

Religion and politics in ancient Egypt

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to examine the pervasive influence of religion on politics in a monarchical ancient African kingdom. After a critical reflection on the mythology and cultus of the Sun-God, the apotheosis of the Pharaoh and the cult of the dead in ancient Egyptian society, it was found that religion was indispensable in ancient Egypt. Religion and politics in ancient Egyptian society were inseparable. Ancient Egyptians were incurably religious. Social and political life was a religious phenomenon. The king of Egypt, Pharaoh was not only despotic, but comprehensively authoritarian. Ancient Egyptian society was a monarchy. The idea of democracy was unknown in ancient Egypt.

Key words: Religion and Politics in Ancient Egypt; Egypt and the Sun-God; Egyptian Mythology;

INTRODUCTION

Religion was the dominant social force in ancient Egypt. Religious influence was pervasive affecting almost everything. Egyptian religion developed from simple polytheism to philosophic monotheism, with every community having a guardian deity which personified the powers of nature. Ancient Egyptian literature and philosophy had religious undertones. Ancient Egyptian art was deliberately an expression of religious symbolism. Egypt, like any other African state was deeply religious, with every city and town having its own peculiar deity as the "Lord of the city".

The list of gods found in the tomb of Thutmose III shows that Egyptian polytheistic *cultus* had up to seven hundred and forty deities. The gods are portrayed in a marital relationship with the goddess who bore them a son, which resulted in the formation of a divine triad, where the father was not always a chief, but also plays the role of prince consort, and the principal deity functioned as the goddess. The chief gods dwelt in a secluded temple, the priests worshiped, awoke the gods each morning with a song, bathed, dressed and fed them. The priests acted as representatives of the pharaoh, who was regarded as a living god – the son of the sun god- Ra (*Aid to Bible Understanding* 492).

The mythology and cultus of the sun-god:

Archaeological evidence of Egyptian religious statues, religious paintings, art and writings has not sufficiently guided us to discover the actual religious beliefs of ancient Egypt. But it is glaring that there was lack of unity of belief because of regional

differences. It is also evident that even though the god – Ra, was known by seventy-five different names, very few of the hundreds of deities were worshiped nationally. The most influential pantheon was made up of the trinity – Osiris, Isis (his wife), and Horus (his son). Egyptians also worshiped the "cosmic" gods under the leadership of Ra, the sun-god, which also included the worship of the gods of the moon, sky, air, earth and the Nile River (*Aid to Bible Understanding* 492).

Perhaps the most important Egyptian strand of religion was the Osiris cult which started as nature religion. Osiri was personified by the growth of vegetation and life-giving powers of River Nile. The myth of Osiris death and resurrection has it that Osiris was the king of Egypt, who killed his brother Seth, also a god. Osiris' body was butchered into pieces and scattered all over the country. Osiri was a good king, who trained his people in the art of farming, practical arts and made laws for peace and order. His brother Set killed him and butchered his body into pieces. His wife who doubled as his sister, searched and found the pieces body, put them together, and restored his body miraculously back to life.

The risen god came back to power as king, ruled for a short period and descended to the world beyond as the judge of the dead. His son, Horus who was born after his death grew up, and avenged his father's death by killing Set. Egyptians knew that the Osiris legend was a myth. Initially, the death and resurrection of Osiris was interpreted to symbolize the recession of the Nile in the autumn and the

beginning of the flood in the spring. With the usual metamorphosis of religion, the human qualities of Osiris reflected the paternal solicitude and affection of Osiris for his subjects. "...the faithful devotion of his wife and son-appealed to the emotions of the average Egyptian, who was now able to see his own tribulations and triumphs mirrored in the lives of the gods... the death and resurrection of *Osiris* came to be regarded as conveying a promise of personal immortality for man" (Burns 35).

As *Osiris* triumphed over death, and the grave, even so, those who follow his footsteps shall inherit eternal life. The victory of *Osiris* posthumous son, Horus over Set was a miniature of the ultimate ascendancy of good over evil in the cosmic struggle. It was at the end of the middle kingdom and in the beginning of the Empire that Egyptian religion attained its highest perfection in the merger of the solar faith with the cult of *Osiris*. The unique status of *Re* as the god of the living, and epitome of good in the world was equated duly with the functions of *Osiris* as the giver of personal immortality and judge of the dead. Folk cults affected the implementation and propaganda of state religion. Images of some deities were embossed in official cult.

Fertility deities in ancient Egypt included *Min*, *Amon*, *Khnum*, *Isis*, among others. But with time *Osiris* emerged as a dominant influence in folk agricultural belief. *Osiris* – the cult of fertility was originally the local patron god of Busiris (Jedu) in Delta, and was always portrayed with Lotus, or grape vines. Archaeologists have discovered the silhouettes of *Osiris* that were made out of sown wheat on a layer of soil that was sprinkled onto a special wooden frame. The sprouted grains created a vivid image of the god (Tokarey 184). Ancient Egyptians celebrated annually the death and resurrection of *Osiris*. The festivities that were organized according to the moon calendar which lasted eighteen days, involved ritual ploughing and sowing.

Segei Tokarey has described the myth of *Osiris* as a graphic account of the transitions which grains undergoes from the time of planting to sprouting "The folk cult of *Osiris* represented a variation of the popular ancient agricultural cult of dying and resurrecting spirit of plant life" (185). *Osiris* was not only the god of agriculture and vegetation, but also the god of judgment over the dead. *Osiris* was married to the goddess, *Isis* who was the chief of goddess. Their son is always pictured as a man with a hawk's head (Clement 46). There was a totemic dimension in Egyptian traditional religion - animal

reverence. Polytheism in ancient Egypt degenerated to the worship of sacred animals. Sacred animals in ancient Egypt included the cat, hawk, ibis and crocodile. Prominent gods were presented as having the human physique with the head of animal or bird. The god, *Horus* was represented with a falcon's head. *Thot* had the representation of the head of an ibis, or ape. The gods were thought to incarnate in the body of animals. "The belief that such animals as cats, baboons, crocodiles, jackals and various birds were sacred by virtue of their association with certain gods resulted in the Egyptians' mummifying literally hundreds of thousands of such creatures, burying them in special cemeteries" (*Aid to Bible Understanding* 493).

The cult of the dead: The king was the link to the gods. Egypt's kings identified fully with the gods. *Menes* declared himself as the "two ladies," that is, the goddesses who represented Upper and Lower Egypt. Since the king was divine, vast resources of the state were concentrated to glorify the throne and accord proper homage to the king. Egyptian social and religious life was pre-occupied with preparation for the afterlife. From the period of the Old Kingdom, Egyptians believed that dead bodies must be preserved to ensure the continued survival of *Ka*, the indestructible essence, or the vital life force of the deceased. In 3200 B.C., and at the peak of Egyptian civilization, the cult of the dead was established, which culminated into the process of mummification where pyramids were erected to house the remains of the kings. Philip Bishop writes: "The great pyramids at Giza were gigantic constructions of limestone block. The largest covered thirteen acres at its base, and was built of more than two million huge stone blocks. Shafts and rooms in the interior accommodated the pharaoh's mummified body and the huge treasure of objects required for his happy existence after death" (32, 33).

The process of mummification was a complex procedure. The dead body was taken to a mortuary, and under the supervision of a priest, specialist workers extract the brains through the nose and emptied the body cavity through an incision in the left side. The body along with its major internal organs were placed in a vat of natron - a naturally occurring salt" (Benton and Diyannic 40, 41). The entire process may last for a period of seventy days. The embalment was done to ensure that the *Ka*, or life force could continue to live on in the body. To be sure of the survival of the *Ka*, a miniature of dead person was made in a hard stone, to serve as a backup in

case anything bad and unexpected happen to the mummy. The next most important thing to do in the interest of the deceased was to place the Books of the Dead in between the mummy's leg.

From the time of the New Kingdom, Egyptians were convinced that only a sinless soul could enter into afterlife. The dead undergo last judgment, which consisted of two tests before *Osiris* under the supervision of *Anubis* – the controller of funerals and cemeteries, who stood in as a man with a jackal's head. It was assumed that the dead are interrogated by a panel of deities about their activities while on earth, while their hearts, which is the seat of the soul, were weighed on a scale against an ostrich feather, which symbolized *Maat* – the goddess of truth. Stokstad avers that these beliefs gave rise to one specific funerary practice among the non-royal classes. Family members were expected to prepare a papyrus scrolls which contain magical texts, or spells to assist the dead pass the test. Such scrolls were called Books of the Dead (Stokstad 124, 125).

Apotheosis of the pharaoh: Life in ancient Egypt centered exclusively on the king and the royal family – the house of pharaoh. William McNeill has described ancient Egypt as a single temple community unit large with a fundamental division of society between the peasant masses and the household of a god, and the god in Egypt was incarnated in the king. Trade and important economic enterprises were controlled and managed by representatives of the divine household. McNeill posits thus: “The divine status of the pharaoh imparted to the central government a stability never attained by the high kingship of Mesopotamia, for the doctrines of Egyptian religion gave the god-king a hold upon his subjects that had no parallel in a land whose rulers, however powerful, were not themselves divine” (74).

Apart from the divine status, ancient Egypt existed to favor the king. The monumental royal cemeteries of the pharaohs, the great pyramids that housed the mummies can still be seen at Giza, near the Western bank of the Nile. Magnificent temples, sanctuaries and rock-cut tombs are still present at Luxor, Karnak and in the Valley of the kings. The official state religion, in the words of Whitehouse and Wilkins, showed an obsessive preoccupation with eschatological rites and the bizarre ritual of mummification (15).

The ritual mythology of ancient Egypt accorded the rulers – the pharaohs a unique status. Ninian Smart

observes that the personality of the pharaoh “became the political and religious pivot of Egypt's widespread culture and the key to social order and that religiously, the pharaoh was the meeting point between humanity and divinity, the meeting point between the invisible and the visible worlds, the point of contact between heaven and earth” (287). Pharaoh's claim to divine kingship favored political stability in ancient Egypt.

Probably from 3100 B.C. to 3400 B.C. a warrior king by name Menes united Lower and Upper Egypt into one Kingdom. From that time, the Kings of Egypt became very powerful, despotic and authoritarian. A new title was adopted ‘*Pero*’ or ‘the Pharaoh’, an Egyptian word for “the great house” or “the great palace”. Menes had the honor to be the first king of the new dynasty. Since the king's dwelling place had to befit that of a god, a magnificent palace was built for the king.

Pharaoh was the cynosure of religious and political life in the old kingdom. It was the prerogative of the pharaohs to administer the wealth, resources, and people to all Egypt. McKay, Hill and Buckler writes: “... The pharaoh was not simply the mediator between the gods and Egyptian people. Above all, he was the power that achieved the integration between gods and humans, between nature and society that ensured peace and prosperity for the land of the Nile” (22).

As a policy, pharaoh owned all the land, was the commander-in-chief of the army and controlled the irrigation system. Social inequality was rife in ancient Egypt. The society was divided into three broad classes. In the upper class, there were the priests, the court nobility, and the landed nobility. While the priest presided over religious ceremonies, especially burials, the court nobles served as government advisers, while the landed nobles managed their large estates. The upper class lived in affluence with “palatial homes, with luxurious furnishings, elaborate gardens and sumptuous food (Wallbank et al 30, 31). The middle class was made up of skilled artisans, rich traders, teachers, artist, doctors, and scribes. Scribes, who served as letter writers, occupied an important position in ancient Egypt, because of the low level of literacy. The lower class was made up of slaves and peasants. “The slaves were usually prisoners of war. Like the peasants, they worked on farms, irrigation systems, roads, and building projects. The peasants were heavily burdened by taxes and forced labor, had few political rights” (Wallbank 31).

The glory, power and prosperity of the pharaohs did not translate into good governance for ancient Egyptians. While the king and his family enjoyed everything, life for the ordinary Egyptian was a difficult and painful experience. Poor people were not allowed to enjoy the beneficence of the Nile without a hard price. The annual flooding of the Nile did not reduce the burden and suffering of the Egyptian farmer. Poverty was a common experience in ancient Egypt.

Up to 20 percent of the total harvest was paid as tax to the king. The process of tax collection could be brutal and heartless. Majority of ordinary folk were just a little above serfs, peasants were compelled into forced labor, which included building of pyramids and canals. There was compulsory conscription into the pharaoh's army. Ancient Egyptian society was an admixture of freedom and constraint, because there was neither a caste system, nor racial discrimination.

It was possible for the talented and hardworking citizen to rise to any level of choice. Evidence of social mobility, which dates back to the new kingdom, is the biblical story of Joseph, who was sold into Egypt as a slave, and rose to become the second in command only to pharaoh (Mckay, Hill and Buckler 25). The views of H. Frankfort that "pharaoh's rule was not tyranny or his service slavery" (119-120), is subjective and misleading. The quantum of evidences from history and archaeology affirms the fact that ancient Egypt was a good picture of oriental despotism.

Religion and politics: Politically, Egypt was a polytheistic theocracy in the Old Kingdom. The pharaohs ruled as God's agents. "Economic energy and material resources in considerable amounts were squandered in providing elaborate tombs and in maintaining a costly ecclesiastical system" (Burns 33). The unification of Egypt under the Old Kingdom led to the political consolidation and fusion of deities. All guardian divinities were merged into the almighty sun god *Re* or *Ra*. After the establishment of Theban dynasty, the deity was renamed Amon or Amon-Re after the god of Thebes. Gods with agro-vegetative potency were merged into a new deity called Osiris – the god of the Nile. "The most important deities in Egypt's religion and cosmology were the sun god *Re* (or Ammon) and the Nile spirits Isis, her husband-consort Osiris, and their son, the falcon-god Horus" (Sherman and Salisbury 17).

In the Old Kingdom the solar faith, which was the worship of *Re* dominated the religious sphere. It was the official state religion with the presumed power to

grant immortality both to the state and to the citizenry. As the guardian spirit, *Re* was worshipped as the embodiment of righteousness, justice, truth and the defender of the moral order. The solar faith did not give any spiritual or material blessings to individuals, it was not the religion of the peasantry, except that their welfare was the responsibility of the state.

The most popular of all the gods was *Horus*. It was the kings who worshiped Horus, who first unified Egypt in the first and second dynasty, and end of the fourth millennium B.C. This was achieved through the transformation of tribal gods into the sun-god. Ancient Egyptian religion was deeply affected by political changes. Thus, there was either a new emphasis, or accretion and syncretism dictated by political exigency. When the capital was relocated to Memphis, in the third dynasty that is, 3000 B.C., the official state god became *Ptah* of Memphis. The religious horizon changed in 2700 B.C., when the fifth dynasty came to power with the capital in the city of On (Heliopolis), the god *Aten* (*Ra*) became supreme god. In the eleventh and twelfth dynasties (2100-1800), the capital city relocated again to Thebes with *Amon* as the head of the pantheon, enjoying popularity and official support comparable to the former supreme god – *Ra* (*Amon-Ra*). In the seventh century B.C., and during the 26th Sais dynasty, Sais goddess *Neith*, which probably had a Libyan origin, was worshiped as the supreme deity in ancient Egypt.

The process of unifying Egypt which was a political decision impacted seriously on Egyptian pantheons as some deities gained worshipers outside their initial and known territories. Some functionaries were elevated as patrons of vital human activities. The god of Hermopolis, *Thot* (an ibis), was made the patron of scribes and scholars, *Anubis* of Sint - god of the afterlife, *Sekhmet* of Latopolis - the goddess of war, and *Min* of Copta - the god of foreigners, et cetera. The gods were also identified with cosmic phenomena, *Aten-Ra*, *Horus*, *Osiris*, *Amon*, *Anher*, *Sebek* and *Munt* were variously connected with the sun; *Thot*, *Isis*, *Khons*, to the moon; *Hathor* and *Nut*, to the sky; while *Min* and *Geb* to the earth.

Priestcraft and superstition in ancient Egyptian religion: After the establishment of the Empire, ancient Egyptian religion passed through various forms of perversion through organized priestcraft and unfounded superstition. The sincere quest for immortality by the average Egyptian religionist was manipulated by a treacherous priesthood. A less

naïve formulation of immortality was adopted to the effect that the dead were to appear before *Osiris* for judgment over their earthly deeds. The righteous souls who passed the test were believed to have entered a celestial realm of everlasting happiness. Burns describes the fortune and rewards of the righteous: "They would find lily-lakes on which to sail, pools of sparkling water in which to bathe, and shady groves inhabited by singing birds and every manner of gentle creature. The unfortunate victims, whose hearts revealed their vicious lives, were condemned to perpetual hunger and thirst in a place of darkness, forever cut off from the glorious light of *Re*" (35).

As in the other religions, priestcraft in ancient Egyptian religion was in the selfish interest of an irreligious priesthood. The desire for justice and social righteousness was circumvented. Magic and superstition took the centre stage. The priests became very powerful and strong with exploitative tendencies. As the highest display of greed, the priests deceptively inaugurated the practice of selling magical charms which supposedly have the power to prevent the heart from betraying the real character of the deceased. The priests devised a formula that were inscribed on rolls of papyrus and placed in the tomb, allegedly to facilitate the easy passage of the deceased to the celestial plane. The collection of these mortuary inscriptions later became known as the Book of the Dead, Burns insists that it was not in any way an Egyptian Bible (36).

Robert Brow informs us that the influence and impact of priestcraft in ancient Egypt reached a point where the organized priesthood of the sun-god *Re* successfully overshadowed the king from about 2400 BC, which eventually led to a religious revolution spearheaded by the barons who divided Egypt into warring states and forcefully subjected the priests to state control. Commenting further on the negative impact of priestcraft, Brow posited that it takes away the joy of worship, individual piety, truth and justice. It stifles religious freedom and divorced morality from religion. The greatest tragedy of priestcraft according to Brow is that it compels men of conscience to fight against "God", since the corrupt priests often claim to be the ambassadors of God (22, 24).

CONCLUSION: As far back as the Early Dynasty period, and until the invasion of the Hyksos, Egypt, in a splendid isolation promoted a civilization that projected the religious beliefs of the rulers and the stability of the state. The state religion of Egypt was in the form of theocratic polytheism – a state ruled by the gods, "Believing that the deities had planned their

country's future from the beginning, the Egyptians thought of their society as sacred" (Mathew and Platt 16). Egyptians were taught that the king, as god on earth, embodied the state. When the gods came together, there is always fusion, or merging of cults in line with the theological speculations of the priests.

The priests benefited immensely from the structure and dynamism of the traditional religion. *The Encyclopedia Britannica* observes that the polytheistic religion of Egypt was not an embodiment of truth and moral upliftment, rather it was pivoted by magic and superstition. Ancient Egyptians employed religious magic to prevent disease, spiritism and occult played dominant role in ancient Egypt (53). The history of religion shows that it was in ancient Egypt that a religiously created conscience confronted the ancient man with the judgment of the dead. The earliest evidence that judgment awaited a man after death was found in Egypt. The idea of post-mortem judgment was traced to the corpus of religious texts known as the Pyramid Texts. Ancient Egyptian religion gave full attention to after-life, and the consequences of one's life.

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The history of ancient Egyptian religion is rooted in Egypt's prehistory and it lasted for 3,000 years. With the exception of the Amarna Period (when King Akhenaten practiced monotheism), the ancient Egyptians believed in polytheism, or many gods. Different gods rose and declined in popularity and importance over the millennia. There were 700 gods and goddesses and many were combined to create new deities. Mythology influenced ancient Egyptian culture including religious rites, rituals and festivals. We know about these rites and rituals from symbols and scenes depicted on tombs and temple walls, in literature and even the jewelry that they wore. The ancient Egyptians used mythology as a basis for everything they did, and as a means for securing a heavenly place in the afterlife. Ancient Egyptians were incurably religious. Social and political life was a religious phenomenon. The king of Egypt, Pharaoh was not only despotic, but comprehensively authoritarian. Ancient Egyptian society was a monarchy. The idea of democracy was unknown in ancient Egypt. Religion was the dominant social force in ancient Egypt. Religious influence was pervasive affecting almost everything. Egyptian religion developed from simple polytheism to philosophic monotheism, with every community having a guardian deity which personified the powers of nature. Ancient Egyptian literature and philosophy had religious undertones. Ancient Egyptian art was deliberately an expression of religious symbolism.