

Early Modern Secularism? Views on Religion in *Seji kenbunroku* (1816)

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Seji kenbunroku (Matters of the World: An Account of What I Have Seen and Heard) is an extensive critique of all manner of social evils, written by an anonymous samurai author with the pseudonym of Buyō Inshi in 1816. Although this work is much quoted, it has hardly been studied in any depth. By analyzing the (overwhelmingly negative) role ascribed to “priests” in this work, this article seeks to shed light on early modern understandings of “religion” before that concept was introduced to Japan. Buyō goes beyond the anti-clericalism shared by many Edo period authors and develops a more elaborate critique of all “Ways,” either as inherently corrupt or as mere moralistic pretense. In Buyō’s discourse, a secular domain sets bounds to the realm of religion in a manner that reminds one of modern notions of secularity. Buyō was hardly an original thinker; rather, his ideas should be seen as representative for a larger body of opinion in the later Edo period. To understand perceptions of religion in this period, we must recognize the existence of secularist thought *prior to* the introduction of the conceptual pair of religion and secularity in modern times. This goes against the notion, established under the influence of writers such as Talal Asad and Charles Taylor, that secularism is a product of Western history exported around the globe by colonialism. This article argues that analyses of *Seji kenbunroku* and similar works will reveal the existence of non-Western secularist ideas that must have had a considerable impact on the reception of modern secularism in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Keywords: Secularism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Christianity, military Way, anti-clericalism, *Seji kenbunroku*, Talal Asad, Charles Taylor, Deism

“Religion” and “Secularism” in Early Modern Japan

There are many good reasons not to use concepts like “secularism” or “secularity” with reference to the Edo period. Whether it is defined as a worldview or as a political doctrine, secularism is generally seen as a product of Western modern history. In his classic *A Secular Age* (2007), Charles Taylor offers an account of the emergence of secular thought in Europe that is firmly rooted in Christianity. The great impact of this work has discouraged many from

discussing non-Western parallels to the very specific and convoluted developments discussed in such detail in Taylor's book. The equally influential work of Talal Asad (2003) likewise stresses the roots of secularism in the Reformation, and he sees its spread across the world as a result of Western dominance.¹ Even studies of secularism in Asia almost invariably rest on the premise that while secularism has taken on many variant forms in different contexts, it first came to the region as an idea of purely Western origin, imposed on traditional societies to which it was alien.² In this intellectual climate, many hesitate to use the term "secularism" to describe, for example, Indo-Islamic states in pre-colonial India that were built on cross-religious alliances. After all, those states were neither Christian nor modern in a European, post-Enlightenment sense, and therefore, the term "secularism" cannot apply to them.

While such reticence may be lauded as academic stringency, it also has a downside. An overly narrow definition of secularism prevents us from exploring the non-modern settings into which modern secularism was transposed. The fact that some modernizing states, including Meiji Japan, found secularism useful and adopted it without much resistance (let alone colonial enforcement), indicates that at least to some non-Western elites, the concept was readily understandable and acceptable. This calls upon historians to investigate pre-Meiji notions that may have made Meiji policy makers and intellectuals receptive and even sympathetic to the logic of secularism.

Moreover, our resistance to applying the "Western" concept of secularism to pre-Meiji Japan stands in contrast to our readiness to adopt its equally modern counterpart, "religion." As Asad and many others have pointed out, the concept of religion as a separate sphere of human endeavour is a product of Western history as much as its opposite, secularism, and much has been written about the dramatic effects of the adoption of that modern concept in Meiji Japan (e.g. Isomae 2003). By stretching the term religion to apply to pre-Meiji Japan, but not the term secularism, we create a template where "religious" Edo gave way to "secular" Meiji. There is a wealth of studies on the religious history of Edo, while we deny ourselves the conceptual tools to talk about secular aspects of Japan's early modern thought and society. The result is a bias that, at worst, ends up smacking of outmoded Orientalism.

This is all the more disconcerting because the policies of the Edo shogunate gradually developed a range of characteristics that, at the very least, invite comparison with variants of secularism. Drawing on the work of Tamamuro (1971) and others, Peter Nosco has described the early development of shogunal policy towards "religion" as rather pragmatic (Nosco 1996). Limiting their aims to political and economic control, the authorities showed a marked reluctance when called upon to discuss matters of doctrine or faith. The shogunate was determined to break the earlier tradition of temple immunity from secular control, and took drastic measures to assert its right to intervene in the affairs of temples and shrines. This included the active suppression of religious groups that did not submit to shogunal authority, such as the *fūju fuse* 不受不施 faction of Nichiren 日蓮 Buddhism and Christians. By ca. 1670,

1 For a critique of this aspect of Asad's (and also Taylor's) work, see Bangstad 2009.

2 E.g. Bubandt and van Beek 2012; Siam-Heng et al. 2010. Both these volumes are comparative collections of essays on "secularisms" in different corners of Asia. Bubandt and van Beek, whose work I find particularly inspiring, consistently regard secularism as a post-colonial or (in the case of China and the ex-Soviet Union) post-imperial phenomenon. While seeking to develop a "comparative study of secularisms," they never consider the possibility that the striking differences between local configurations of secularism across Asia may, at least to some degree, reflect differences in the legacies of pre-colonial secularist discourses and practices. They follow Asad in finding problematic the notion of secularism as anything other than "a colonial import" (2012, p. 21).

however, suppression of even these groups petered out. In Nosco's terms, the state "retreat[ed] from its attempt to control what individuals believed," and systematically ignored or even encouraged "religious dissimulation." In practice, the authorities came to regard faith, even in prescribed teachings, as a "private" affair that lay outside the domain of state regulation. Nosco goes so far as to describe this as a form of "separation of church and state."³ While that may be an overstatement, it is worth underlining that the bracketing out of religious faith as part of a private sphere is often mentioned as a central characteristic of secularism.

This political secularism emerged against the background of the development of a more "secular" outlook in society at large. Satō Hiroo 佐藤弘夫 is particularly bold in describing Edo period changes in the worldview held by a growing section of the population in terms of "secularisation" and even "modernization."⁴ Writing about popular understandings of death and funerary practices, he points out that from the sixteenth century onwards, an earlier emphasis on transcendence (*ano yo* あの世) gave way to a concern for matters of this world (*kono yo* この世). In a similar vein, many have pointed out that Edo period scholarship increasingly replaced cosmological readings of the classics (whether Confucian or Japanese) with historical ones. Where medieval commentaries on, for example, *Nihon shoki* 日本書紀 depended heavily on techniques of etymological allegoresis, numerology and mandalization, eighteenth century intellectuals recoiled from such "vulgar deceit" and turned to philology in order to reconstruct an "historical" truth.

To be sure, it would be facile to draw the sweeping conclusion that Edo Japan was moving from a "religious" to a "secular" mode. Both concepts are, in Asad's terms, too "unstable" to give much meaning unless they are specified in relation to their particular context. My argument here is that while extensive use is made of the equally anachronistic term religion in the study of Edo Japan, we remain unable to analyze aspects of premodern secularism as long as we either avoid the term, or use it in an unreflecting manner. What we need is a body of research that focuses squarely on the "secular" forces that imposed limits on the "religious" realm in early modern Japan. Such research would also investigate contemporary perceptions of religion (in concrete terms, temples, shrines, priests, and rituals) as they were expressed by a broad range of Edo period writers. I believe that such an analysis will reveal the existence of a broad and popular secularist discourse that was, at times, aggressively hostile to religion, while at other times defending its usefulness within a delineated private realm. Without understanding this discourse, it will be impossible to make sense of the harsh measures that local and national authorities imposed on temples, shrines, and other religious groups in nineteenth century Japan—both before and after the Meiji restoration.

"Religion" and "Secularism" in *Seji kenbunroku*

As a modest contribution towards that goal, this essay offers an analysis of one Edo period text that, among many other things, expresses a critical view on the priesthood and its relationship to the state. Written in 1816 by an anonymous samurai writer, *Seji kenbunroku* 世事見聞録 is a comprehensive critique of the corruption of the world, spanning some 440

3 Nosco 1996, pp. 152–53.

4 Satō 2008, p. 216.

pages in one modern edition.⁵ The author calls himself Buyō Inshi 武陽隱士, “a retired (or hidden) warrior of Edo”; we have no clue as to who he may have been. Judging from the little information Buyō volunteers about himself in the course of his work, he appears to have been a disgruntled samurai with a checkered career, who has seen many aspects of Edo life for himself. He prides himself on relying not on book learning but on real life experience, and although he does mention a few of the big intellectual names of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, his account of Edo society is based first and foremost on his personal observations, albeit filtered through the thick glasses of a firmly held conviction. It is exactly this non-elite nature of *Seji kenbunroku* that makes the text interesting for our purpose. It can be argued that this work, in all its directness, presents a less filtered account of warrior attitudes to temples and shrines than the more sophisticated texts on which scholars of intellectual history have tended to focus.

Before addressing the issue of priests, it will be useful to gain a general understanding of Buyō’s larger argument. Buyō’s opinions on the state of the world are straightforward and categorical. He is convinced, first of all, that society is in rapid decline. Honor and obligation are disappearing from a world swamped by commerce, calculation, greed and lust. The perfect order established by the “Divine Lord” Tokugawa Ieyasu has fostered an excess of “splendour” (*kekkō* 結構) and extravagance, which in turn has corrupted people’s “dispositions” (*ninjō* 人情) and “customs” (*fūzoku* 風俗). The greed-induced corruption of the last hundred years has undermined the “military Way” (*budō* 武道) on which the realm was founded by Ieyasu. This has resulted in a situation where everybody is “at war” with everybody else. Buyō argues that full restoration of the military Way is the only possible solution to this crisis, but to his regret he does not see any signs that the authorities are taking steps in that direction. As long as warriors are effectively prevented from taking decisive action against the agents of greed, the country will continue its slide into a quagmire of corruption.

Buyō structures his account, though not strictly, according to the status order of Edo society. His work opens with chapters on warriors and farmers; after this he moves on to priests, medical doctors, Yin Yang diviners, blind moneylenders, lawsuits, townspeople, prostitution, kabuki, and outcasts (*eta hinin* 穢多非人). He closes with a series of shorter pieces on consumption, deforestation, and untimely deaths; this final section of the book also includes two longer essays that sum up his general conclusions, entitled “On Japan being called a Divine Land” and “The land, people and ruler.”

This contents list may at first sight appear random, but there is some logic to it. Buyō divides society into two large categories of people: the warriors and farmers who form “the foundation of the state” (Chapters 1 and 2), and the townspeople and idlers (*yūmin* 遊民) who spend their time squandering the state’s resources (Chapters 3–7). *Seji kenbunroku* first gives an account of the two classes of people that are essential for the functioning of the state, and then moves on to introduce a selection from the wide variety of “poisonous in-

5 *Seji kenbunroku* circulated widely in manuscript form, and printed versions of the first two chapters appeared in the Bakumatsu years. The first complete edition was published by Honjō Eijirō in 1926. The latter edition was later republished by Seiabō in 1966 with further corrections and an introduction by Takigawa Masajirō 瀧川政次郎 that remains the most thorough discussion of this work. Naramoto Tatsuya 奈良本辰也 consulted both the Kaizō Bunko and the Seiabō editions, and prepared the Iwanami Bunko version that appeared in 1994. References in this essay will be to this 1994 edition. For a complete English translation with an introduction and notes, see Teeuwen and Nakai (forthcoming).

sects” that “fester in the flesh of the warriors and the farmers.”⁶ Interestingly, Buyō develops a dichotomy of *kokumin* 国民 vs. *yūmin*, in which *kokumin* does not simply refer to “people in the provinces” (that is, farmers), but acquires the more pregnant meaning of “people who sustain the state” together with the warrior class. Needless to say, Buyō’s conception of the state as a hierarchical system of classes has little in common with the modern concept of a nation state (*kokumin kokka* 国民国家) of “equal” citizens. Yet his usage of the term *kokumin*, to denote productive people who deserve the protection of the state because they form its foundation, seems to straddle this divide. It goes beyond the present paper to investigate whether such usage was widespread, but if it was, it must have coloured Meiji understandings of the nation state and its relation to its *kokumin* citizens.

More immediately relevant to our topic is the fact that *jishanin* 寺社人, the priests of temples and shrines, feature first on Buyō’s list of non-productive idlers. Later, they are joined by other objectionable types such as doctors, diviners, and blind moneylenders. All these are particularly offensive to Buyō because their position in society appears to be sanctioned by the warrior authorities; some are even awarded warrior privileges or court ranks. Brothel keepers, kabuki actors and outcasts feature further down the list. Together with the townspeople, all these different kinds of idlers represent what Buyō calls the “inverted Way” (*gyakudō* 逆道). They are the direct cause of the corruption that is destroying even the warriors and the farmers, turning so many of them into *de facto* idlers too. Buyō’s solution is, quite simply, to save the warriors and the *kokumin* by unleashing the force of the military Way upon the parasites that threaten to destroy them. He writes:

Of course it will need more than ordinary measures to open up the Way of governing the populace. The essential thing is first to reduce the numbers of townspeople and idlers and return them to their original status as people of the soil. People of the soil obey laws. Townspeople and idlers break them. Now it may be considered harsh to reduce the numbers of townspeople, idlers, and other bad sorts who at present stand their ground so confidently. Unless one uses the force of the military Way, it will be difficult to carry out such an attack. Quite likely, implementing such an attack may lead to riots. (...) It is indeed a radical, fearsome approach.⁷

Fearsome though all-out war on “townspeople and idlers” may be, Buyō argues that it is the only way to save the country from impending disaster.

Before homing in on the place of priests in Buyō’s view on society, it is worth pointing out that his argument against the “inverted Way” is not primarily an economic one. He does indeed see the accumulation of wealth in the hands of a small group of townspeople and idlers as the source of poverty among the warriors and farmers, but in *Seji kenbunroku*, money seldom figures alone as the medium of the inverted Way. Almost invariably, it is accompanied by that other source of desire, sex. Buyō’s concern with sex as a central aspect

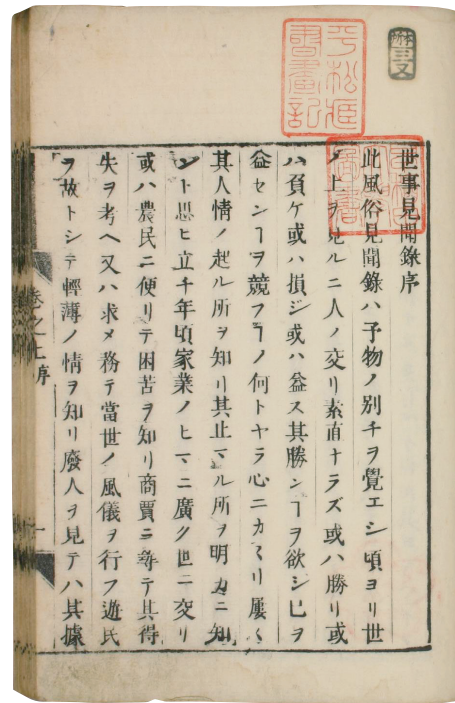
6 Buyō 1816, p. 394. It is striking that only the first two chapters, on warriors and farmers, were published before Meiji; presumably, this reflects a perceived lack of demand for the “idler” chapters on the part of the publishers (although the other chapters do figure in the contents list of this edition). A digital facsimile of an undated woodblock print version of the first chapter can be found in the *Kotenseki Sōgō Database* of Waseda University (www.waseda.ac.jp/kotenseki). The first page of this print is reproduced overleaf.

7 Buyō 1816, p. 425.

of corruption explains why he dedicates a long and fascinating chapter to prostitutes and kept women (*kakoimono* 囲ひもの), and brings them up repeatedly in other chapters as well. In the chapter on prostitution Buyō explains the process that transforms a regular woman (*shirōto* 素人) into a professional prostitute. He writes that a few months after entering that profession, women are attacked by an illness that he describes in almost metaphysical terms, as the transformation of a human being endowed with heavenly virtue into a “human monster” (*ninpinin* 人非人)—a barren thing without true feelings that is damaged beyond repair, and that is forever doomed to the meaningless life of an idler, unable to do even the simplest kind of productive work.⁸ Prostitutes represent in Buyō’s thinking the ultimate victims of the inverted Way: empty shells, robbed of the very essence of humanity. He equates a woman’s loss of chastity to the loss of loyalty in a samurai retainer: prostitution destroys the very foundations on which society is built. Later on in the same chapter, Buyō makes a similar argument while criticizing the rapidly spreading taste for kept women: “The Way of men and women is in accordance with the harmony between Heaven and Earth; it is pivotal for governing the state, the house, and the individual; and the married couple is the foundation for proper human relations. It is not at all a private matter.”⁹

This combination of greed and lust, money and illegitimate sex as the hallmarks of the inverted Way is fundamental also to Buyō’s take on priests. In a manner similar to prostitutes, the clergy takes on a significance in his thinking that appears out of proportion to their importance as social actors, even considering the official sanction they enjoyed from both the shogunate and the imperial court. Taken together, priests and prostitutes represent to Buyō the very essence of idler corruption. In his usual in-your-face manner, Buyō writes: “There are two evils that contribute most to the corruption of the Great Way in our time. One is the Honganji sect (...); the other is prostitution.”¹⁰ While he singles out Shinran’s Honganji 本願寺 sect in this particular passage, elsewhere he makes it abundantly clear that his view of other Buddhist sects is just as dim.

At the beginning of his chapter on priests, Buyō briefly sets out his ideas about what constitutes a priest’s correct way of conduct:



The first page of the woodblock print version digitalized by Waseda University. (See above note 6.)
Courtesy of Waseda University library.

8 Buyō 1816, p. 326.

9 Buyō 1816, p. 376.

10 Buyō 1816, p. 159.

A monastic should have no possessions and no desire for fame; he should follow a master and lead a humble life. He should go around with a begging bowl to receive alms in return for transferring merit for the benefit of others.¹¹ Or else he should live as a hermit, sewing his own clothes and carrying firewood and water to cook his own meals in his hut. There he should spend his days offering incense, flowers, and holy water; accumulating merit through study of Buddhist doctrine and the practice of austerities; and seeking a state of no self and no desire. Or he should search for a wise master, travelling from province to province and in remote regions so as to gain instruction in the deepest meanings of the Dharma. Or yet again, he should undergo training in a particular school, obtain a temple upon reaching a certain age, instruct the people in Buddhist teachings, and guide them to reach salvation in their next life.¹²

In this passage, Buyō offers two openings as to what might be a legitimate ideal for Buddhist monastics. In effect, he gives monks the choice between living as beggars and hermits, or, more realistically, acquiring a temple after a lifetime of study and dedicating themselves to the edification of the people. Notably absent is the mainstay of monastic activity—the performance of ritual. Monks may study and teach with some legitimacy, but not perform rituals (*kaji kitō* 加持祈祷) to solve people's problems. More will be said later on Buyō's reasons for this negative attitude to ritual beyond "offering incense, flowers, and holy water" as a simple mark of respect.

Much of Buyō's chapter on priests is taken up by anecdotal evidence of the corruption of temple monks. In stark contrast to his stated ideal, which would see monastics take over a temple after long years of study and practice, Buyō reveals that temples are never granted to monks with supreme knowledge of the Dharma but always to the highest bidder.¹³ As a result, temples fall into the hands of bandits with a warped skill in the inverted Way of profit making. Temple holders force even the poor to make donations; they take money for worthless ceremonies that they leave to underlings to perform; they make loans and collect high interests in the most merciless fashion; they organize lottery tours conducted by financial agents of no spiritual merit whatsoever (who take a cut from the profits and, predictably, spend it on prostitutes); they set up provision funds for their retirement; and they keep women even in the precincts of their temples. Priests enjoy fixed temple incomes that they can add to by organizing *kaichō* 開帳 Buddha viewings, holding sermons for a fee, collecting donations and gifts, and performing prayer rituals, all designed to extort more money from their parishioners.

Moreover, temple lands, sanctioned by the shogunal vermilion seal, are the very places where the inverted Way thrives in all of its most appalling forms:

Vermilion-seal lands and other areas near the gates of temples and shrines have come to be called "places of evil."¹⁴ Their grounds reek of the business of fornication; they

11 Buyō refers here to *ekō* (Skt. *pariṇāma*), practices of creating merit (positive karma) by various means and transferring it to a patron or a deceased person.

12 Buyō 1816, p. 137.

13 On the realities behind this passage in *Seji kenbunroku*, see Williams 2009.

14 The expression "places of evil" (*aku basho* 悪場所) referred originally to recognized brothel districts such as the Yoshiwara, but in the later Edo period came to be applied more widely to districts that accommodated theatres and other entertainment facilities.

are full of “hells” with illicit prostitutes and serve as hideaways for kept women.¹⁵ Packed with taverns serving fish and fowl and tea stands put together of rush mats, they also offer other kinds of amusements, such as theatre plays, pantomimes, jugglers, and storytellers—all conspiring to deceive people and steal their money. Even in the provinces, these vermilion-seal lands are nests of gamblers, troublemakers, thieves, and murderers.¹⁶

To Buyō, temples represented greed and lust in their most condensed form, and he concludes that monks are “in truth the greatest enemies of the land.”¹⁷

Can Buddhism Be Redeemed?

Was Buyō merely objecting to the corruption of monks in his own age, or did he regard Buddhism as inherently evil? Buyō is not necessarily coherent on this point, and in places, he recalls a golden age of Buddhism: during the reign of the founder of the Tokugawa shogunate, Ieyasu, monks were chastised for their medieval corruption and once again followed the Dharma.¹⁸ Elsewhere, however, Buyō systematically undercuts any possible route towards Buddhist respectability in three ways. First, he reneges on his opening gambit of demanding that priests should live as beggars or hermits. Secondly, while grudgingly admitting that Buddhism may well be a necessary evil among the populace at large, he simultaneously fulminates against it as a lethal threat to the ethos of samurai retainers. Thirdly, as we have already seen, he rejects the performance of prayer rituals by priests for lay donors as a form of corruption in itself.

Relating to the first point, Buyō disqualifies the ideal of the mendicant monk by comparing Buddhist ascetics unfavourably with poor farmers:

The austerities of ascetics are of no benefit to the state. They are idlers. [In contrast,] the destitute [in the villages] perform austerities by exhausting themselves for the state’s sake. ... A famous priest of surpassing wisdom may well exert himself in the practice of austerities for the merits of Buddhism in deep mountains or ravines, but he will never match the virtue of the destitute.¹⁹

In Buyō’s eyes, even those rare monks who do stay aloof from greed remain useless idlers, much inferior to the poor in the villages, whose poverty is the direct result of rampant idler wastefulness. Ascetics may “be worshipped as famous priests of surpassing wisdom, or as saints who eat only rough forest foods,” but in fact, “it is the destitute who should be revered in this world.”²⁰

Buyō’s second point comes to the fore in a long passage in Chapter 7 where he describes how, ever since ancient times, emperors and warriors have allowed the military Way to

15 “Hell” (*jigoku* 地獄) was a popular slang term for an illicit brothel.

16 Buyō 1816, p. 148.

17 Buyō 1816, pp. 150, 172, and other places. For a less normative account of the symbiosis of “prayer and play” at religious sites in Edo Japan, which analyzes many of the phenomena condemned by Buyō, see Hur 2000.

18 E.g. Buyō 1816, p. 164.

19 Buyō 1816, pp. 128–29.

20 Buyō 1816, p. 129.

lapse while relying on the prayers of priests in governing the realm. Here he accords some role to Buddhism by noting that, at least in principle and in theory, it should serve to lead the people away from greed. However, he immediately closes this opening by bringing up another fundamental fault of Buddhism as a teaching:

The Buddhist Way is acceptable as long as it is taught only to the lowly classes as a way for them to control their bodies and minds. For those of middle rank and above, however, it becomes a great obstacle that prevents them from handling their worldly duties and from leading others. Especially for one who is a warrior retainer, to have faith in the Buddhist Way and pray for one's afterlife is to act like a woman who has intercourse with a secret lover: it is the extreme in disloyalty towards one's lord. A retainer whose heart is taken in by Buddhism fears for his next rebirth and, looking upon this life as something transient that may not last another day, he seeks to avoid getting trapped in the affairs of this floating existence. He thus leaves aside his moral obligations, loses courage, and becomes unable to stand up and put his life on the line for the Way of loyalty and filial piety. Those Honganji followers who rebelled [against Ieyasu] in Mikawa are an example of this. Such "teachings" are a great threat to the military Way.²¹

Even as a sincere faith concerned with the afterlife, Buddhism turns loyal retainers into unfaithful wives and followers of the inverted Way, ultimately inciting them to rebellion. It is striking that, again, Buyō expresses his critique of Buddhism in sexual terms.

The third point relates to the fundamental fallacy of ritual. Here, Buyō's scepticism goes beyond Buddhism; it extends to all kinds of priests, irrespective of their doctrinal background. He expresses his view most succinctly in his discussion of the activities of Yin Yang diviners:

Rituals that are performed for fees, whether they are Shinto purification rites or Buddhist prayer rituals, do not move the gods and Buddhas, let alone the Way of Heaven. After all, a prostitute will not give you sons, either. The Buddhas and gods will simply ignore rituals that are inspired by greed.²²

By offering to bribe the Buddhas and the gods, Buyō implies, priests are acting like pimps who sell their sacred divinities as though they were prostitutes, while pretending to their customers that this will actually bring them some real benefit. In this particular passage, Buyō clearly assumes that it will not; elsewhere, he appears less certain.²³ Either way, he

21 Buyō 1816, p. 401. In the last sentence of this quotation, Buyō refers to the 1563 rebellion against Tokugawa Ieyasu of Ikkō Ikki groups connected to Honganji branch temples in western Mikawa, as related, for example, in *Mikawa monogatari* 三河物語. This instance of Buddhist rebellion against Ieyasu when he was still a Mikawa daimyo reappears repeatedly as a sign of Buddhist perfidy.

22 Buyō 1816, pp. 185–86.

23 On p. 161, for example, Buyō states that "there is no denying that miracles do indeed occur," but warns against relying on the vagaries of Heaven, the Buddhas and the gods in dispensing justice. Hur (2000, pp. 203, 210) interprets a similar passage in *Seji kenbunroku* as a reaction to the rise of new, "faddish" deities and a "lament that 'traditional' deities, whether Buddhist or Shinto, had all died out." However, Buyō never mentions the phenomenon of *hayarigami* 流行神 cults, and is certainly not interested in restoring the authority of "traditional" Buddhas and kami.

points out that if the Buddhas and gods do indeed grant benefits to those who offer them most coin, they are themselves champions of the inverted Way of greed, whose motto is that everything is for sale. This is yet another way in which not only Buddhism, but all ritual activity on the part of priests is, at core, a form of prostitution. After all, no rituals were ever performed without “fees,” or, as priests would call them, donations.²⁴

Beyond Buddhism towards a Broader Critique of “Religion”

The association of priests with greed and lust is not limited to temple and shrine priests; it is also a hallmark of that most devious of all heresies, the Christians. Buyō was utterly ignorant about Christianity. This makes it all the more striking that for him this teaching was all about greed:

From what I hear, Christians are greedy. Because they see personal glory as their utmost aim, they engage in all sorts of nefarious practices so as to produce strange occurrences and thereby deceive the world.²⁵

This image of Christianity was ultimately based on the simple idea that this was a sect in which the general faults of “priests” multiplied to reach an extreme of malice. In a roundabout way, Buyō’s misrepresentation of Christianity reveals much about his intuitive understanding of “religion” in general. As if to underline the generic nature of his condemnation of Christianity, Buyō even expands his definition of Christians to include all who succumb to the “Ways of extravagance, lust and greed”: “Even if the people are not actually Christians, they might as well be following the doctrines of that sect now that greed permeates the popular attitude through and through.”²⁶

This leads Buyō further into a striking argument about the evils of all “Ways,” including those that are not inherently immoral, or even, in principle, benevolent:

The First Emperor of the Qin is said to have buried Confucian scholars alive. Everyone speaks of this as inhumane; indeed it was. Yet, considered from the perspective of the realm and state, it is necessary to destroy even the Way of the sages and worthies should it become so dominant as to be detrimental to the state and lead people to put on a front of politeness to those above, while acting arrogantly to those below and indulging themselves in physical pleasures. Given these circumstances, there is no need to show tolerance to the Ways of extravagance, lust, and greed followed by the townspeople and idlers of today. Since these things are as harmful as the Christian sect’s creed, should one not be ready to bury their perpetrators alive? Otherwise the current trend will not just continue endlessly; it will grow daily more rampant, and in the end all will become greedy evildoers.²⁷

24 On the impossibility of “free ritual services,” see Hur 2000, p. 39.

25 Buyō 1816, p. 416.

26 Buyō 1816, p. 416.

27 Buyō 1816, pp. 416–17.

Here Buyō argues that even a legitimate Way, such as that of the Confucian sages, merely teaches people to “put on a front of politeness,” and thus, paradoxically, allows them to indulge in vice without suffering shame. A Way, even if it is sound, will always fall short of inspiring real sincerity; people will merely use it to gloss over their actual misdemeanours. It is thus ultimately a hindrance to benevolent government. This argument takes us beyond the familiar terrain of Buddhism-bashing and anti-clericalism, and can perhaps be described as a form of more radical “secularism.”

Buyō offers a different argument against *all* Ways a few pages further down:

Confucians always speak about the Way of benevolence, but this is something that, like faith in the Buddhas and gods, cannot be counted on. It is true that those who do evil may soon be defeated and that those who indulge in excessive extravagance meet with disaster, or fall ill and see their lives shortened. This may appear to be Heaven’s punishment, or punishment meted out by the gods and Buddhas, just as the teachings of Shinto, Confucianism, and Buddhism say. But such punishment is useless because it comes after the evil has been done; it is as much as making people into evildoers first, and then punishing them afterwards. Is not the true Way of Heaven and of the Buddhas and gods to lead people to the ultimate good *before* they become evildoers? If those Ways cannot do that, they are of no use whatsoever. Clearly neither the sun and the moon nor the gods can overcome selfish human desire. Since it is said that the Buddhas and gods cannot control human action and people cannot follow the intentions of the Buddhas and gods, it is all the more certain that only man can govern man.²⁸

First of all, it is worth noting that Buyō recognizes no difference in ontological status between (the Way of) Heaven (*ten* 天, *tentō* 天道) on the one hand, and the Buddhas and gods on the other. In this, he is breaking with the notion that Heaven stands above the divinities who can be manipulated by priests, as an incorruptible force of absolute morality.²⁹ Buyō does not deny that Heaven, the Buddhas and the gods may well punish evildoers, but he argues that they do so in a haphazard manner—in contrast to the military Way, which dispenses rewards and punishments systematically and correctly. The Way of Heaven, the Buddhas and the gods first lead people towards greed by hearing their prayers, and then punish them for that same greed. This is worse than useless to those who govern the realm. Rather than depending on the “Other World,” the ruler must rely on “men.” The only way to secure peace and dispense righteous government, Buyō concludes, is by establishing a firm system of military control.

In places, Buyō goes even further by casting doubt on the moral nature of not only the Buddhas and gods, but even of Heaven itself. If the Buddhas and gods do indeed grant favours to those who pay priests to perform rituals, this implies that they are as easily corrupted by bribes as are their human caretakers. Heaven may be beyond simple bribery,

²⁸ Buyō 1816, pp. 428–29.

²⁹ This notion was expressed most clearly in a group of seventeenth century texts that are commonly understood to represent *tentō shisō* 天道思想 (Heavenly Way thought). Also later in the Edo period, the notion of a transcendent Heaven was a standard and mostly unquestioned feature of the age’s intellectual landscape. On the concept of the Way of Heaven in *Seji kenbunroku*, as compared with earlier *tentō* thought, see Teeuwen 2012.

but it is still undependable: “The Way of Heaven shines on eras of turmoil as well as order. People commit the heinous crimes of assassinating their lords or murdering their parents and brothers in full view of the sun and moon, and yet these do not cloud over.”³⁰ Buyō vacillates between notions of the Way of Heaven as a moral entity and as a detached, natural process of amoral transformations.³¹

In effect, Buyō argues that the ruler must act as though the Other Realm, be it conceived in terms of Heaven, Buddhas or gods, does not exist. What a ruler should *not* do is identify a true “Way” and seek to establish it in the realm by supporting its “priests,” or by relying on it to reward good and punish evil on its own. In the end, Buyō distrusts all abstract talk of morality as an excuse for those who seek to disguise actual greed and lust. “Ways” of any kind—we would use the term “religion”—are therefore best excluded from public life.

Buyō in Context

Needless to say, not much is truly original in Buyō’s critique of clergy. Monks were classified as “idlers” already by medieval Chinese critics of Buddhism, and in Japan, by authors like Kumazawa Banzan 熊沢蕃山 and Ogyū Sorai 荻生徂徠, to mention just two writers with whom Buyō appears to be somewhat familiar.³² *Seji kenbunroku* is but one example of a long lineage of writings that associate Buddhism with idler corruption.

Buyō’s arguments diverge from more intellectual forms of anti-Buddhist discourse in several ways.³³ He is not interested in Buddhist cosmology; he quotes (in fact, misquotes) only one sutra,³⁴ and does not engage in philological analyses of the authenticity of Buddhist scriptures. He does not criticize monks for withdrawing from society, as Confucians tended to do, but rather for failing to do so—although he fails to see the merits of religious asceticism, too. Finally, Buyō has little to say about the nativist argument that Buddhism is non-Japanese. This suggests that the notion of Buddhism as the essence of the “inverted Way” of greed, lust and corruption was widespread, held even by people who did not display any allegiance to one of Buddhism’s rival teachings, be it Confucianism or Shinto.

Buyō does not criticize Buddhism from the standpoint of a Confucian or a nativist of the *kokugaku* 国学 school. He is openly critical of Confucianism as a doctrine of formalism that hinders warriors in their use of legitimate military means. He shows no interest in *kokugaku*, and clearly disagrees with its reverence both for the gods and for the emperor, whom he ignores completely in his work.³⁵ In all these ways, Buyō stands outside the factions of intellectual life in his time. If anything, his ideas remind one of the Chinese

30 Buyō 1816, p. 427.

31 For example, in Buyō 1816, p. 448: “When disorder reaches its ultimate, order is achieved, and when order reaches its ultimate, things fall into disorder; this is the norm of the Way of Heaven.”

32 On the branding of monks as idlers by a range of Edo period authors, see Morimoto 2001, pp. 99–107.

33 For an effective overview of common strands within such intellectual anti-Buddhism, see Kashiwahara 1973.

34 Buyō 1816, p. 154.

35 Buyō co-opts some *kokugaku* terms, showing at least some awareness of this school of thought. One example is the notion of a primeval *Yamato damashii* 大和魂 (“Yamato spirit”), which he uses to denote Japan’s ancient mastery of the military Way (Buyō 1816, p. 403). Another is the term *amatsu hitsugi* 天津日つぎ (“the dynasty of the sun in Heaven”), which Buyō uses in the waka poem that concludes his work: “Longing to recompense ruler and people/I pray fervently, with all my might/Before Heaven’s successor!” (p. 452). Here this phrase refers not to the emperor, as anyone familiar with the basics of *kokugaku* thought would expect, but to the shogunal line, whose ancestor Tokugawa Ieyasu ruled in accordance with Heaven.

legalists (Ch. *fajia* 法家) who propagated rule by punishments and rewards rather than by virtuous example; this school was certainly not represented on Edo's intellectual scene in institutionalized form.

Rather than the doctrinal objections of Confucians and nativists, Buyō held a firm conviction that priests, whether Buddhist, Shinto, or otherwise, were by definition agents of greed and lust, commerce and prostitution. In places, conventional rhetoric masks this basic attitude, and Buyō finds himself backing up his appeals for reform by pleading that Heaven or the Buddhas and the gods may once more protect the realm, if only the corruption of the last hundred years is properly dealt with.³⁶ Yet the more one reads, the more disingenuous Buyō appears when his rhetoric seems to allow some role for priests or their divinities in a reformed Japan. Buddhism, and indeed all priestly activity regardless of denomination, is too closely associated with the inverted Way.

That this attitude was far from unique is illustrated by another work in the same genre: *Keizai mondō hiroku* 経済問答秘録 (A Private Record of Questions and Answers on Good Government), written in 1833 by the Bizen merchant Shōji Kōki 正司考祺. Kōki's work is much more intellectual in tone than Buyō's, and considerably more sophisticated in its arguments. According to Ketelaar, Kōki argues that good government is rendered difficult by four fundamental problems that bedevil the world: drink, gambling, lasciviousness, and, last but not least, "priests and other debauchers."³⁷ Buyō does not mind drink so much and has little to say about gambling; otherwise, Kōki's list corresponds closely to what Buyō calls the inverted Way. Ketelaar introduces Kōki as representative of those who reject Buddhism on economical grounds, as a waste of the state's resources. Kōki does indeed argue that priests should be forcibly turned into artisans, so that they may cease to be a drain of the state's resources. At the same time, however, Kōki represents another example of the close association of "priests" with an immoral inverted Way, identified with both greed and lust. Ultimately, Kōki proposes that monks should stay within their temples, refrain from any preaching, and limit themselves to the performance of funerals.³⁸

Conclusion: Comparing Buyō to Western Forms of Secularism

Neither Buyō or Kōki thought in terms of "religion" and "secularism," concepts that were alien to both. It is clear, however, that neither saw a role for priests in public life. Kōki held that preaching should be left to "officials" (*kan* 官), who were to teach moral principles such as filial piety. Buyō was even more radical; he was sceptical of even "good" teachings because he believed they merely inspired duplicity, and, even worse, limited warriors' ability to take decisive action against the enemies of society. Can such views be understood as a form of nascent secularism?

I argue that in many ways they can, but the answer depends to a large degree on one's definition of the term, which is used in different meanings in different contexts. In a politi-

36 E.g. Buyō 1816, p. 172: "If only this evil is reformed and the law restored, the Way of Heaven and the Buddhas and gods will once again illuminate us, shower us with their compassion, and resume their protection of the realm and state."

37 Ketelaar 1990, p. 39. Chapter 20 of *Keizai mondō hiroku* elaborates on the topic of priests, gambling, drink and women.

38 Morimoto 2001, pp. 104–105; Shōji 1833 (vol. 23), p. 88.

cal sense, secularism denotes views that support separation of religion and state, or at least a weakening of the influence of religion within public life. Clearly, Buyō represents a variant on such an argument, as does Kōki. Buyō gives much space to the common trope that Buddhism has “corrupted the state” ever since its arrival in Japan in the age of Emperor Kinmei 欽明 (sixth century),³⁹ and argues that only a return to Ieyasu’s policy of confiscating temple fiefs and disciplining priests can stop the country from sliding into chaos. Kōki’s proposal to reduce monks to temple-confined undertakers is even more unequivocally secularist; it points forward to the restrictions that, ironically, would eventually be imposed not on temples, but on “non-religious” shrines in 1882.

Such a political stance is only possible when it is based on a broader secular, “disenchanted” worldview. Therefore, it invites us to compare this Japanese discourse on religion and secularity with the much better known history of European secularism. According to Taylor, the secularist worldview that emerged in eighteenth century Europe combined an exclusive humanism that rejects all notions of transcendence with what he calls a stadial consciousness: a notion of progress that leads from a less to a more rational society—that is, a less religious society. Central to the development of this modern secularism, Taylor argues, was the ideal of “Reform,” a shift of emphasis from dependence on divine grace to disciplining the self and society.

Buyō clearly stands outside of this European tradition. In particular, he is far removed from what Taylor calls the secular “Modern Moral Order,” which recognizes religion as one of a plurality of autonomous fields of human endeavour. Buyō’s main argument regarding Heaven, the Buddhas and the gods is that these otherworldly entities cannot be depended upon to order society, and that their passiveness in the face of the age’s corruption implies that they are irrelevant, if they exist at all. Buyō goes back and forth between this almost agnostic view that denies the powers of the Other Realm on the one hand, and, on the other, ill-boding predictions that Heaven will soon throw the world into turmoil, or pious hopes that reform will cause Heaven once more to bless the land with prosperity. Moreover, he holds on to the transcendent notion that the “Divine Lord” (*shinkun* 神君) Tokugawa Ieyasu and his shogunal dynasty represent the will of Heaven, while at the same time expressing the disenchanted view that the Way of Heaven represents an ultimately amoral process that is unrelated to human affairs.

Buyō lacks consistency, but this does not mean that the strands of secularism that stand out in his text are in any way less poignant. In their study of modern Asian varieties of secularism, Bubandt and Van Beek stress that “really existing secularisms” are always marked by “fissures and aporias.”⁴⁰ It is the pattern of such fissures that defines the particular characteristics of any local form of secularism. Beyond his apparent inconsistency, Buyō expresses views that remind one of a notion of purely human “Reform.” He argues that rather than depending on divine grace, or trying to “purchase” such grace by “bribing the gods,” the world needs to be brought to order through the consistent application of discipline, both on the level of the individual and of society as a whole.⁴¹ The ability of the Other Realm to bestow benefits on individuals is regarded with some scepticism; either it is

39 Buyō 1816, p. 160.

40 Bubandt and van Beek 2012, p. 5.

41 An example of this as applied to the individual is Buyō’s criticism of those who “spoil” their children by “smothering them with affection” (Buyō 1816, p. 39).

an illusion, or it is a moral problem. When Buyō declares that “miracles do indeed occur,” while at the same time arguing that such otherworldly interference is highly problematic, this marks an important fissure in his brand of secularism.

In his genealogy of European secularism, Taylor identifies Christian “Deism” as a crucial premise for the development of a worldview that focuses on Reform. Deism here denotes the argument that God has endowed mankind with reason and benevolence, and that it is man’s duty to use these gifts to carry out the plan of a God who has withdrawn from the world and can/should not be depended upon to interfere in its events through acts of divine mercy or punishment. Buyō’s views on the Other Realm are, obviously, dissimilar to Deism in many ways. Yet it is clear that in order to arrive at the secular view that man should rule man by disciplining human society without relying on divine favour, it is necessary to sideline the notion of an intervening Other Realm. Both Deism and Buyō’s notion of a passive Other Realm (as an entity that needs to be “ignored”) performed that function.

It is important, however, to recognize that even in Europe, the secularism traced by Taylor coexisted with many other forms, which diverged from it in important ways. In response to Taylor’s genealogical narrative, José Casanova has argued that we must distinguish between two different historical paths leading to different forms of secularity.⁴² The Protestant path, which takes place of honor in Taylor’s account, “takes the form of breaking the boundaries, ‘the monastery walls,’ between the religious and the secular, making the religious secular and the secular religious.” In this model, this-worldly progress through Reform becomes the main goal; whether that Reform is religious or secular becomes irrelevant because in a sense, it is always both. The Latin-Catholic path, by contrast, “maintains the boundaries between the religious and the secular, and pushes those boundaries into the margins, containing, privatizing, and marginalizing everything religious. When it breaks the monastery walls, it will be not to bring the religious into the secular world but to laicize them, dissolving and emptying their religious content and making the religious persons, monks and nuns, civil and laic before forcing them into the world.”

Even Casanova’s two very different “paths” are perhaps not the only routes that can lead towards secularism in all its variations. Naturally, Buyō’s secularism does not coincide neatly with either of these paths; indeed, it displays elements from both. In line with Casanova’s “Latin-Catholic” model of secularity, neither Buyō nor Kōki presents a radically secular understanding of the world that negates transcendence in all its forms. In fact, both are prone to legitimizing the social hierarchy by referring to transcendent entities, notably Heaven. Rather than “making the secular religious,” they seek to contain “religion” (that is, the priesthood) within the temples and shrines, laicize it, and eventually, force it into worldly professions. The religion of priests needs to be marginalized and separated from the state. In contrast to “Protestant” secularism, this variant treats religion as an enemy of the state that is closely associated with corruption. Benevolent government is only possible when the role of religion is minimized, or even eradicated.

Seji kenbunroku is only one example of a wide range of Edo period texts that profess a form of secularism. Obviously, this “secularism” displays many characteristics that distinguish it from Western secularisms, just as Edo period “religion” is only partly congruent with the concept of religion whose history lies hidden in that English word. Like

42 Casanova 2010, p. 276.

“religion,” “secularism” is a term and a category that did not exist in Edo Japan.⁴³ Some argue that this means both concepts are by definition inappropriate, and must be avoided; but the notion that we can transcend our own cultural context and understand a different time and place on its own terms is ultimately an illusion. If one accepts that Japan had “religion,” and that the influence of “religion” was limited by the simultaneous existence of a form of “secularism,” this implies that we need to investigate what that secularism was, and how it differed from the modern secularism that later became such a powerful force also in modern and contemporary Japan. Comparative analyses of other Edo period texts that display clear secularist tendencies may bring us closer to answering this question.

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⁴³ One might argue that, for this reason, it would be more correct to resort to the term “proto-secularism.” This raises the question, though, why no one prefers the term “proto-religion” when writing about premodern times.

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