
*Japanese Historian Amino Yoshihiko's Interpretation
from the Viewpoint of "the People" on the Relationship
between Religion and Secular Authority*

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AMINO Yoshihiko (1928–2004) was a Japanese scholar who studied Japan's Middle Ages (i.e. about 13th–16th centuries), and is known in Japan as one of the historians in the postwar era who aimed to rethink the relationship between Japanese history and the nation-state. In this essay, I would like to analyze *Muen, Kugai, Raku: Nihon Chūsei no Jiyū to Heiwa* [Muen, Kugai, Raku: Liberty and Peace in Medieval Japan], a book by Amino published in 1978.¹ In this work, he assumed a dichotomy between religion and the secular state in Japanese history and viewed medieval religions as a symbol of Japanese "liberty" and "peace." That is to say, he, as a Japanese historian, strongly valued religion over the secular state. In his view, secularization in the modern era is a "terminal disease." He characterized modernity not as the expansion of the domain of the secular state, but rather as the decline of religious power.

This is not because he himself believed in a particular religion, for he was a Marxist and even refused arrangements for any kind of ceremony at his own funeral because of the religious component in such practices. As a student at the University of Tokyo he took part in communist political activities, and described himself as a Marxist until the day he died. Marx, moreover, is known for the famous thesis: "Religion is the opium

1. Amino Yoshihiko, *Muen, Kugai, Raku: Nihon Chūsei no Jiyū to Heiwa* (Tokyo: Heibonsha, paperback version, 1996). William Johnston translated part of the book into English and is now working on a complete translation. Amino Yoshihiko, "Medieval Japanese Constructions of Peace and Liberty: *Muen, Kugai, and Raku*," trans. William Johnston, *International Journal of Asian Studies* 4, no. 1 (January 2007): 3–14.

of the people.” Regardless of Marx’s exact intention in this assertion, most Marxists in Amino’s generation believed that all religions would be abolished in the future.

Given Amino’s Marxist leanings, why then did he value religion over the secular state? In other words, with what kind of criterion did Amino judge “religion vs. the secular state”? The answer, I suggest, has to do with his concept of “the people” [*jinmin*].² Through his comments concerning “the people”—and for Amino this meant communist “people” to a large extent—he reconsidered modern secularization or the issue of “religion vs. the secular state.”

In 1970s the consciousness of “viewpoint” [*kanten*] is one significant issue of historiography. When writing history, former historians by then, whether Marxist or not, postulated the sole scientific objectivity. In response, some historians emphasized historians’ subjectivity and so totally objective history does not exist. Then they discovered that there can be multiple viewpoints in writing history and that the interpretation of history greatly varies according to the viewpoint which a historian adopts. In this sense a viewpoint is a basis of the interpretation of history. In the theoretical discussion about history in Japan, one of the pioneers was another Japanese historian Sera Terushirō (1917–1989), whose assertions Amino may have read.³

When we take into account this paradigm shift at that time, we can read the arguments in Amino’s 1978 text as the response from the medieval studies. He relativized the viewpoint tacitly adopted in other prior discussions and criticized it for a bias toward authority, so by introducing a new viewpoint that is, the viewpoint of “the people,” Amino reached a unique valuation on the relationship between religion and secular authority. In this essay I would like to bring out the framework and logic in his 1978 text which he used to uncover the existence of multiple viewpoints, in order to clarify one of his sources of originality, which on many

2. This term frequently appeared in chapter 23 of Amino’s *Muen, Kugai, Raku*, as the form of “the people’s life” [*jinmin seikatsu*]. I guess that Amino certainly kept in mind the famous discussion by Tsuda Sōkichi (1873–1961) which stressed that “life” has to be described in history.
3. Sera Terushirō, *Rekishigaku Hōhōron no Shomondai* [Problems of Historical Methodology] (Tokyo: Bokutakusha, 2nd edition, 1975), section 1. His idea on “viewpoint” [*kanten*] is based on Max Weber.

topics encouraged many followers to investigate along similar lines and their collective approach has come to be called "social history" among Japanese historians.

In 1978, Amino published a book titled *Muen, Kugai, Raku: Nihon Chūsei no Jiyū to Heiwa*. This book attracted attention in academic circles and is now regarded as one of his representative works. At the beginning of the book, he focused on the phenomena in Japan's Middle Ages where lowly persons, criminals or debt-slaves could escape to non-secular places such as Buddhist temples.⁴ There, they could be free from the burden of their low social status. According to him, in Japan's Middle Ages this kind of phenomenon was popular and the names of such places were "muen," "kugai" or "raku," the title of Amino's book. In his thought, the independence of religion from the secular world enabled these events and so religion in these cases represented "liberty" and "peace." Through this logic, Amino greatly appreciated the significance of religion.

We can illustrate the framework presupposed in the logic of Amino's 1978 work by drawing attention to his key terms. First, he assumed an opposition between "the people" and "authority" [*kenryoku*]. "Authority" here meant warlords and, after Japan's unification in 1603, the feudal government called the Tokugawa Shogunate. In the modern era this "authority" became "state authority" [*kokka kenryoku*]. "Authority," according to Amino, rules and suppresses "the people" as it seeks to establish and retain control. On the other hand, the subordinated "people" try to oppose it. In this way, there is a conflict between "the people" and "authority." This view is nothing other than Marxism's class-struggle.

Next, "authority" conflicts with "religion," as well. Amino often used the term "despotic authority" [*sensei kenryoku*] in the context of "the people vs. authority" and he used the term "secular authority" [*sezo-ku kenryoku*] in the context of "religion vs. authority." Here Amino's framework clearly suggests a "religion vs. secularism" opposition. This is because he thought that Japan's Middle Ages could be interpreted in the same terms as Western European history, for theories drawn from Marx and Engels informed his arguments. While this raises an implicit

4. Amino, *Muen, Kugai, Raku*, chapter 2.

question of whether the dichotomy “religion vs. secular authority” is really applicable to Japan’s Middle Ages, I would like to explore another dimension of Amino’s argument.

Nevertheless, we should note that the two views “the people vs. (despotic) authority” and “religion vs. (secular) authority” are neither new nor particularly unique. Amino, however, integrated these views and drew another conclusion contrary to the then-contemporary perception of religion. This is the discovery of religion’s function of saving the suppressed “people.” The “secular world” is unequal because the social gap widens depending on the amount of “private property” [*shiteki shoyū*], and thus divides “authority” or “the state” from “the people.” On the other hand, Amino thought that religion is basically oriented toward social equality under the name of transcendence like God, and so it is “essentially indifferent to secular authority and force.”⁵ Thus, “the people,” suppressed and unequal in the “secular world,” hoped to escape to religious places. The oppressed “could survive by running to places that were indifferent to the secular.”⁶ Based on this interpretation, Amino found that “religion” functioned to provide an area of refuge for “the people” and was one of the representatives of “liberty” and “peace” in Japan’s Middle Ages.

In the modern era, secular authority adopted the form of the state, seeming to broaden its sphere of control and to weaken the power of religion. We can say this means secularization. Amino represented this as a process of decay, as the collapse of “medieval ‘liberty’ and ‘peace,’” and as a “terminal disease.”⁷

In 1978 Amino supported his own discussion using the historical events of Japan’s Middle Ages as a starting point, but he did not limit his analysis to this period alone. Surprisingly, his book refers to a variety of case studies from both ancient and modern history. Of course this means that he aggressively expanded his logic and for this reason many criticisms against his work have appeared, including ones based on misunderstandings.⁸ In my opinion, however, Amino’s study suggests mainly

5. *Ibid.*, 7.

6. *Ibid.*, 27.

7. *Ibid.*, 7.

8. Yonaha Jun reviewed such criticisms and misunderstandings. Yonaha Jun, “Muenron no

two important points: first, that he intended to rethink the discourse on modernity through his medieval studies, and second, that his approach provides a heuristic method that others have found suggestive.

Next, I would like to examine Amino's viewpoint which made these features possible. Through such an examination, we can obtain some good insights when we discuss "secularization, religion and the state" in a broader sense, and especially in a diachronic or universal perspective without closing it into modernity.

Amino pointed out the ambiguity of historical facts while he developed an uncommon interpretation of Japan's Middle Ages. He admitted that, in many cases, we can interpret one historical fact in opposite ways. In his words, "subordination and liberty are opposite sides of the same coin" and so "it is quite natural to accept both totally contradicting sides."¹⁰ Yet "many historians hitherto," he insisted, "directed their attention entirely to the side of subordination."¹¹ He criticized their common tendency to regard the development of "private property" as "progress" and to view people's resistance to authority as only an "anachronism to be overcome."¹² In this way, he exposed the bias of historians such as Araki Moriaki, that is, their privileging of "private property" and "authority." For example, Amino stated that such privileging is "rightly pointing out one side of the fact," but they also act as "excellent spokesmen for the intentions of the warlords."¹³ This, of course, is an example of his irony. Amino himself, however, did not regard "both totally contradicting sides" equally. He attempted to "turn over the point of view,"¹⁴ rather than to "accept both totally contradicting sides." Such a motivation shaped the writing of his book.

Amino stated his aim at the beginning of his book: "I want to emphasize," he said, "that a kind of 'liberty' and 'peace' that is essentially indifferent to secular authority and force [...] had an enormous impact on

Kūten: AMINO Yoshihiko ha ikani Godoku saretaka" [The Idling of "Muen" Theory: AMINO Yoshihiko Misunderstood], *Oriental Culture* 89 (March 2009).

9. Amino, *Muen, Kugai, Raku*, 231.

10. *Ibid.*, 232.

11. *Ibid.*, 231.

12. *Ibid.*, 116.

13. *Ibid.*, 48.

14. *Ibid.*, 116.

the lives of our ancestors, and that there is the possibility for its ‘revival.’”¹⁵ In writing the above, Amino hoped to describe, through the case of medieval history, the “possibility for its ‘revival’” of Japanese medieval ‘liberty’ and ‘peace’ rather than its modern similarities to a “terminal disease.” With such a goal in mind, clearly Amino’s project on Japanese medieval history was not neutral.

In his book, Amino described, with many historical episodes, “the goal of persons toward the realization of an ideal world”¹⁶ or people’s “orientation to ‘utopia.’”¹⁷ What he meant here by the words “ideal world” or “utopia,” if we go by another work he published in 1976, must be “communist society in the future” and the abolishment of private property.¹⁸ But, to put it another way, his vague expression in 1978 of an “orientation toward ‘utopia’” made the contents of the book not merely a matter of medieval history, and we can read the book as a critique of modernity including capitalism. In this sense Amino Yoshihiko was a historian who asserted his views against modernity through the medium of pre-modern, medieval history.

To conclude, Amino wrote history by presupposing the modern conflict of “religion vs. the state” in the relation to “the people.” Of course his book contained some shortcomings, for example the doubt as to whether the opposition “religion vs. secular authority” is really applicable to Japan’s Middle Ages. Nevertheless, we can see the effectiveness of the third term “the people” for the question of “religion vs. state” and “secularization.” By paying attention to their relationship to “the people” and thereby introducing a new viewpoint, Amino reached a new valuation on “religion” and “authority” in Japan’s Middle Ages. Furthermore he criticized the bias which other prior discussions tacitly adopted. What Amino made clear in 1978 is that the valuation of the modern so-called “secularization” depends on one’s viewpoint and that we can turn over the valuation if we choose another viewpoint. When we think about

15. *Ibid.*, 7.

16. *Ibid.*, 120.

17. *Ibid.*, 121 and 249.

18. Amino Yoshihiko, “Chūsei Toshiron” [On the Medieval City], in *Nihon Chūsei Toshi no Sekai* (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, paperback version, 2001): 174.

“secularization, religion and the state,” whether or not we admit the opposition between religion and the state or the reality of “secularization,” we should be conscious of the viewpoint we adopt. This is because this question reveals the aims of our argument. Introducing alternative viewpoints or perspectives and considering how they function can be fruitful. What kind of viewpoint should we choose? This has much to do with the purpose of our studies, and this is what we have to argue primarily.

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