

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Yamagata Bantō: An Atheist in the Tokugawa Period

Shuhei Fujii

This paper will discuss the atheistic thought of Yamagata Bantō (1748–1821). The general concept of atheism will also be discussed. The term “atheism” is often used only in the Western sense; as such, existing studies of atheism in Japan only focus on modern intellectuals who were influenced by Western atheism. But the merchant-scholar Yamagata Bantō, who lived in the Japanese Tokugawa period (1603–1868), can also be classified as an atheist. In his *Yume no shiro*, Bantō denies any belief in supernatural beings by adopting a rationalistic worldview and criticizing religions from philological, historical, and rationalistic perspectives. According to Bantō, gods were a “skillful means” created by humans for the purpose of guaranteeing peaceful governance. While belief in gods had become commonplace over time, Bantō believed it was impossible to govern contemporary society according to such simple beliefs. He claimed that there was no further need to worship gods. However, he did not deny every form of worship, as he approved of worship that acknowledged obligations to ancestors or ancient sages. Bantō, therefore, showed the way toward a moral life understood from a humanistic standpoint. Bantō’s “no gods” argument was influenced by Western science and Neo-Confucianism. However, because his view was considered reactionary by the Shintoist government, Bantō is little known among modern intellectuals. A study of Bantō will, therefore, make a useful contribution to scholarly knowledge of the universal category of “atheism” and its relevance to local differences in atheistic thought.

Introduction

In recent years, there have been a growing number of studies of atheism, non-belief, and secularism, covering every major world culture. As one of these studies, this paper intends to describe the thought of the Japanese atheist Yamagata Bantō¹ (1748–1821), who lived in the Tokugawa period (1603–1868). The concept of “atheism” in general will also be discussed.

Scholars who study atheism from a non-Western point of view frequently face a major problem. That is to say, although atheism is defined as “an absence of belief in the existence of a God or gods” (Bullivant, 2013, p. 13), the term “god” often refers to a monotheistic Christian god. Western atheists and critics of religion tend to refer only to Christianity, and some, such as Sam Harris (2014), even approve of Buddhism. The atheism discussed here is “atheism” understood in its Western sense as a specific denial of the existence of the Christian god. In Japanese studies, the situation is much the same. For instance, an existing study of atheism in Japan discusses only those forms of atheism that came on the scene after the Meiji period (1868–1912), during which Japanese national isolation ended and cultural exchange between Japan and the Western world commenced (Whyly, 2013). By commencing their analyses during this period, such arguments presuppose that atheism in Japan only came into existence with the introduction of modern Western scientific culture.

These arguments relate to a problem concerning the validity of the word “atheism” as an analytical category. If “atheism” practically denoted merely an absence of “Western” belief, then use of the word ought to be restricted to discussions of Western culture specifically. If we were to adopt this more restricted definition, of course, the above-mentioned view—that atheism only came into existence after the modern period in Japan—would be correct; and, furthermore, it would no longer be appropriate to use the word “atheism” to describe premodern Japanese discourses. Nevertheless, I would like to claim that “atheism” can be used more globally, and that, furthermore, it should be.² To support this view, this paper introduces the thought of the merchant-scholar Yamagata Bantō, and discusses the ways in which he can be regarded as an atheist.

Why should Bantō be described as an atheist? It is not simply because he criticized Christianity: Christianity was banned by the government during that period, and almost every scholar adopted a critical attitude toward Christianity. Bantō is unique, however, due to his attacks on Buddhism and Shinto traditions, both of which are popularly classified as “religions”. Furthermore, Bantō’s naturalistic attitude, based in Western science, indicates that aspects of his thought were influenced by the Enlightenment. From this point of view, Bantō shares common features with Western atheists.

Although, for these reasons, Bantō is primarily characterized as a critic of religion, the word “religion” is also problematic. It is well-known that the concept of religion is a product of the modern West (McCutcheon, 1997). In Japan, the current word that means “religion”

(*shūkyō*) did not exist in the Tokugawa era; rather, the word was invented after contact with Western civilization (Josephson, 2012). Therefore, it is not adequate to use “religion” in reference to premodern Japanese beliefs. For present purposes, it is not my intention to discuss such long-standing arguments over the definition of “religion”; rather, I intend to focus on the word “atheism” specifically and examine its appropriateness as a description of the thought of Bantō.

Studies of Bantō have not received much attention among Western scholars. One of the main reasons for this is that his work has not been translated. Among those who do study Bantō, some focus on his idea of economic reformation (Najita, 2009; Langrill, 2012), while others examine his Confucian thought with no reference to his atheism (Craig, 1965; Najita, 1975; Tucker, 1998). The most significant English study of Bantō is Tetsuo Najita's *Visions of Virtue in Tokugawa Japan* (1987). Although Najita provides an in-depth account of Bantō's thought, biographical details, and intellectual background, the work does not consider his atheism. Bantō is not typically known as an atheist but as a Confucian scholar or economic reformer.

Therefore, the aim of this paper will be to focus on Bantō's atheism, examining his work, background, and influence on later generations. It will also discuss the implications for a clarification of the term “atheism”.

Bantō and His Academy, the *Kaitokudō*

Yamagata Bantō was born to a peasant family in the village of Harima (in present-day Hyōgo prefecture). At the age of thirteen, he succeeded his uncle as the head of one of the branch houses of the Masuya money exchange enterprise. He worked as a financier, and, after many successful trades, he grew the branch house significantly and was subsequently adopted into the main Yamagata household. Although his formal name was Yamagata Yoshihide, he preferred to use his business name, Bantō, a homonym for “branch manager”. While working as a merchant, he studied at the *Kaitokudō*, an academy in Ōsaka.

The *Kaitokudō* was founded by Ōsaka merchants in 1724; two years later, it was accepted as an official academy by the Tokugawa government. The *Kaitokudō* was operated by townspeople who invested money in it, employed scholars, and studied there themselves. Those who excelled became officially known as scholars (Suenaka, 1971; Mizuta, 1973; Najita, 1987). Generally speaking, in the Tokugawa period, the Tokugawa government did not directly operate educational institutions except for the Shōheizaka academy. Instead, each domain (*han*) established domain schools (*hankō*) where only samurai studied. Other people studied at various private educational institutions, such as *terakoya* (elementary schools) or *shijuku* (schools for higher education). The *Kaitokudō*, as a half-official and half-private academy, played an important role in shaping public thought in the Tokugawa period. Najita states that:

No outside authority could forcibly interfere with the inner workings of the academy; here merchants sought universal ideas that confirmed their “virtue” as marketmen and, in turn, made ideological

claims about the special knowledge they possessed, especially regarding the economy. (1987, pp. 5–6)

At the *Kaitokudō*, the teachers taught Neo-Confucian Chinese thought, politics, economics, and Western natural sciences through Chinese literature. The *Kaitokudō* was closed in 1869 in the aftermath of the Meiji Restoration.

Bantō's intellectual background

Bantō's atheism was not created solely by him but was the product of debates with his contemporaries. As Albert Craig (1965) notes, Bantō explored the implications of the union of Neo-Confucian metaphysics and Western science more deeply than did others.

The government closed off Japan during the Tokugawa era; only one trading post for trade with European countries was permitted (the Dutch factory in Nagasaki). However, a few scholars, including Bantō, studied Western knowledge from Chinese and Dutch literature. One subject that had a particularly great influence on Bantō was astronomy. He studied astronomy under the astronomer Asada Goryū³ and understood that stars and planets move in accordance with physical laws. Bantō said that “Heaven only moves. Various weather is caused by the change of the atmosphere. How can it be foreseen?” (1973, p. 154). Such observations amounts to a denial of astrology, for, as he says: “Common astrologers tell when we should remove into a new house or hold ceremonies according to fortune. It is very harmful. Hence, I write no fortunes in this book in order not to confuse the people” (1973, p. 154). Bantō learned this rationalistic view from Western science. He also shows respect for it: “Do not stick to old theories because astronomy and geography are developing year by year. The accuracy of Western Science is unattainable with Japanese or Chinese ones” (1973, p. 179).

Similarly, Neo-Confucianism had a great impact on Bantō's “no gods” argument³. Neo-Confucianism, which characteristically explains the universe based on principle (*li*) and matter (*qi*), can be understood as deistic or pantheistic. Encountering Chinese Neo-Confucianism, the seventeenth-century Jesuit Nicolas Malebranche regarded it as atheistic. The theologian Michael Buckley (1987, p. 153) notes that Malebranche denounced Neo-Confucianism because he detected in it similarities with Spinoza.

Nevertheless, not all Neo-Confucian thought has an atheistic orientation. For example, Kamada Ryūō (1754–1821), who also studied Neo-Confucianism in the same period, takes a different view of gods. In his work *Shingaku Oku no Kakehashi*,⁴ Ryūō states that every god is only a variation of the principle, saying:

Although people worship their ancestor's spirit, the god of the lord or sages, each object of worship does not have its spirit. In the heaven, there are only empty names ... not only demons but also gods of sky, earth, sun, moon, mountains, rivers, hearths, wells, houses, gates, etc. are variations of the principle. They do not exist independently. (1971, p. 438)

However, “even if they are only empty names, if its name is its principle and benefit must come into existence” (1971, p. 440). That is to say, given its name, the god obtains a part of the principle and the power to give benefit to worshippers. Moreover, Ryūō even recommends worshipping gods when he states that:

As our Confucians are plain and use no skillful means, we think that there are only gods who are empty names, but since we were born and live in the land of gods we must worship them. (1971, pp. 440–441)

In his view, even Confucians are obliged to worship Japanese gods. We can infer from this that even a Confucian who accepts only the existence of *li* and *qi* needs to take further steps to deny other religious faiths.

Bantō had a number of important intellectual influences within Japanese as well. Tominaga Nakamoto was one of his predecessors. Nakamoto—seen as a Japanese pioneer of the comparative study of religions by Michael Pye (2003, p. 14)—studied Buddhist, Confucian, and Shinto literature critically, stating that these literatures were affected by the social and historical contexts in which they were written and so did not contain universal truth (Katō, 1967; Shimazono, 2008). He was expelled from the Kaitokudō because he denied all of these traditions, including Confucianism, claiming that they contain unsavory tendencies (Najita, 1987, p. 100). Nevertheless, Goi Ranshū and Nakai Chikuzan, both scholars at the Kaitokudō, exerted a more direct influence upon Bantō. Adopting a naturalistic point of view, Ranshū criticized the metaphysical views of the preceding Neo-Confucians, Buddhist enlightenment and salvation, and the divine origins of the Japanese nation (Najita, 1987, p. 137). Indeed, Chikuzan, Bantō’s master, developed a prototype of Bantō’s atheism. He not only argued against belief in mystical creatures such as *Tengu* (crow-like demigods) as superstitious, but he also denied the existence of any supernatural concepts, including the heaven and hell of Buddhism (Tao, 1988).

Bantō and his predecessors had two kinds of common opponents. One of them was the Sorai school. This school, established by Ogyū Sorai, while showing the socio-political orientation of Confucian thought, is nevertheless critical of Neo-Confucianism. All of the above-mentioned scholars opposed this school, and one of the points at issue was the worship of gods. For example, Chikuzan argued that Sorai’s claim that the worship of gods was politically useful was not only based in false belief but was also harmful to the people (Tao, 1988, p. 163). Similarly, Bantō critically mentioned Sorai several times in his work.

The second opponent of Bantō was the Kokugaku (National Learning) school. Founded in Motoori Norinaga’s writings, the Kokugaku school recommended the study of Japanese classical literature, attempting to clarify the spirituality and culture peculiar to the Japanese nation. They regarded Shinto as the indigenous religion of Japan,⁵ and denied any foreign influence from Buddhism or Confucianism (Kuroda, Dobbins, and Gay, 1981). A Kaitokudō scholar, Bantō severely attacked the National Learning school. He pointed out that

Norinaga’s belief in the traditional Japanese gods was irrational, and also argued that Norinaga’s attempt to establish Shinto as an indigenous religion was ethnocentric. As Maeda Tsutomu writes: “in Bantō’s period, to deny the existence of gods believed by Shinto scholars or National Learning scholars means denying an idea that Japan is ‘a land of gods’ indirectly” (2003, p. 2). Bantō’s criticisms were also aimed at those Confucian scholars who were trying to syncretize Confucianism and Shinto, such as Hayashi Razan or Yamazaki Ansai. On Bantō’s stance towards them, Najita writes:

What is fresh about Yamagata’s presentation, however, is the sustained and uncompromising manner in which he presented his broadside attack on mystifications of all sorts, including nationalistic teachings about Japan’s spiritual uniqueness. (1987, p. 253)

Yume no Shiro: The Book of Rationalism

Bantō wrote a series of books about his studies titled *Yume no Shiro*. These took twenty years to complete and were finished in 1820. *Yume no Shiro*⁶ can be translated as “In Place of Dreams”. Najita (1987, pp. 222–223) explains that the word “dream” refers to religions or superstitions, both of which Bantō intended to replace with scientific knowledge. This encyclopedic work consists of twelve volumes consisting of the following: the first volume, “Astronomy”, dealt with cosmology and introduces Copernican heliocentrism. The second, “Geography”, described Japanese and world geography. The third, “the Age of Gods”, cast doubt upon Japanese mythic history. The fourth, “History”, described “real” Japanese history. The fifth, “Constitution”, and the sixth, “Economy”, both dealt with the history of politics, customs, and the economy. The seventh chapter, “Confucian Literature”, as well as the eighth, “Other Literature”, expounded upon Chinese literature. The ninth chapter, “Heresy”, criticized Buddhism from a Confucian point of view. Chapters ten and eleven, “No Gods: Part I and II (*muki*)”⁷ argued on behalf of atheism. Finally, chapter twelve, “Other Discourses”, addressed medicine.

In what follows, I focus on the tenth and eleventh volumes, “No Gods (*muki*).” In these volumes, Bantō discussed atheism, which he called the “no gods argument (*muki ron*)”. Bantō stated that, “Concerning the no gods argument, it cannot be said that it is not my invention” (1973, p. 694). The idea of *muki* can, therefore, be seen as central to the whole encyclopedic work.

Bantō’s “No Gods” Argument (*Muki Ron*)

In the first book of *Muki*, Bantō explained the ancient Chinese understanding of gods by citing a number of works of Chinese literature. Here he followed the example of Ruan Zhan. Bantō admired Ruan Zhan because he claimed that there were no gods. Bantō then cited *Records of the Grand Historian*,⁸ stating that the *ki* mentioned in this book referred to the gods of mountains and rivers (1973, p. 475). He also stated that *shin* meant something incomprehensible, and that, therefore, the *ki* or *shin* mentioned in the Confucian literature ought to be understood as metaphoric. According to him, although Confucianism

taught the worship of nature gods or ancestors, its purpose was not worship itself. Rather, its real purpose was to warn people not to be selfish, and he said the reference to gods was a “skillful means”⁹ for the purpose of promoting good government. Bantō stated that “[Confucian] sages peacefully govern the people by using gods” (1973, p. 486). This was because people would not fear heaven (*tian*) and would do evil things if they believed there were no gods, no punishment, and no benefit from believing in gods. Therefore, the idea that gods existed was a “skillful means” to keep people ethical. Although ancient societies were governed peacefully through the use of gods, Bantō stated that contemporary societies cannot be governed in this way because their customs had become too complex. He stated, therefore, that it was necessary to think of being as being, non-being as non-being, known as known, and unknown as unknown. Bantō pointed out the description of worship in the *Doctrine of the Mean* and the *Analects*,¹⁰ which argued that the people must worship gods “as if they are existent” (1973, pp. 498–499). According to Bantō, Confucius would have written that “they are existent” if he believed in gods, or he would have written that “they are non-existent” if he did not believe in gods. By using the phrase “as if,” Confucius signaled neither belief nor disbelief. By adopting this attitude, Bantō avoided the criticism that the no-gods argument is blasphemous. Concerning the denial of gods, he stated:

I do not condemn gods, but respect them. I wrote that there are no spirits, no benefits from them and no gods in this book while respecting them. Do not blame me for not fearing the heaven and gods, and not following the ancient and present national or ritual laws. (1973, pp. 514–515)

Here he followed Confucius’ “respectful distancing”. This term shows Bantō’s typical attitude toward religious teachings. In explaining why distancing means respecting, he compared it to an attitude toward lords: to come near a lord is to despise him; if you have a respectful mind, you must keep your distance from him. Likewise, he said that:

Distancing from gods must be seen as respectful, approaching them must be seen as blasphemous. Therefore, god-affirmative arguments are blasphemous, while no-gods arguments are respectful. It is the essential point in serving gods. (1973, pp. 577–578)

It is interesting how Bantō tries to keep gods at a distance while avoiding the criticism of other scholars.

As I have shown above, in the first book of *Muki*, Bantō critically interpreted ancient Chinese literature in order to obtain the basis for his “no gods” argument. His main points were as follows. Ancient sages understood that there were no gods; however, they taught people to worship them in order to keep them ethical and to govern them peacefully. This argument should not be seen as blasphemous because it involved a “respectful distancing”.

In the second volume of *Muki*, Bantō discussed the reason he used the “no gods” argument, following the Japanese history of religious traditions. In his view, Shinto was originally limited to members of the imperial house, who worshipped the sun as their ancestor. Over time, however, additional objects of worship were added, especially after the introduction of Buddhism, and the beliefs of the Japanese people became more complex. He noted:

In Japan, from the ancient period, people used to pray to gods, tell fortunes and offer a prayer for peace by tradition ... but since the introduction of Buddhism, everything was mixed with Buddhism, became syncretic ... It is derived from the mind which thinks that there are gods; wicked priests took advantage of this and spread false teachings ... The heresy in the ancient period was not so harmful since people’s mind were artless; therefore, sages made god-affirmative arguments. If they observed how the present people indulge gods, they would use the no gods arguments. (1973, p. 558)

Again, Bantō interpreted ancient sayings about gods as a skillful means. He said that because the everyday life of the people became more complex in comparison with the ancient period, we must now tell the truth. Bantō also criticized Buddhism. Throughout the ninth volume, Bantō blames Buddhism for spreading superstitious beliefs. This was a severe criticism. For much of the third volume, he cast doubt upon Japanese mythical history on account of its inherent improbability and its absence of written sources. According to Bantō:

The introduction of writing is the achievement of the *Ōjin* emperor.¹¹ Events after him should be seen as facts, while events before him should not be seen as facts because they have been transmitted orally... [Regarding Japanese mythical history] how can intercourse bear lands, mountains, rivers and plants? How can washing eyes, stroking a nose, swearing by the Milky Way and killing *Kagutsuchi* [a god of fire] bear children? ... Without writing, people could only say what they were told. This is why, concerning three sovereigns in China and the Age of Gods in Japan, it is best to ignore them. (1973, pp. 272–273)

Similarly, he said about Chinese literature:

Know that mysterious things written in various works of literature are all delusive discourses. As I have argued in the previous book, those works of literature, such as the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*¹² or the *Collected Biographies of Immortals*,¹³ except books by Confucian sages, are all distorted or delusive ones by Shintoists or Buddhists. They must not be treated as sources. (1973, p. 433)

In the second volume of *Muki*, he examined stories about gods in Japan and denied that they are real. He stated:

There have been delusive stories about *Oni* [demons] since the Heian period [794–1185], then about *Tengu*, then about [bewitching] foxes. They are all fashions of a period. Fearing those things, ignorant people believe in them. How can such weird things be existent in the world? (1973, p. 568)

Nevertheless, Bantō did not deny every religious belief or practice. He claims that ancestors should be worshipped according to the virtue of “filial piety (*xiao*)”.

Sages with filial piety usually sympathize with their parents. They also think of them always. If they think of them, they instantly worship them by offerings...from which derives all worship, such as the worship of heaven, the earth, mountains, rivers and court rituals. Keep this in mind. You must worship only from sincere filial piety, regardless of the existence of gods. (1973, p. 560)

Here, Bantō not only affirmed ancestor worship but also stated that it was the original form of worship. In his view, once people began to worship their ancestors, they began to worship gods; the former preceded the latter.

From this point of view, he showed respect for the founders of religious traditions, stating that people imagined that sages also worshipped gods. From Bantō’s perspective, this was also true for those who imagined that there was a heaven or hell, contrary to the true intentions of Gautama Buddha. Bantō believed that the original Buddhism did not include belief in gods but that this belief was added later. He adopted a similar view regarding monotheistic religions. About gods, Bantō stated:

Knowing their nonexistence, Gautama Buddha, Jesus, Magomette [Muhammad] and sages said they are existent and used them as a tool to govern people blissfully. Gautama Buddha and Jesus, however, claimed their existence forcefully adding other teachings that brought harmful results. (1973, p. 580)

Although Bantō’s understanding of Christianity and Islam was superficial,¹⁴ here it might be said that his no-gods argument had become more universal in scope.

In the epilogue of *Yume no Shiro*, Bantō wrote two famous poems that directly expressed his thoughts:

There is no hell, no heaven, no self—
Only humankind and the ten thousand things.

In this world there are no gods, Buddhas or demons,
There are surely no mysterious and miraculous happenings. (1973, p. 616)

After the dreams: the influence of Bantō

Once cultural exchange between Japan and Western countries commenced in the Meiji era, numerous thinkers began to criticize religion and turn to atheism. However, none of them referred to Bantō.

There are three reasons for their failure to mention Bantō. First, the spread of his *Yume no Shiro* was restricted. Only several dozen copies existed until the book was published in print in 1916. Second, the Kaitokudō declined rapidly throughout the Meiji Restoration. Najita (1987, pp. 293–299) says that the city of Ōsaka suffered an economic crisis and political upheaval in this period. Famines and peasant rebellions resulted in the fall of a number of merchants, including Bantō’s merchant house. Rebels led by Ōshio Heihachirō, a Neo-Confucian scholar who had once studied at the Kaitokudō, managed to burn more than one-fourth of Ōsaka. Najita regards Ōshio’s uprising as a reaction against Bantō’s rationalism. As a result, the merchants and the Kaitokudō had lost their positions by the end of the Tokugawa period. Third and most important was the de facto state religion during the Empire of Japan period (1868–1947), so-called “State Shinto”. In that period, the government instituted education based on Shinto ethics. They granted freedom of religion, encouraging people to worship at shrines (Shimazono, 2005). In order to resolve the contradiction between freedom of religion and the requirement of all people to practice “State Shinto”, Shinto came to be defined in non-religious terms. Because people were encouraged to believe the emperor was a deity, criticism of Shinto was tantamount to disloyalty to the emperor. Therefore, Bantō’s atheism had to be restricted. For example, Kameda Jirō writes in 1943 that:

It is difficult to argue some parts of his [Bantō’s] discourses under the present circumstances. Therefore, detailed explanations of them are intentionally omitted. For it is unavoidable; I ask for your understanding about this matter. (Kameda, 1943, p. 95)

In addition, Suenaka Tetsuo (1971, p. 1), who has studied Bantō most extensively, similarly indicates that the study of Bantō was still limited by the end of World War II.

After the war ended and the new government was established, several Marxist-scholars became interested in Bantō. They appreciated Bantō’s materialism and atheism while also denouncing him as “a moneylender parasitizing feudalism” (Nezu, 1954, p. 105) and “a bourgeois ideologue” (Sugihata, 1962, p. 110). They thought of Bantō as an imperfect Marxist trapped in feudalism. Indeed, Bantō was often connected to Marxist materialism during this period. Nevertheless, apart from these scholars, Bantō’s atheism has, until more recently, been largely ignored historically.

Conclusion: How Can Bantō Be Classified?

In conclusion, I will discuss whether Bantō can be regarded as an atheist according to the specifically Western understanding of atheism. If not, how can he be classified? First, I will focus on what he denied, that is to say, the existence of gods, religions based on belief in them, and worship other than ancestor worship. The word *kishin* does not necessarily refer to a monotheistic god. Rather, it ought to be interpreted in a broader sense to include superstitions and belief in demons. Concerning religion, instead of the word *shūkyō*, which today refers to religion, Bantō used the terms *hō* (laws) and *kyō* (teachings). However, as

mentioned above, he included Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam in this category, so it might be said that he used the terms to mean much the same thing as “religion”. He also understood that worship is essential for religion and disapproved of it except in regard to ancestors or sages.

Second, in terms of his beliefs, Bantō adopted a materialistic and rationalistic view, as shown in his discussion of the movements of stars and planets and in his denial of heaven and hell. He also adopted a humanistic view. Given his recommendation of the worship of sages or ancestors, the word “humanistic” would be incongruent with Bantō. Clearly, however, he denied any ethical principle based on transcendental authorities. This could be seen as an alternative form of Western humanism.

What about secularism? It is difficult to discuss this because there is a weaker connection between religion and politics in Japan than there is in Western countries; accordingly, in Japan, criticism of religion does not much shape the form of secularism. Concerning the Japanese situation, philosopher Sin’ichi Funayama writes that:

Mocking and detesting God, modern Western atheism intended to liberate itself from feudalistic political power. Japanese atheism, however, did not provide such a sense of freedom. In Japan, “god” was neither the former ground of truth and reason, nor the former mental and political oppressor. (1999, pp. 205–206)

Bantō also refrained from severe criticism of the government in the Tokugawa period, although the government could be seen to have used Shinto to form a national identity and to have used Buddhism as a means to govern the people. Similarly, Bantō mentioned the Tokugawa political system in the fifth volume of *Yume no Shiro*. There, he expressed his approval of the then-current system: “really, there is no other political system than feudalism!” (1973, p. 334). Furthermore, although he criticized Buddhism, he did not reject the Tokugawa government at all.

Due to his denial of the existence of the gods and his rejection of any worship of them, and also because of his materialism, his rationalism, and his humanism, Bantō deserves to be called an atheist. Bantō’s “no gods” argument shares some commonalities with Western atheism, but it also has some differences. More in-depth studies of Bantō will hopefully, in future, contribute further to research concerning the relevance of the universal category of “atheism” and to research about local differences in atheistic thought.

Notes

¹ For translations of Japanese, I have followed the Modified Hepburn system. Japanese names referred to in the paper are written in their Japanese order, in which the surname precedes the given name. Following this convention, the given names of some famous authors stand in for their surnames. All translations from Japanese are mine.

² Some would recommend using a different word or phrase, such as “secularism” or “nonreligious thought”. However, given the fact that definitions of these words

depend upon each other, this does not solve the problem, as mentioned below.

³ Asada Goryū (1734–1799) was a Japanese astronomer. He studied astronomy from Dutch literature, made telescopes by himself, and observed stars.

⁴ Citations of *Shingaku Oku no Kakehashi* are drawn from the annotated edition *Nihon Shisō Taikei*, vol. 42, edited by Shibata Minoru.

⁵ This means that the concept of “Shinto” was constructed in that period. Interestingly enough, Bantō described the process of constructing the concept: “in ancient Japan, there was no teaching called Shinto. People simply worshipped gods at that time. Current Shinto was gradually established over two or three hundred years. Originally, it was constructed in envy of the prosperity of Buddhism” (1973, p. 513).

⁶ Citations of *Yume no Shiro* will be drawn from the annotated edition *Nihon Shisō Taikei*, vol. 43, edited by Mizuta Norihisa and Arisaka Takamichi.

⁷ *Muki* is Bantō’s own original word. *Mu* means “non-existence” and *ki* is a shortened form of *kishin*. The most important problem is how to translate his original word *kishin*. In the traditional usage of this word, *kishin* refers to gods, both good and bad (cf. Arai Hakuseki’s *Kishinron*). Bantō also follows this usage. However, he includes not only Japanese nature gods and Buddhist deities but also a monotheistic god, as discussed below. For this reason, *kishin* can be interpreted in a more universal sense as “gods”. By the same token, *muki* will be translated as “no gods” in the following.

⁸ The *Records of the Grand Historian* is a history compiled by Sima Qian. The book describes chronicles of the events from the beginning of the legendary Chinese empire to the reign of Emperor Wu of Han dynasty (141–89 BCE).

⁹ Skillful means (*hōben*) is a Buddhist term that originated in the Sanskrit *upāya*. The term refers to a technique of teaching adapted to the understanding of the audience. Because of its specific purpose, such a teaching is justified, even if it contains fictions.

¹⁰ *Doctrine of the Mean* and the *Analects* are both a part of the Four Books, which are fundamental for Confucianism. The *Doctrine of the Mean* is considered to have been written by Zisi (c. 483?–402 BCE), a grandson of Confucius (552–479 BCE). The *Analects* are the words and actions of Confucius as collected by his disciples.

¹¹ *Ōjin* is the fifteenth emperor of Japan (*Tennō*). Although his real existence is controversial, some recent scholars regard him as the first historical (not mythical) emperor.

¹² The *Classic of Mountains and Seas* is a Chinese geographical text written around the fourth century BCE. It includes various descriptions of mythical creatures.

¹³ The *Collected Biographies of Immortals* is a legendary biography of Taoist transcendent persons.

¹⁴ Bantō’s knowledge of Christianity and Islam was drawn from the work of the seventeenth-century scholar Arai Hakuseki. As mentioned above, Christianity, which was introduced to Japan in 1549, was officially pro-

hibited in the Tokugawa period. However, Hakuseki interviewed an Italian missionary who entered Japan illegally. Hakuseki then wrote a book on Christianity and other aspects of Western societies.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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