

RELS 499 Bachelor's Essay Proposal, Spring 2004-Fall 2004

Jason Purvis, with Professor Bjerken

Title: "Japanese Rituals and the Ethics of Personhood: Ambiguities over Abortion and Organ Transplants"

Abortion, brain death and organ transplants are globally among the most controversial issues of our time. Many cultures express varying ethical positions with regard to these issues; Japanese society, in particular, is deeply concerned with these issues for religious reasons. Due to their religious heritage and cultural perspectives, the Japanese debates over these biomedical topics are distinctly different from the prevailing debates that are found in our own culture. The Japanese perspectives on abortion, brain death and organ transplant are grounded in a culturally constructed conception of "personhood."

The Japanese notion of personhood is a key factor for understanding why abortion is so widely accepted in Japanese society today. For the Japanese, birth is merely part of a process and the offspring is not considered a fully developed person. For one to reach "personhood," one must complete an assemblage of rituals, which William Lafleur calls "densification rituals." The reluctance in Japan to practice organ harvesting is also influenced by their conceptions of "personhood." The Japanese believe that a person is alive until the heart stops, respiration ceases, and the pupils become dilated. This accounts for why organ harvesting is so controversial. The cessation of brain activity is not a sufficient indication of death because some other organs might still be functioning and housing remnants of the spirit. Personhood in Japan is therefore socially embedded in relationships that are constituted through rituals. Rites of birth and death reveal that the Japanese understanding of individual identity is constructed through ritual practices in a web of relationships existing in an extended temporal continuum.

For my Bachelor Essay project, I will examine Japanese cultural attitudes towards abortion, brain death, and organ transplant. More specifically, I will examine how these attitudes are informed by Japanese religious values that are often embodied in ritual practices that constitute personhood. I would like to examine the effects that these cultural phenomena have on religious institutions in Japan, such as Buddhist memorial temples for the spirits of aborted fetuses. **How are the religious institutions challenged by these cultural views, and how might they benefit? Why are the Japanese so concerned with the inappropriateness of harvesting organs when they seem to widely accept the act of abortion, which denies the chance of life? Does this suggest that leaving life is somehow more precious than entering it?** These questions raise ethical concerns, and I intend to explore how ethical norms inform and respond to the rituals of Mizuko Kuyo and funeral rituals in Japan. **Are the rituals that are practiced an attempt to absolve behavior that is regarded as unethical in modern Japan?**

My project will require extensive reading on the subjects of abortion, brain death and organ transplant in Japan, some of which are listed in the bibliography below. These texts will mainly consist of case studies performed by religious studies scholars and sociologists in Japan. During the Spring 2004 semester, I intend to meet regularly on a weekly basis with my advisor, Dr. Zeff Bjerken. In the Fall I will write my Bachelor's Essay based on the research I have conducted in the Spring and Summer. I am optimistic that understanding how the Japanese treat these biomedical issues will contribute new ideas that might be valuable for students of comparative ethics, and perhaps there will be a pragmatic value for our society, which is so deeply divided over these controversial topics.

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