the communal prayer, she has the opportunity to reflect on her abortion decision and on her plans moving forward. Then, the other women move forward to lay hands on her, saying together, “Be healed sister, be whole!”

Ruether’s “Rite of Healing from a Miscarriage or a Stillbirth” also centers on a prayer to be read by or on behalf of the community gathered round the couple that has suffered the pregnancy loss. It identifies the mother and father of the lost child by name and honors the anticipation, hopes, and preparations that the pregnancy gave rise to. It laments, “We are left with empty arms and an empty heart where the thoughts of this coming child had been.” The prayer then asks questions directed toward the God of “life and new life” about how such a tragedy as the death of a hoped-for child could happen. “Should we be angry at you, the source of life, who have deprived us of this life? Or are you, too, subject to the insufficiency and limitations of life as you struggle to bring new

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51 Ibid., 162.
beings to birth?" Ruether, 163.

53 Ibid., 162.

54 Ibid., 4.
Catholic church. She is involved in the Women-Church convergence, and as a feminist liturgist, she has developed countless rites for use in that community and for any others who might find them beneficial. Neu opens her book *Women’s Rites: Feminist Liturgies for Life’s Journey* (2003) with the statement, “Women worldwide are challenging old rituals and calling for liturgies that mark positively women’s rites of passage. We are creating women’s rites for life’s journeys. Needs unimagined in earlier centuries challenge existing liturgies and call for the creation of new ones.”55 Her book reflects on the relationship between feminist theologies and liturgies, and it offers over twenty rituals created to “honor women’s worth and mark positively women’s life transitions from womb to grave.”56

One chapter of *Women’s Rites* is devoted entirely to rituals aimed at supporting women in their reproductive choices, which the text says all women face at some point in their lives. Whether the choice is to conceive, to adopt, or to terminate a pregnancy, the rites involve the woman (or couple) making the decision as well as friends who promise to stand with them in whatever choice they make. The rite, “You Are Not Alone: Seeking Wisdom to Decide,” is for women facing unplanned pregnancies and trying to decide if they should carry the pregnancy to term. It begins with the prayer, “Gracious and loving Wisdom Sophia, fill N. (name of the woman) with wisdom that she may know clearly the choice that she needs to make. Bless her and comfort her with you Spirit.”57 The chapter also includes a liturgy titled, “A Difficult Decision: Affirming a Choice for Abortion.” Neu


56 Ibid., 275.

57 Ibid., 218.
writes that the rite “affirms that a woman has made a good and holy decision to have an abortion.” The prayer within the rite says, “We are saddened that the life circumstances of N. (woman’s name, and if appropriate, her partner’s name), are such that she has had to choose to terminate her pregnancy. Such a choice is never simple. It is filled with pain and hurt, with anger and questions, but also with integrity and strength.”58 The liturgy employs oil—an ancient Christian symbol of healing used in the sacrament of the sick—to anoint the woman at the center of the rite. It serves as balm for the wound of the abortion and for the circumstances that led to the abortion decision.

A third liturgy created by Neu relating to pregnancy loss is called “Tears from the Womb: Mourning a Lost Pregnancy.” Neu explains in her introduction to the rite that she has helped women perform it immediately after a pregnancy loss or, as is more often the case, years after a loss in which the grief was ignored or silenced. The rite opens with a “call to mourn.” It acknowledges the feelings of the woman who had been anticipating a hoped-for child, and it affirms that the loss impacts the whole community, not just the mother. Friends and family gathered then affirm their commitment to their loved one, saying, “[Name], I support you in your grief.” A single candle is lit “in memory of the little one we will never know,” and then a second candle is lit in remembrance of all the women who have suffered pregnancy losses. The central prayer of the rite addresses the “God of Our Ancestors,” stating that the group is gathered to weep and mourn together. “Our beloved [Name] was anticipating the birth of a child into her life...She had imagined their future together.” The prayer continues, “Yet the seed of life could not grow in her. Now

58 Ibid., 221-222.
her womb is empty and her heart is aching. Her yearnings to cradle new life, to sing hushed lullabies, and to welcome a little one will not be fulfilled at this time.”

The ritual guide Neu developed includes 3 readings that could potentially be included as part of the liturgy. They draw on the loss experiences of women writers to affirm the grief of the women at the heart of Neu’s rite. One is a feminist rendering of Psalm 88 (“Oh God, I cry to You day and night! Will you listen to my prayer?). The other two are writings from women who experienced pregnancy losses. “Sharon's Legacy,” a poem composed by Dottie Ward-Wimmer, explores what the author has come to understand about her loss since the stillbirth of her daughter twenty years earlier. A short theological reflection by Cynthia Lapp recounts how she was given new insight into the Christian story when “[her] body had been broken, [her] blood poured out” through a miscarriage at twelve weeks gestation.

“Tears from the Womb” concludes with a final blessing as the central ritual actor is invited to wash her hands a “symbol of letting go of what may have been or of wanting to let go.” It ends with the blowing out of the commemorative candle as the “would-have-been parent” speaks the words, “Goodbye, my little one, until we meet again.”

Ruether’s and Neu’s rites reflect the commitment of some contemporary feminists to honor women’s reproductive decisions as well as experiences of loss. Their rites are focused on the woman who suffered the loss, rather than on the lost prenate, and they

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59 Neu, 241-242.

60 Cynthia Lapp, “This is My Broken Body,” quoted in Neu, 244.

61 Neu, 246-247.
affirm women’s feelings and choices regardless of the circumstances of the pregnancy loss. As Neu writes of her “Tears from the Womb” liturgy, “This rite of mourning is meant to help cope with the loss of a pregnancy. It acknowledges pregnancies that have ended in sorrow. It makes the loss real.” As we saw in the introduction to this dissertation, not all American feminists have embraced pregnancy loss as a feminist issue out of concern that doing so would jeopardize their support of women’s reproductive rights. Working through the lens of ritual, Ruether and Neu demonstrate that these concerns need not be at odds with each other.

Ruether’s and Neu’s rites draw on a framework of Christian liturgical symbols and practices to create a meaningful ritual experience that resonates with the ritual sense of participants. Yet as feminist liturgies dealing with miscarriage and abortion, they push against the traditional character of that framework, incorporating new themes, symbols, practices, and voices into the ritual process. Beyond the ritual framework, the power of these liturgies is linked to the performative speech they embody. Prayers and pledges like, “Be healed, sister, be whole” and “I support you in your grief” are not meant simply as communal affirmations, but rather are intended to effect (or bring about) the feelings of support they pledge, both in the central ritual actor and the other ritual participants. They create a new context for understanding pregnancy loss as a loss for the community. They also seek to displace feelings of grief, regret, and uncertainty about one’s loss (which can accompany both intentional and spontaneous losses) with a narrative of support that is enacted through the liturgical performance. 

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62 Neu, 240.
On the occasion of the dedication of the Shrine of the Unborn at the Church of Holy Innocents in midtown Manhattan, Cardinal John O'Connor, archbishop of New York, recounted his own doubts that “the Church at large has fully appreciated the loss of babies through involuntary miscarriage and the loss of babies who are stillborn.”

The shrine is one of several physical memorials dedicated the unborn that have sprung up across the country over the course of the last few decades. These sites are part of a diffuse movement of grassroots efforts by Catholic organizations (parishes, dioceses, and other independent groups) to recognize the lives of those who die before birth and to call them to the attention of the public.

The Shrine of the Unborn at the Church of Holy Innocents was dedicated on the Feast of the Holy Innocents, December 28th, 1993. A small space within the larger church, its focal point is a “Book of Life” in which the names of lost children are written and remembered. On either side of the book sits statues of the Holy Family—Mary on her own and Joseph holding the Christ Child—and on the wall above it is a prayer and picture of what also looks like the child Jesus, this time in a womb-like setting. The Church of the Holy Innocents spells out the goals of the shrine on its website. It says,

Often children who have died before birth have no grave or headstone, and sometimes not even a name. At The Church of The Holy Innocents, we invite you to name your child(ren) and to have the opportunity to have your baby’s name inscribed in our "BOOK OF LIFE". Here, a candle is always lit in their memory. All day long people stop to pray. On the first Monday of every month, our 12:15pm Mass is celebrated in honor of these children and for the comfort of their families. We pray that you will find peace in knowing that your child(ren) will be remembered at the Shrine and honored by all who pray here.

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For those unable to visit the shrine in person, the website contains an electronic form through which the names of the unborn can be submitted to be added to the Book of Life. Upon request, a Certificate of Life with the name of the child is emailed to whomever submits the initial request. As the name suggests, the Shrine of the Unborn focuses on lost prenates, and through the act of memorializing the unborn, it endeavors to bring healing to grieving women and family members.

Though the use of the term “unborn” in some ways allies the Shrine with the rhetoric of the anti-abortion movement, the overall tone of the Shrine and the language of Cardinal O’Connor at the its dedication demonstrate that abortion is not the sole focus of their memorial. By contrast, abortion figures much more prominently in most other Catholic shrines and monuments dedicated to memorializing pregnancy loss. Indeed, in the last two decades, several monuments have arisen across the country for which opposition to abortion is the focus of their mission. Technically miscarriage and stillbirth are memorialized at many of these sites as well, but spontaneous losses typically are not given with the same priority as abortion. Two examples of this are the Oblates of St. Joseph’s Patron of the Unborn memorial in Santa Cruz, California and the Memorial of Mourning in Naperville, Illinois.

On the Feast of St. Joseph, March 19th, 2001, the Shrine of St. Joseph, Guardian of the Redeemer in Santa Cruz dedicated a special memorial on its grounds. The memorial declares Joseph, the husband of Mary, the Patron of the Unborn, and was established to honor lost pregnancies and to bring healing to those suffering from them. Visually, the

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Patron of the Unborn memorial is both striking and beautiful. The focus of the monument is a 7-feet tall, seated bronze statue of St. Joseph holding what is meant to be a six-month-old fetus in his hands. The fetus’ arms are stretched out as reaches for a light hanging high above the head of St. Joseph. The light represents the light of Christ as Joseph shepherds the prenate toward God. Next to the statue of Joseph is a bench where visitors may sit to reflect or pray, and a low wall surrounding the statue space helps maintain a sense of privacy and quiet. The wall itself is also part of the memorial; mounted along the outside are small stone plaques engraved with the names of prenates commemorated there. In addition, Book of Life containing the names of lost prenates is housed at the memorial for those unable or disinclined to purchase a stone for the wall.\(^{65}\)

A detailed description of the memorial and its purpose is given by Larry Toschi, OSJ, on the Shrine’s website. The description explains that while Joseph has long been understood as the protector of the child Jesus, he also deserves recognition for his role in protecting and accepting Jesus even before he was born. The Christian gospels tell of how Joseph wed Mary even though she was carrying a child that was not biologically his own and of how he cared for Mary and Jesus while the Christ Child was still in Mary’s womb. By looking to Joseph, the website says, “we may learn something about even the earliest stages of parenthood, prior to birth.”\(^{66}\) The memorial is open to any individuals who wish

\(^{65}\) Currently, the suggested donation for having a commemorative stone placed on the wall is $300.

\(^{66}\) Oblates of St. Joseph, “Patron of the Unborn,” http://www.osjoseph.org/osj/patron-unborn.php (Accessed November 15, 2010). The website continues, “No one can be a better defender of the innocent, helpless life in the womb. No one is a better model of fatherhood to parents of pre-born children. No one can more fittingly aid in the process of healing and reconciliation for those who grieve and agonize over having committed the sin
to commemorate a pregnancy loss, regardless of whether the loss came about naturally or due to abortion. It is clear from the online description, however, that the site is focused primarily on “post-abortion healing and reconciliation.” For example, the website stresses that the model of Joseph caring for the unborn Jesus is “so crucial in this era of widespread abortion, denial of the humanity of the child in the womb and the consequent denial of parenthood.” The importance of unborn human life is reiterated throughout the website’s description, and the monument’s lifelike image of the fetus Joseph cradles helps make the connection between preborns and newborns quite visceral.

In the process of researching the Patron of the Unborn memorial, I had the opportunity to interview the lay pastoral volunteer, Susan Vega, who helps run the memorial as well as the priest who founded it, Larry Toschi. Vega has been a volunteer at the Shrine of St. Joseph for ten years, and typically she deals with visitors or parishioners who wish to enter a name in the Book of Life or have a stone dedicated to a lost child. She put me in contact with Toschi, whom she called “the visionary” behind the memorial.

During our interview, Vega described the regular activities of the memorial. She told me that most visitors to memorial learned about the Patron of the Unborn through the Shrine’s website, pamphlets, or at one of the four parishes run by the Oblates of St. Joseph in California. In addition to the physical memorial and Book of Life, the Shrine holds a special mass each month as part of their post-abortion and pregnancy loss ministry. It is at these masses that new commemorative stones are blessed and dedicated before being placed on the memorial wall. In the ten years since the memorial’s construction, approximately twenty commemorative stones have been dedicated and roughly two

of abortion. No one is a better image for women who have been hurt by men unwilling to accept fatherhood of the child they engendered.”
hundred names have been entered in the Book of Life. In Vega’s experience, people attend these special masses and visit the memorial because it gives them a chance to remember and honor pregnancy losses in a religious way that was not available to them in the past. For some memorial participants, this means that they attend the pregnancy loss mass and visit the Patron of the Unborn site on a regular basis. For others, they visit once, maybe even dedicate a commemorative stone, and then never return again.  

Vega told me that the Patron of the Unborn memorial and Book of Innocents are both part of the broader pro-life ministry of the Shrine and its parish, which takes part in annual pro-life activities such as the Walk for Life and 40 Days for Life. They even had the founder of Project Rachel, Vicki Thorn, come to speak to the community at one point. At the same time, Vega insisted that their pro-life ministry is very conscientious about not letting their opposition to abortion translate into placing blame on women who have terminated pregnancies.  

Larry Toschi, the priest behind the creation of the Patron of the Unborn site, also sees the memorial as part of the broader commitment of the Oblates of St. Joseph to the Catholic pro-life cause. In my interview with him, he identified post-abortion ministry as a big need in the American Catholic church today. He said that women are frequently told that abortion will be the solution to their problems when in reality, it often leads to other difficulties for them. They are told that the embryo or fetus is not really human life, and

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67 This mirrors the habits of regular and occasional visitors to *mizuko* memorials in Tokyo.

68 More information about each of these events can be found on the websites, walkforlifewc.com and 40daysforlife.com.

69 Susan Vega, phone interview by author, November 24, 2010.
they go against their “motherly instincts” by having an abortion. In the end, they are left wounded and feeling very alone. He explained that he has witnessed this time and again with women who come to confession seeking healing and forgiveness for an abortion that took place decades ago.\textsuperscript{70}

In addition to relating the Patron of the Unborn memorial to the broader pro-life message of the church, during the course of our conversation Toschi endeavored to connect the mission and form of the memorial to traditional theological beliefs as well. Many of the themes he raised overlap with the memorial’s online description, which Toschi authored when he was still a priest at the shrine.\textsuperscript{71} Giving voice to the theological imagination of prenatal life explored in Chapter 4, he explained that his inspiration for the memorial came from the role that important role Joseph plays in the gospels in protecting Mary and the unborn Jesus on the journey to Bethlehem, and then later, in shielding the child Jesus from Herod’s slaughter of the Holy Innocents. He also referenced statements about the destiny of those who die before birth by John Paul II and in the International Theological Commission document, “The Hope of Salvation for Infants Who Die Without Being Baptized.” Toschi told me he trusts the unborn are taken up in “the merciful hands of God” after death, and thus, the prayers said at the Patron of the Unborn memorial are aimed at providing healing and reconciliation for women and families, not at interceding on behalf of the souls of lost prenates.

In the text on the Patron of the Unborn website, Toschi goes into detail about how this healing comes about through memorializing a pregnancy loss. Focusing on cases of

\textsuperscript{70} Larry Toschi, OSJ, phone interview by author, January 21, 2011.

\textsuperscript{71} Since then, he has moved on to serve at another parish run by the Oblates of St. Joseph in Bakersfield, California.
abortion, he writes, “The process of spiritual healing involves coming out of denial and facing the reality of the humanity of her child. In order to reconcile with God and herself, she must reconcile with her child. Insofar as she is able, she must exercise now the parental role she had denied, and for which her motherly heart aches.” First and foremost, this involves naming the lost child. “Once the child has been named,” Toschi continues, “he (or she) may be memorialized, giving the parent a concrete, physical manner of honoring and remembering the child. The memorial validates her grief and gives her permission to grieve. That unique bond between parent and child may begin to grow.” Moreover, through the dedication of commemorative stones at the Patron of the Unborn memorial, “the children who were never buried or remembered anywhere now have a place where markers testify to the fact that they were individual live human beings brought into existence on this earth.” The process of acknowledging the prenates lost through abortion, as well as through miscarriage and stillbirth, is at the heart of the mission of the Patron of the Unborn memorial. Doing so turns the lost prenate into a beloved child and transform the woman who suffered the loss into its mother.

The Oblates of St. Joseph’s Patron of the Unborn memorial in Santa Cruz is at the forefront of Catholic pregnancy loss memorialization, both in terms of the scope of its memorial activities and the centrality of the memorial to the Shrine’s parish community. Yet it is certainly not unique in its efforts to respond to pregnancy loss through the establishment of a public monument. Smaller monuments can be found throughout the United States on Catholic church and cemetery grounds. Behind a great many of these

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memorials are local Knights of Columbus chapters. Indeed, a plaque at the Patron of the Unborn memorial thanks the local Knights of Columbus for a generous contribution that made possible the construction of the memorial.

Another such monument is the Memorial of Mourning (MOM) in Naperville, Illinois. Erected in 1996 as joint project between the Knights and Victims of Choice, a non-denominational Christian anti-abortion organization, the monument sits in a Marian grotto on the grounds of Saints Peter and Paul Cemetery outside of Chicago. I visited the MOM in the summer of 2010 and spent the day with Elizabeth Verchio, former director of the local Victims of Choice group and designer of the MOM monument.

Verchio’s involvement with Victims of Choice and her opposition to abortion grows out of her own abortion experience in the early 1980s. As a “post-abortive woman,” she tries to be particularly sensitive to the feelings women who have had abortions in her ministry. Though Verchio has retired as the director of Victims of Choice, she still spends time tending the memorial, particularly its overgrown ground cover. Watching her interact with the memorial is like watching someone tinker in her home garden. She looks at it as an insider who not only enjoys it, but also sees its flaws—dead foliage here, spotty soil showing there. As we spoke about the origins and design of the monument, she was constantly bending down to pick a weed or to intercept creeping ivy.

73 I was unable to make contact with the individuals behind the Knights of Columbus’ efforts to establish public monuments commemorating abortion losses. This would be an interesting and important avenue for future research. More information about the Knights’ involvement in memorials for the unborn can be found on their website. Knights of Columbus, “Memorials to Unborn Children,” http://www.kofc.org/un/en/prolife/programs/monuments.html (Accessed June 2010).

74 “Post-abortive women” or the even less delicate “aborted women” are terms used by post-abortion healing groups to refer to women who have had abortions.
In Verchio’s account of how the memorial came about, it is clear that the MOM as it stands today is a combination of Verchio’s vision, the goals of the Knights of Columbus, and the pragmatic challenges of creating a public memorial. While the idea to establish monument came from the local Knights, they left its design to Verchio. She chose a 3-feet-tall, black granite oval as the focal structure of the memorial. It sits on a small concrete slab surrounded by greenery off to one side of the cemetery. A bench faces the monument, making the spot an inviting space for quiet reflection. The central feature of the granite monument is a fetal-shaped cutout near the top edge of the stone. Present through its absence, the fetus shows through on both sides of the monument. On the side of the stone that faces the bench, the cutout is cradled by a large hand etched into the rock, with the words of Isaiah 49:15-16 engraved below: “I will not forget you. Behold, I have inscribed you in the palm of my hand.” The side of the stone that faces the road has a small cross just below the fetal cutout and is engraved with the words,

MEMORIAL OF MOURNING

IN LOVING MEMORY OF THE CHILDREN
AND MOTHERS KILLED BY ABORTION

LEGALIZED
JANUARY 22, 1973

DEDICATED OCTOBER 19, 1996
KNIGHTS OF COLUMBUS COUNCIL 1369
NAPERVILLE, IL

Taken together, the two sides of the stone are an interesting demonstration of the intertwining of religion and politics in the American Christian anti-abortion movement

75 Elizabeth Verchio, interview with author, June 3, 2010.
and in the memorialization of pregnancy loss. Specifically, the inclusion of the date of the 
Roe v. Wade Supreme Court decision marks the monument as not only an act of 
memorialization but also a political statement.

Verchio shared with me another story from her past interactions with the Knights of Columbus that points to the intersection of memorialization and pro-life politics in pregnancy loss monuments. She sent me the following email just before our interview:

I don’t know the time frame, but, when I learned about a KoC [Knights of Columbus] memorial being installed in Harrison, Ohio, I called and spoke with the man who chaired the committee. He related to me that shortly after the memorial had been installed but before the dedication, he discovered roses and a small toy laying atop the memorial stone…He was perplexed as to why someone would leave the items. I suggested to him that the person leaving the items was the mother of an aborted child. The gentlemen seem quite shocked and said, "Why would a woman who chose to have an abortion what to leave flowers at our memorial?" We talked for more than an hour and I believe I helped him better understand. This conversation also helped me understand better of the KoC perspective in how they approached memorials and why they were designed as they were. It appears to me that KoC approaches memorials to the unborn from more of a political perspective. Most of the time they don’t realize they are providing a place where mothers and fathers (and other family members) can memorialize a lost baby.⁷⁶

Verchio’s story raises questions about whether the Knights’ monuments truly should be considered pregnancy loss memorials in the same manner as the other memorialization efforts examined here—meaning, they are aimed at memorializing lost prenates or bringing about healing for those suffering from pregnancy losses—or if they are better understood as straightforward political statements.

This tension between divergent visions of memorialization manifested between Verchio and the Knights in relation to the placement of the Memorial of Mourning.

Verchio told me that while the Knights were willing to hand over the design of the memorial to her, they had specific ideas about where it should be located within the

⁷⁶ Elizabeth Verchio, email communication to author, June 2, 2010.
cemetery. The Knights first choice was to place it at the front entrance of the cemetery grounds, just below the American flag. When they informed Verchio of their plan, she resisted and began pantomiming taking off her clothes in front of them. Her point, she says, was to demonstrate that placing the memorial there, right in view of the public and the street, would make visitors to the memorial feel naked and vulnerable. She also resisted their next suggestion to place the memorial in the section of the cemetery reserved for deceased infants and children. When she imagined how it would make mothers who had lost infants feel to be mourning alongside women who had abortions, and vice versa, she felt that such a location would also be inappropriate. Verchio suggested instead that the memorial be placed in a more secluded space so that it could be a place where those affected by abortion could reflect privately, which is precisely what happened in the end. Still today she continues to find flowers and other “tokens of memorial” left by visitors to the monument.77

Public shrine and monuments memorials dedicated to pregnancy loss are generally more focused on individual acts of commemoration than on communal ritual performances. For this reason, they are better understood through Catherine Bell’s category of “ritualization,” which is meant to encompass a broader range of social actions than just official or formal ceremonial activities. Nevertheless, the insights of performance and practice theories are still useful for interpreting the “work” of these monuments and the people who visit them. Like the mizuko memorials in Japan, these monuments seem to focus on establishing a connection between the visitors and their lost prenates. At the Memorial of Mourning, a physical environment for recognizing pregnancy loss grief and

memorialization has been created such that, as Verchio attests, visitors are inspired to
leave toys, notes, and flowers for lost loved ones. At the Patron of the Unborn memorial,
lost prenates are represented graphically in the tiny, struggling being cradled in the hands
of the St. Joseph statue. In both cases, these monuments inspire and facilitate interaction
between the living and the dead. Through the act of memorialization, participants
materialize lost prenates and in turn, come to form relationships with the children they
never knew.

_Catholic Post-Abortion Ministries and Retreats_

The final type of pregnancy loss memorialization under consideration here is the
work of Catholic post-abortion ministries. Specifically, I concentrate on Project Rachel and
the affiliated organization, Rachel’s Vineyard. In 1984, Vicki Thorn, then director of the
archdiocesan pro-life office in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, founded Project Rachel. Since then,
it has spread to over a 150 dioceses across the United States and has become the primary
post-abortion healing ministry of the American Catholic church. It is made up of a
network of clerical and lay counselors and volunteers committed to offering psychological
and spiritual healing for individuals who have been negatively affected by abortion. While
most of this work takes place on a one-on-one level, Project Rachel offices provide the
training and resources necessary to support those engaged in post-abortion ministry and
to get the message out this relatively new operation within the Catholic church.

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78 Sisters for Life also sponsor a popular post-abortion retreat called Entering Canaan.

79 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), _Project Rachel Ministry: A
Rachel’s Vineyard is an independent post-abortion healing organization with close ties to Project Rachel. Established in 1995 by Theresa Burke, Ph.D. and Kevin Burke, the Rachel’s Vineyard weekend retreat model is an outgrowth of Burke’s previous work doing post-abortion trauma research and counseling. In 2003, Rachel’s Vineyard was incorporated as an outreach ministry of Priests for Life, Father Frank Pavone’s umbrella organization supporting priests and a network of ministries engaged in pro-life causes (including opposition to euthanasia and stem cell research, for example, in addition to abortion).\(^{80}\) Retreat weekends incorporate individual- and group-centered activities aimed at helping women and men find healing for long-past or recent abortion experiences.\(^{81}\)

Both of these groups, Project Rachel and Rachel’s Vineyard, focus on the emotional and spiritual wellbeing of individuals wounded by abortion. Their work is premised on the notion that abortion is a form of psychological trauma that historically has been ignored or

\(^{80}\) Through his YouTube channel online (FrFrankPavone), Pavone has posted videos of funerals he has performed for aborted fetuses. It is unclear how the bodies of the fetuses were obtained, but they are present and on display in small, shared caskets during the funerals. One video from a funeral held in Detroit on June 28, 2008 (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dT1Lzry_9qc), shows Pavone’s sermon at the burial site in which he emphasizes that the funerals, videos, and photos of aborted fetuses make the lives of the unborn “real” and “concrete.” The service that day was “a real funeral for real human beings.” In a different video of a funeral for three aborted fetuses conducted July 27, 2008, at Mother Angelica’s Shrine in Hanceville, Alabama (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=whgJnLpATml), the congregation of the packed church walks past the open casket during the communion procession, viewing the fetal bodies that are not shown on-camera. I initially discovered this video from Alabama in November of 2008, but since then, I had been unable to locate it again online. I recently rediscovered the video through a new web address, but by then, it was too late to incorporate the video into my research in any significant way. This video, and others like it, will be an important data source as I move forward with this research in the future.

denied within American society. Their counsel is meant to address that trauma as well as grief related to abortion experiences while also facilitating forgiveness and reconciliation by drawing on the teachings of scriptures and the church.

In addition to working to mend post-abortion trauma through counseling, Project Rachel and Rachel’s Vineyard turn to ritual to create meaningful opportunities for healing. With Project Rachel, these activities typically draw on the familiar symbols and customs of Catholic liturgical practice. Priests and dioceses are encouraged to offer a “Mass of Hope and Healing” one or two times a year, and the project Rachel’s training manual suggests that the mass concentrate on grief and “speak about God’s infinite mercy and the healing power of the sacraments.” It recommends that a memento of some sort be available at the end of the mass for participants to take home—“a prayer card, a small crucifix, a votive candle in glass, or perhaps an attractive artificial flower that can be displayed without prompting others to ask what it means.”

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82 The issue of “Post-Abortion Trauma” is a hotly debated topic. Those working within the post-abortion recovery community fervently assert the existence of Post-Abortion Syndrome, which they liken to other forms of post-traumatic stress disorder. To date, however, the mainstream psychology community has rejected identifying a specific form of post-abortion trauma.

83 Promotional materials frequently quote John Paul II’s “special word to women who have had an abortion” from Evangelium vitae: “The Church is aware of the many factors which may have influenced your decision, and she does not doubt that in many cases it was a painful and even shattering decision. The wound in your heart may not yet have healed. Certainly what happened was and remains terribly wrong. But do not give in to discouragement and do not lose hope. Try rather to understand what happened and face it honestly. If you have not already done so, give yourselves over with humility and trust to repentance. The Father of mercies is ready to give you his forgiveness and his peace in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. To the same Father and his mercy you can with sure hope entrust your child,” Evangelium vitae, 99.

84 USCCB, Project Rachel Ministry, 62.
In addition, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Secretariat of Pro-Life Activities launched a website in the spring of 2011 called “Project Rachel Lenten Resources.” The website includes extensive notes for priests on how to incorporate the themes of post-abortion healing into their homilies during Lent. It also contains a list of “Prayers of the Faithful” that focus on abortion for use during Sunday Lenten liturgies. The petitions pray for “mothers and fathers who have lost a child in an abortion” as well as “parents who encouraged or coerced their daughter to undergo an abortion.” They ask for forgiveness and healing for those involved with or wounded by abortion. One petition also prays, “for children who have died in an abortion: that their tireless intercession on behalf of their parents may bear fruit in their parents’ salvation.” The implication of this prayer is that the unborn dead have no need for intercession on their own behalf, which is consistent with the most recent prenatal anthropology delineated in Chapter 4. They are called on instead to assist others who, as a result their involvement with the abortion, are presumed to need additional help in securing their salvation.

Rachel’s Vineyard retreats have ritualistic activities integrated throughout the weekend as well. They incorporate traditional Catholic practices, including the sacrament of reconciliation, opportunities for Eucharistic adoration, and a “Mass of Entrustment” at the end of the retreat. Furthermore, their retreats often use new symbols and practices that have been designed for specifically for use in the post-abortion ministry setting. For instance, one exercise used during the retreat is that the participants are asked to carry

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85 It should be noted that Rachel’s Vineyard offers interdenominational retreats in addition to their Catholic retreats, and their promotional materials make clear that proselytization is part of the mission of the organization. In the last decade, Rachel’s Vineyard has expanded its ministry internationally and now holds retreats in countries throughout North and South America, Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean.
around a rock representing the emotional baggage they carry with them. The participant can discard the rock at any point during the weekend with an explanation of why they feel ready to do so.\textsuperscript{86}

At the conclusion of each retreat weekend, a special memorial service gives participants a chance to grieve and “let go” of their losses. In its description of the memorial service, the Rachel’s Vineyard website speaks directly to potential retreat participants. “Since your baby was lost because of an abortion,” it says, “it’s likely that you have never been given permission to grieve the loss of your child. Because of the nature of such a pregnancy loss, the tiny body of your baby was never held or buried. It is every mother’s need to grieve the loss of her child.” The website asserts that the aborted fetuses are already “in heaven” and explains that the memorial service is intended as “a unique, beautiful opportunity to give honor and dignity to [participants’] lost child[ren].”\textsuperscript{87} Thus, a link is made between grieving a lost child and giving that child dignity.

As part of the ritual, participants are invited to lay bereavement dolls in cradle as a symbol of “placing [the lost] baby in the arms of the Creator.” There are also opportunities “to read a poem, share a letter, or sing a song or any artistic expression you choose to commemorate and express your connection to your baby.” These activities ritually help to manifest lost children and in the process, fashion a loving mother-child relationship as well. Ultimately, the memorial service is meant mark a turning point in participants lives after which they stand in new relationship with their abortion experience. Through the

\textsuperscript{86} Kevin Burke, “Pregnancy Loss, Sexual Trauma, and Unresolved Grief,” Rachel’s Vineyard Ministries training workshop, Timonium, MD, October, 9, 2009.

memorial, “It is [Rachel’s Vineyard’s] hope and prayer that as you go on with your life that this moment will mark a special place in your history, the day you gave honor, respect and dignity to your unborn child.” During a training workshop in 2009, Rachel’s Vineyard founder Theresa Burke explained that rituals such as these generate powerful healing for victims of trauma. She argues that ritualized, non-verbal forms of communication are essential to the healing process because trauma experiences are typically non-verbal as well. If healing is achieved, participants still have wounds, but the wounds are no longer “toxic.”

Like the memorial practices examined above, the ritual practices of Project Rachel and Rachel’s Vineyard build on the familiar liturgical framework of the Catholic church in the U.S. to create meaningful opportunities for post-abortion healing. Their rituals are aimed at bringing about a new understanding of abortion experiences for ritual participants through stories, symbols, prayers, and liturgical actions that attest to God’s grace and mercy. Additionally, practices like caring for bereavement dolls and singing songs to lost prenates manifest mother-child relationships between the retreat participants and their beloved children. Through the performance of these ritual practices, a new narrative of forgiveness and healing is enacted, and abortion stories of trauma, sin, and shame are transformed according to a new narrative of redemption.

Re-Framing Pregnancy Loss and Epistemological Ritual Efficacy

Unlike Japanese Buddhist mizuko kuyō in which ontological efficacy figured prominently, in the memorials examined above, I found little concern on the part of

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88 Theresa Burke, Ph.D., “Pregnancy Loss, Sexual Trauma, and Unresolved Grief,” Rachel’s Vineyard Ministries training workshop, Timonium, MD, October, 9, 2009.
memorial facilitators for the salvation of lost prenates. The memorial prayers and activities typically reflect the belief that deceased children are already in the care of God. This marks a departure from the concerns of the infant baptism and limbo debates of early and medieval Christian history, as well as from the funeral practices of the same eras, in which there was great worry about the soteriological status of babies who died prior to baptism. The International Theological Commission’s “Hope for Salvation” document—by its very nature and by its insistence that it is addressing pastoral, not doctrinal, issues—suggests that this worry persists in the contemporary era as well, yet it tries to assuage this concern by firmly asserting that there is strong theological support for trusting that children who die before baptism are included in the salvific will of God. Thus, neither Catholic doctrine nor emerging pregnancy loss memorials suggest that deceased prenates require the benefits of ritual intervention on their behalf. In short, this means that Catholic rites do not work in the same way as mizuko kuyō are purported to work. I suggest instead that American Catholic pregnancy loss memorials work by means of the active and tangible re-imagination of loss by drawing on the liturgical symbols and practices of the church.

The different types of memorialization explored above represent diverse attempts on the part of Catholic-affiliated communities to attend to the reality of pregnancy loss in women’s lives. Their forms vary greatly, yet they share much in common in terms of their function. In their own ways, each of the memorials considered seeks to re-frame experiences of loss, brokenness, and grief within narratives of grace and community, healing, and repentance. In Serene Jones’ words, they create a new type of “knowing” that “crossing the multiple borders of our complex lives, could give meaningful shape to this
particular event.” I argue that this re-framing, or re-narration, which takes place by means of the ritual performance, is a form of epistemological efficacy that goes beyond what can be accomplished through a strictly discursive approach. Acts of pregnancy loss memorialization do not simply describe but rather enact the embodied framework of meaning they seek to communicate. This framework is tied to the ideas that the Catholic church recognizes the pain that accompanies pregnancy loss, cares for lost prenates, and believes that the symbolic and ritual resources of the church can be brought to bear on loss experiences in ways that facilitate healing. Yet, because it is grounded in ritual, this framework possesses a dynamism that transcends discursive responses to pregnancy loss, which are bound to standards of logical consistency and doctrinal orthodoxy that can be sidestepped (deliberately or not) in memorial performances able to hold together ambiguities and tensions that discursive arguments seek to resolve.

The memorials and the framework they enact gain their “performative potency” (to use Tambiah’s phrase) by drawing on the familiar symbols and practices of the Catholic liturgical tradition in order to appeal to the ritual sense of memorial participants. At the same time, the memorials are helping re-shape the American Catholic tradition insofar as they attend to a phenomenon that has historically fallen outside the church’s purview and that in many ways transgresses themes typically treated as taboo by the church. Their growing popularity suggests that Catholic participants have recognized emerging pregnancy loss memorials as resonating with the broader ritual tradition of the church.

The epistemological efficacy of pregnancy loss memorials hinges on the notion that rituals are effective, not as a result of the literal communication of the values and beliefs

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89 Jones, 129.
they put forward, but due to their ability to bring about intended effects. In the case of post-abortion memorials, the desired effect is a sense of healing for those who feel emotionally and spiritually wounded by abortion. Testimonials on the Rachel’s Vineyard website suggest that in this area, the retreats are truly efficacious for some. Stories of trauma, sin, and abandonment are re-framed within a new framework of God’s grace, redemption, and right relationship between the post-abortive woman and her lost fetus. Yet, as I suggested above, the ritual effects are not necessarily limited to the orthodox interpretations put forward by the church due to the fluid and dynamic nature of ritual performance.

Returning to the pregnancy loss mass developed by Thomas Turner and recreated by Mark Gary, both liturgies insisted that lost prenates remain a part of the church community even after death. By doing so, the liturgies did not just affirm an existing belief. Rather, through the liturgical performance, they helped create and manifest that community between the living and the unborn dead in the life of the church by ritually interacting with the spirits of lost prenates. In this way, they transformed loss experiences by re-framing relationships defined by absence in terms of continued presence and by drawing the parish community into what are often individual, isolating events thereby creating a sense of shared sorrow.

In addition to changing women’s understanding of their own loss experiences, pregnancy loss memorialization aims for epistemological efficacy on another level as well. Throughout my research, I uncovered a consistent concern among memorial facilitators, which was then reflected in the memorials they developed, for relating pregnancy loss memorialization to the broader Catholic and American cultural discourse on the ethics and
politics of abortion. In some cases, this connection was obvious. In Ruether’s and Neu’s feminist liturgies, a clear commitment to supporting women’s reproductive choices and not condemning abortion decisions is built into the liturgies themselves. The post-abortion ministries and the public monuments I investigated, on the other hand, seem to be rooted as much in a commitment to the church’s stance against abortion as in a concern for the wellbeing of women who have suffered pregnancy losses. Consequently, one could ask how, in addition to having therapeutic effects, these ministries and monuments can also be interpreted as having the effect of creating (not just responding to) the need for such healing through their insistence that abortion is a sinful act that kills a human child.

In a less obvious way, Turner’s miscarriage rite also has implications for the ethics and politics of abortion inasmuch as it is intended to challenge the standard American Catholic approach to promoting the so-called culture of life. During our 2010 conversation, Turner told me he sees pregnancy loss liturgies as a way to affirm the church’s commitment to the pro-life cause without strictly dwelling on the issue of abortion, as is typically the case in the rhetoric of the American Catholic church. He contends that by not recognizing the lives of the children lost through spontaneous pregnancy loss, a “logical disconnect” in the church’s teachings is revealed. Only by attending to miscarriage and stillbirth in addition to abortion does a more consistent and compelling understanding of life come to light.

Conclusion

Over the course of this chapter, I have addressed a wide range of subjects and advanced several intersecting arguments about the nature, function, and role of pregnancy
loss memorials in American Catholicism. I began by reviewing the evolution of Christian funerals and memorial practices in relation to the question of ritual efficacy. This overview showed that the understanding of the instrumental, ontological efficacy of funerals and prayers for the dead has undergone several shifts over the course of church history. The earliest Christian funerary practices celebrated the redemption already wrought through baptism while later sources came to stress the need for ritual intervention on behalf of the dead based on a growing pessimism about the effects of sin, the reality of purgatory, and the severity of God’s judgment. The medieval through modern periods witnessed increasing standardization of liturgical rites, including that of the requiem mass, which promoted the idea that in order for a rite to effective, it must follow the prescribed ritual formula. This tendency, along with the excessive clericalism it engendered, would eventually be tempered by the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council, which had the effect of de-emphasizing ontological efficacy of Catholic prayers to affect the soteriological status of the dead. The important role of liturgy in forming how individuals understand themselves in the world and in relation to the Christian story of grace came to be emphasized in its place. Using the analytical categories I developed in relation to ritual studies, I identified this as a form of epistemological efficacy that fosters a new, performance-based “knowing” among liturgy participants.

This re-orientation manifests in pregnancy loss memorialization insofar as they aim at bringing healing and comfort to the living through a process of ritual re-narration and are not focused in any significant way on impacting the salvation of lost prenates. Pregnancy loss memorialization effectively transforms what were once individual, private stories of loss by re-framing them in broader Catholic narratives that are both traditional
and new. First and foremost, they acknowledge that pregnancy losses are an important part of many women's lives—a fact that has been ignored within the church throughout its history. They draw on the rich ritual resources of the tradition to bring Catholic themes like healing, reconciliation, and the communion of saints to bear on situations that were previously defined by grief, isolation, and fragmentation. In doing so, they enact a new form of “knowing” by crafting an interpretive framework capable of addressing pregnancy losses in familiar yet innovative ways. Rooted in ritual performance, this new “knowing” goes beyond a strictly intellectual form of knowledge to encompass body, memory, and imagination in ways that are linked though not restricted to traditional Catholic practices and theological values.

In addition, the framework produced by the various forms of memorialization typically is informed by memorial facilitators’ and participants’ positions regarding the ethics and politics of abortion. The impact of these ethical and political commitments on the memorial practices can be great or small, but they permeate the forms these new memorials take and could play an important role in the growth or decline of the practices in the future.
CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

Miscarriage, stillbirth, and abortion are an age-old part of the reproductive lives of women, but the attention pregnancy loss has received as a phenomenon of cultural and religious significance has paled in comparison to its prevalence. While not all women mourn pregnancies that fail to come to term, for many others, it is a traumatic, life-changing experience that is exacerbated by the silence with which losses historically have been met. My hope is that, in discussing the doctrinal issues relating to pregnancy loss, the actual women who have experienced losses have not been overshadowed, for it is their grief and their efforts to mend situations once defined by brokenness, that lie at the foundation of these memorials and of this project.

My study of pregnancy loss memorials in Japanese Buddhism and American Catholicism began as an implicit comparison that arose as I first learned of mizuko kuyō and tried to find a parallel practice within the religious tradition with which I am most familiar, Roman Catholicism. Progressively, this comparison became explicit as I transitioned from simply looking for parallel practices to investigating how pregnancy loss memorials in each tradition relate to the broader doctrinal and ritual frameworks of Buddhism and Catholicism. In the end, the comparative process drew my research in two directions. On the one hand, it pulled me deep into the history and doctrine of each tradition as I sought to uncover the anthropological and ritual foundations that could help support the emergence of these memorial practices. On the other hand, the comparative nature of the project expanded my research gaze beyond the boundaries of each tradition, allowing me to bring in new questions, and hopefully, come to new insights that otherwise would have remained hidden.
Over the course of my research, it became apparent that Japanese Buddhist and American Catholic pregnancy loss memorials share some points in common despite the significant differences that exist between the traditions as a whole. Some of these commonalities are conceptual correlations between how the nature of prenatal life and death have been imagined within each tradition. For instance, both religious traditions share the notion that the lost prenates remain available for communication and continued relationship with the living after death. A certain parallelism manifests also when Japanese Buddhist and Catholic ways of imagining of the afterlife of the prenatal dead, Sai no kawara and limbo, are set along side one another. Sai no kawara is the frightening riverbank imagined as the resting place of lost mizuko as they wait to be rescued by means of ritual intervention on their behalf. Limbo was envisioned as a dark place at the “edge” of hell, defined not by torment but quiet grief and deprivation. Not quite hell and definitely not the Pure Land or heaven, Sai no kawara and limbo highlight the ambiguity and liminality surrounding death before birth. They are “in-between” places for “in-between” creatures.

The greater commonality this study investigated is how, in the last half-century, Japanese Buddhism and American Catholicism both have developed ritualized ways of memorializing pregnancy losses. Within the context of this commonality, however, key differences surfaced that reflect the distinct doctrinal, ritual, and even social and political contexts in which Japanese Buddhist mizuko kuyō and American Catholic pregnancy loss memorials have emerged. Exploring these differences has led to a richer understanding of pregnancy loss memorialization within each tradition, and hopefully, has modeled the potential benefits of undertaking complex religious comparisons, as articulated in Luis
Gomez’s comparative principle (raised in Chapter 2) that “correspondences in context are valuable even when they reflect similar issues but different or mutually exclusive solutions.”

In the Introduction chapter, I identified two questions that lay at the heart of this project. These questions developed early in the comparative process and helped shape the course of my research, both in scholarly sources and in the field. First, I asked what can be said about the nature of the prenatal beings memorialized in pregnancy loss rites, and second, what are pregnancy loss rites believed to accomplish by means of their performance? Over the course of the dissertation I turned to the doctrinal and ritual foundations of Japanese Buddhism and American Catholicism to address these questions, focusing on the areas designated as prenatal theological anthropology and ritual efficacy.

In Chapter 3, several significant features of Japanese prenatal anthropology emerged that build on broader Buddhist ideas about early human life, death, and the relationship between them. Within the context of mizuko memorial practices, the mizuko is treated as a child who has an individual identity. The mizuko exists in a transitional state after death and as such, continues to be in relationship with its family through memorial acts aimed at benefiting both the mizuko and the individual taking part in the memorial. The corollary to the promise of benefits is the threat of ill-fortune arising should the mizuko not be properly memorialized.

Chapter 4’s survey of Catholic prenatal anthropology demonstrates a strong commitment in recent magisterial texts to affirming the full personhood of prenates at all stages of fetal development. Despite claims that this has always been so, history shows that

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the moral status of the unborn has been a source of debate since the foundations of Christianity. These debates centered primarily on questions about the timing of ensoulment and the moral significance of various stages of fetal development. Today, the issue of prenatal anthropology arises most commonly in the Catholic discourse related to abortion and reproductive technologies. In the face of these and other “threats” to human life, the magisterium asserts that embryonic and fetal life merit the same protection as any other child or adult human life.

The unborn have been increasingly characterized as “innocent” in recent years in Catholic theology. This characterization has come to eclipse the concern with original sin that guided the theological thinking of previous generations. The emphasis that was once placed on infant baptism has shifted as well. While the core theological arguments underpinning original sin and infant baptism remain intact, the International Theological Commission’s 2007 document, “The Hope for Salvation for Infants Who Die Without Being Baptized,” tempers the peril and promise of both out of pastoral concern for families who lose a child before baptism. The document’s argument is premised on the notion that the very young will not be excluded from the salvific will of God for reasons beyond their control, i.e., that they were not baptized before death. Essentially, it asserts that God’s mercy trumps other possible obstacles to redemption faced by those who die young without being baptized.

Unlike Japanese Buddhist mizuko kuyō, the new Catholic memorials make no claims to impact the postmortem destiny of prenates that die before birth. Chapter 5 established that mizuko rites are considered essential to the process of helping mizuko transition to the Pure Land. The doctrinal reasoning underlying mizuko kuyō corresponds to the logic of
other Japanese Buddhist mortuary rites and more general Japanese religious values about
the efficacy of religious practice and the importance of caring for ancestors. It also relates
to the Japanese Buddhist prenatal anthropology delineated in Chapter 3, which showed
that prenates are seen as karmic beings who remain accessible to the living after death
through ritual, particularly during the “intermediate state.” In examining current Catholic
prenatal anthropology, it becomes clear no such ritual intervention on behalf of lost
prenates is necessary. Thus, as Chapter 6 demonstrated, the instrumental, ontological
efficacy that figures prominently in mizuko kuyō finds almost no place in Catholic
pregnancy loss memorials.

Instead, what I have identified as “epistemological efficacy” takes center stage as
Catholic acts of memorialization encourage women to develop a new understanding of
their miscarriages, stillbirths, and abortions. This is accomplished through a process of
ritual re-framing, in which situations once defined by grief, absence, and broken
relationship are re-narrated according to Christian narratives of grace, reconciliation, and
healing. Re-narration, in the case of pregnancy loss memorials, is not simply a matter of
discursive, literal communication. Rather, it is brought about through a process of ritual
enactment in which the chosen themes and narratives are performed and thereby
manifested through their performance. The act of memorialization aims to produce a new
embodied, experiential form of knowledge changes how pregnancy losses are understood.
In this way, epistemological efficacy plays an important role in mizuko kuyō as well insofar
as through the ritual, stories of loss and failed motherhood are transformed into
relationships defined by the ongoing loving care of a mother for her lost child. Ritually
acknowledging lost prenates is one of the central components of both Japanese Buddhist
and American Catholic pregnancy loss memorials. Doing so makes once invisible and unspoken losses real, and in turn, supports women hurt by miscarriage, stillbirth, and abortion as they come to stand in new relationship to their loss experiences.

Through the act of memorialization, bonds, real and imagined, between the living and the dead are created and sustained. Nevertheless, the character of these relationships merits further consideration due to the infinitely malleable nature of the unborn dead. By bringing the unborn into relationship with themselves, the living define not only the terms of the relationship but also the identity of the unborn. That is, because the individual personalities of lost fetuses never have an opportunity to develop, the unborn essentially remain mirrors that reflect the faith, character, tone, politics, etc., of their surroundings. As a result, demands are put on lost prenates to serve as symbols and intercessors for the beliefs of others. They are simultaneously absent and present, and as such, can be called upon to fulfill the designs of whoever invokes their empty presence.

Pregnancy loss has played a role in Buddhist and Catholic ethical discussions for close to two millennia. Yet only in recent decades have these losses—as prenatal deaths and as occasions for mourning—come to be addressed by drawing on the rich ritual resources of each tradition. In pregnancy loss memorial practices, Japanese Buddhists and American Catholics combine long-standing doctrinal and ritual traditions with new ways of imagining prenatal life and death, pregnancy, and motherhood. These practices not only reflect the traditions from which they emerged, but also the agency of individual Buddhists and Catholics as they seek meaningful ways to address pregnancy losses that have long been ignored by religious communities.
The distinct religious landscapes in which these practices have developed impact the form and function of the memorials. Building on the existing frameworks for memorializing the dead within each tradition, these new practices invoke familiar symbols, sounds, actions, and doctrines in order to create a meaningful ritual experience for memorial participants. Nevertheless, as new rituals focused on an at-times taboo subject, the memorials push against the conventional boundaries of those frameworks. Through their performance, they are leading Japanese Buddhism and American Catholicism in innovative directions as they re-shape traditional doctrinal and ritual principles. In the coming years, it will be fascinating to see how these memorial practices continue to develop and evolve, and how, in doing so, the broader traditions are compelled to change as well.
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