

## **The Evolution of Egyptian Religious Thought: From Totemism to Atenism**

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This study provides a historical analysis of the significant religions of ancient Egypt. Early Egyptians revered a vast number of deities, and every locality, no matter how small, had its own tutelary deity, and in certain instances, two or more. Consequently, this led to a religious landscape in Egypt that was very diverse, much like the other primitive or natural religions, as will be shown in this paper. The development of religious thinking in ancient Egypt took the form of a sequence of various stages. To comprehend this development, one has to trace its historical development starting with Totemism, which was the first cornerstone of the religion of the ancient people, then the emergence of polytheism with its plurality of divine figures, and finally the religious reform of Akhenaten, which focused on the new deity (Aten). The results show that the religious beliefs of the ancient Egyptians were cumulative in nature. The different historical periods produced new doctrines that coexisted with the earlier traditions: Totemism coexisted with theology, and polytheism with new monotheistic inclinations. This rich religious text is an expression of the intellectual depth of the ancient Egyptians and the scope of their spiritual imaginations.

**Keywords:** ancient Egyptian, religions of ancient Egypt, totemism, akhenaten

The role of religion in the life of the ancient Egyptian state was significant, as it impacted the social, political, and economic organization of that state. It penetrated almost all spheres of life, and people tried to explain cosmic processes by referring to the divine power. They were also convinced that there was a supernatural power that controlled human life, and that this power could be approached and appeased with offerings and rituals.

Egyptian civilization and especially wall paintings have been described by many scholars as being rigid. But a more careful study of these images, frequently of animals, will show a continuity of movement that goes beyond stillness. What seems lifeless in a single piece of carving or painting comes alive when seen in a group, and the artist of the ancient Egyptian art was consciously engraving and painting with the hope that he was ensuring the continuation of life itself. The visual imagery appears to address the viewer through the ages and conveys the idea that the painter knew his art would live on even after his time.

Detailed information is present in these inscriptions and paintings; it requires the contemplative eye that jolts memory and imagination into awakening. By so doing, they introduce the viewer into the world perception of the ancient Egyptians, allowing us to recreate their perception of both the life on earth and life after death.

The first step in the right direction towards such an inquiry is to admit that what has been inscribed, written, painted, and preserved is but a part of what there used to be. Life in the past, as to-day, was full of events of the most ordinary sort, which were not written, learned, or recollected at all, because of their homeliness--things inherited, or done without thinking, or too trivial to be worthy of notice or description. This fact enables us to create a more precise opinion about the evolution and the splendor of Egyptian civilization,

and especially religious aspect. The few pieces that remain, inscriptions, objects, and paintings, are therefore a reflection of the eternal Egyptian spirit of curiosity.

### **Research Problem**

According to this research's perspective, the study seeks to trace the development of Egyptian religious thought from its initial totemic origins to the occurrence of the Atenist faith. It proceeds from a central research problem framing the following question: How did Egyptian religious thought evolve from the symbolic plurality of deities to the concept of universal divinity?

### **Research Questions**

From the problem arises several subsidiary questions that the study aims to address, the most significant of which are:

- How did intellectual, social, and natural transformations contribute to shaping this religious consciousness?
- What were the theological and intellectual characteristics that distinguished the period of Akhenaten's religious movement?
- To what extent did the monotheistic movements known in Egypt affect Egyptian religious thought?

### **Method**

The study adopts a historical–analytical approach to examine the diverse religious phenomena of ancient Egyptian society, situating them within their specific temporal and intellectual contexts. This approach allows for a systematic tracing of the development of Egyptian religious thought across successive historical periods.

Given the cumulative and overlapping nature of Egyptian religious beliefs, the research further employs the comparative historical method alongside historical analysis in order to clarify the main features of this complex religious system and to account for its long-term evolution. Such a methodological combination is particularly relevant to the study of the Atenist movement.

Through this comparative framework, the study examines the intellectual and religious transformations associated with Atenism in relation to the broader religious messages attributed to prophets who are traditionally believed to have visited Egypt. This approach contributes to a more nuanced understanding of Atenism by situating it within its wider historical and intellectual context, and by interpreting its emergence as a religious phenomenon shaped by a multifaceted cultural and religious environment.

The religious thought of the ancient Egyptians represented the frame through which he perceived existence, structured their system of governance, and organized their daily life. The deeper we understand the development of this religious thought, the closer we come to grasping the essence of ancient Egyptian civilization, a civilization born from a faith in immortality and in the divine power that inhabits both the universe and humankind.

### **The Importance of Studying Egyptian Religion**

Religion in Egypt permeated every aspect of life throughout its history (Durant, 1988). Greek historian Herodotus considered the ancient Egyptians very meticulous in their daily religious practices. They ensured that their lives followed all religious codes and taboos. In the Egyptian religion alone lies the justification for organizing the country, especially since they believed that the land belonged to the gods and that the pharaohs were the divinely authorized rulers (Emar, 2003).

The Egyptians were so dedicated to religion, that they oriented life, art, governance and all other aspects of their livelihood with their religion (Hatoum, 1964). The religion ruled the everyday life in ancient

Egypt. The largest product of religious faith was literature, art, and stories. There were numerous deities like gods of the sky, gods of the sun, gods of vegetation, animal deities, deities of sexuality, anthropomorphic deities such as Osiris, Isis, and Horus, minor deities, priests, and the doctrine of immortality. This is one of the most outstanding elements of ancient Egyptian thought. (Abu Zahra, 1991).

According to this mutual connection, the explanation of the refinement of Egyptian civilization should start with the basis and structure of it, the religious thought of the ancient Egyptians. One cannot understand the greatness of ancient Egyptian civilization, its peculiarities as compared to other ancient civilizations, the phases of its evolution, and the interpretation of Egyptian architectural and ornamental systems without being aware of the religious philosophy of Egyptians, their vision of the source of life, and their conception of the afterlife.

### **Totemism in Ancient Egyptian Religion**

Totemism<sup>1</sup> is: a religion composed of ideas, symbols, and rituals based on the relationship between a human community and a natural object called the totem, which could be an animal, a bird, or a cosmic phenomenon (Al-Majdi, 2016).

Other historians have refuted the fact that there was totemism in Egyptian religion. Nonetheless, tombs with mummified animals depict the fact of animal worshipping unambiguously. As an example, there were calves tombs in Saqqara. The emergence of totemic symbols was common in the Predynastic Period because of fragmentation of Egyptian regions. It would later become the beginning of Upper Egypt and Lower Egypt which had an emblem of totemism. Certain totemic practices continued in Egyptian religion into later periods, as evidenced by tombs containing mummified sacred birds dating back to the Thirtieth Dynasty (Shalabi, 1984).

During these stages, the ancient Egyptians worshipped calves, such as the bull *Apis*, as well as crocodiles, falcons, cows, dogs, jackals, and serpents. Even when the gods assumed human forms, they retained their animal attributes in hybrid representations: *Amun* was symbolized as a ram, *Amenhotep* as a cow, and *Horus* as a falcon (Durant, 1988). Nevertheless, it is unlikely that the ancient Egyptians, with their advanced religious outlook, continued to regard animal and plant symbols as deities in themselves in the later stages. Rather, they may have perceived in each of these creatures certain divine attributes, with every symbol embodying one of the qualities of the gods.

### **The Theological Reality among the Ancient Egyptians**

The number of deities in ancient Egypt was enormous, and it is possible to divide them into two groups: major gods whose popularity fluctuated with the course of events, and minor gods whose only local cult was the god of the Nile, Hapi, and the goddess of hippopotami, Taweret (Daumas, 1998).

Great deities were Ra, Amun, Ptah, and Aten. These gods were highly related to political occurrences. When a deity changed to another, it could be an indication that there was a change in politics. But the older gods were by no means destroyed; they were in other cases, absorbed as personalities of some attributes of the supreme deity. There was also the spread of religious icons, and the victory of a certain group frequently symbolized the victory of a corresponding god over other groups (Asfour, 1987).

This is very much associated with the administrative and political boundaries of Egypt. The gods were pertained to certain areas, but that did not imply totally different religions. This multiplicity of the symbols can be likened to the one God worship religions, where various churches in common can have practices that are alike, but distinct symbols linger in the common memory (Daumas, 1998).

The development of religious symbols was in line with civilization. Rituals may emerge or disappear, and new symbols tend to appear to replace old ones. This process resulted in more and more religious symbols with time. Moreover, a combination between two or more gods was also adopted in the Egyptian religion with

integration of their name and their qualities. These practices indicate that there were several gods even in the presence of monotheistic tendencies (Daumas, 1998).

Prior to the merging of the upper and lower Egypt, the nation was broken into forty-two provinces, with each having its gods. These provinces later became the two kingdoms. The Egyptians had their gods namely, Upper Egypt that worshipped Seth, and Lower Egypt that worshipped Horus. These religious divisions were mostly portrayed in political conflicts. The pharaohs could be associated with either a god to ensure popularity or to remain in power (Suleiman, 1978).

The popular gods were incorporated into well-known myths, including the Osiris myth, alongside the local and cosmic gods. There were hero figures such as Seth, Horus and Isis whose roles were vital. Using this myth, Osiris was not only a god of the dead but also the one who would judge the activities of humans in the afterlife (Emar, 2003).

The Egyptian religion was intricate as seen by the numerous gods. The Egyptians never envisaged a single Supreme Being who had all the divine qualities. They instead shared these attributes among various gods, each portraying a part of the supreme deity.

### **Myth and the Interpretation of the Origin of the Universe and Humanity**

The mythological explanation of life, creation, and existence played a significant role in the ancient Egyptian religion. The interpretations can be categorized, based on Egyptologists and archeologists, into school and theories. In the general interpretation, there are texts that state that creation grew out of a vacuum in the primordial eternity; this was the beginning of the earth. The text of other works talks about the cosmic egg, one of the key symbols of Egyptian cosmogony. The egg held the lotus flower and the bird of light, which bore the child sun. In these myths, all temples symbolized the center of the world, the place where everything started (Nardo, 2011)

One of them explains how a cosmic egg was laid by the heavenly goose. One of the texts says that the god Apis dropped this egg, and when it broke, a great bird was born, which is thought to have been the ibis, the companion of the god Thoth, the god of wisdom. Another document holds that it was the god Ra who broke out of the egg; when he appeared, the eight primordial gods fled to the underworld, leaving Ra in the universe to accomplish the work of creating humankind and all the forms of the universe. Certain researchers understand the idea of the cosmic egg and the moment of its explosion as a symbolic expression of the contemporary idea of the Big Bang (Eliade, 1987).

### **Mythological School**

#### *First: The Heliopolitan School*

As per this theory, back in ancient times, both the earth and the sky did not exist. There was just an empty place which was filled with a watery body called Nun. Out of it a creative spirit was formed, the god Atum, who in his turn brought forth Shu and Tefnut. These gods later produced Geb, Nut, Isis, Nephthys and Horus, which were referred to as the Great Ennead (Armour, 2005).

Atum was regarded as the primordial god, and he was the creator of the primordial couple. This pair produced a second generation that comprised Osiris, the god of fertility and agriculture, Isis, who was the embodiment of the black soil that was sustained by the Nile water and Nephthys who was the embodiment of barren land. All these aspects created a spectrum between nature and man (Armour, 2005).

#### *Second: Hermopolitan School.*

This school was concerned with the Ogdoad which was a sacred group of eight gods that predated the emergence of Ra-Atum. Similar to the Heliopolitan School, it believed water to be the origin of life. These four gods were in the form of frogs and the remaining four in the form of serpents. Light represented by the

sun was also added to supplement the Heliopolitan theory and it reiterates the fact that creation had to be made before even the gods existed (Asfour, 1987).

### *Third: The Memphite School*

The Memphite School had an Ennead similar to the one of Heliopolis. Ptah was the god considered the artisan, and the creator of eight gods, he created Atum through the spirit and utterance. Ptah was thus regarded to be older than the other gods. These gods took actual human shapes (Eliade, 1987). Memphis people were of the view that all their known deities were embodiments or hypostases of Ptah who was the ultimate content and origin of all things (Mehran, 1989).

### *Fourth: The Theban School*

According to the Theban School, Amun was the sovereign of all the deities, the birthplace of primitive deities, and self-created. The Thebans combined him with the sun god in solar worship and this led to Amun-Ra (Armour, 2005).

### **One of the Most Prominent Myths of Ancient Egypt is *The Osiris Myth***

*Isis* was the sister and wife of *Osiris* and became an image to depict the motherhood, sympathy, and the typical goddess mother. There was a conflict between *Osiris* and his uncle *Seth* over who should rule in Egypt, and this conflict led to *Seth* killing *Osiris*, wrapping his body in a coffin, and throwing the body into the Nile. Seeking to redeem him, *Isis* found the body at Byblos, but *Seth* had preceded her, cutting the body into pieces and throwing them into the river. *Isis* then took up the scattered parts of her husband and brother and buried each part in a different part of Egypt. Thereafter, temples were constructed in these areas in memory of *Osiris*, the god of the dead. Kingship was then passed to his son *Horus*, who symbolized a critical intermediate phase in Egyptian mythology and the transition between divine rule and the dynastic rule of the pharaohs. This is why the title of *Horus* became part of the ruler's titulary at the earliest stages of rule. The *Osiris* myth, therefore, remained as the central religious and culture construct that survived in the later stages of the Pharaonic era (Hatoum, 1964).

### **Historical Events and Their Impact on the Transformation of Deities**

The historian *Manetho* documents that initially government was led by the gods-*Ptah*, *Ra*, *Shu*, *Osiris*, *Seth*, and *Horus*, then by demi-gods, and then by mortal kings. He also adds that *Seth* was seen as the primordial god, that the *Osirian* cult had developed in Western Asia, the *Horus* cult in the *Wadi Hammamat* area, and that *Isis* was worshiped mostly in the north, and *Horus* in the western Delt (Asfour, 1987).

The royal titulary, which first appeared during the era of the dynastic period, was used to denote the primacy of a god. *Horus* rose to the forefront, as we see in the fact that his name was associated with the name of King *Serapis-en*, who led a religious reform by identifying himself with *Seth*, the god of the south, in order to seek rapprochement with southern communities after a theological crisis (Asfour, 1987).

*Ra* started gaining influence in the Fourth Dynasty, and this can be seen in the royal names of *Khafra* and *Menkaura*. During the Sixth Dynasty, with *Teti* in charge, the relationship between the priesthood of *Ptah* and that of *Ra* became strained, and ultimately, the latter triumphed, and the power of *Ra* became centralized in persecutors like *Userkare*. Religious underpinnings were also shaken during the First Intermediate Period: some communities began to doubt the old beliefs, and others focused on righteous behaviour as the way to become immortal, the afterlife being the completion of earthly actions (Salim, 1989).

As the Eleventh Dynasty started to ascend to power in Thebes, the cult of *Amun* started gaining significance, as he was introduced as the god of the dynasty. Other gods were gradually absorbed into his personality, and reached its climax in the theological unification of *Amun-Ra* (Asfour, 1987).

The invasion of the *Hyksos*<sup>2</sup> brought with them the foreign deities of Syria, *Baal* and *Teshub*. They identified the southern Egyptian God, *Seth*, with these gods and brought him to the rank of official cult deity,

which Mircea Eliade documents by stating that King *Apophis* had officially proclaimed *Seth* to be the state god. The followers of other deities considered this move an insult, especially considering that *Seth* had killed *Osiris* (Eliade, 1987).

After the *Hyksos* had been thrown out of Egypt by a king of Thebes, the supremacy of *Amun* was again established, and he was made the official god of the Egyptian empire. A syncretism of *Horus* and *Ra* occurred, though under *Amenhotep III*, the name Thoth came into prominence, in an attempt to reduce the influence of priests over the cult of *Amun*. At the same time, *Aten* was thought of as a solar incarnation of *Ra*, and a new type of worship appeared--the worship of the living pharaoh himself (Asfour, 1987).

Origins of royal divinity, though, are earlier than this development. The pharaoh was already considered to be the son of *Ra* and the successor of *Horus* as a king. However, his humanity did not take a back seat as indicated in the ancient writings that highlighted the two aspects of the monarch: the godly ruler on the one hand, and the accountable human ruler on the other. These two aspects have been shown in the writings of the Instructions of *Amenemhat* to his son *Senusret*, the Tale of *Sinuhe*, and also in the writings of the Pyramid Texts, which have emphasized the duality of the pharaoh (Kemp, 2006).

### **Akhenaten's Religious Reform**

Templor worship of *Aten* was not invented by *Akhenaten* (*Amenhotep IV*) because he was already one of the Egypt gods. *Aten* had already started increasing in influence during the reign of *Amenhotep III*, in part as a reaction to the rise of the *Amun* priesthood. But it was under the reign of *Amenhotep IV* that the monotheistic tendency was formed. He changed his name to *Akhenaten* and declared himself a servant of one deity (the sun) and founded a new capital at *Tell El-Amarna*. His hymn is the most important and celebrated piece of art to study the doctrine of *Atenism* (Mehran, 1989).

### **The Distinctive Features of Akhenaten's Religious Reform**

*First:* Universality. The universal nature of the sun disk as a goddess symbol was apparent when *Akhenaten* adopted it as a universal symbol. *Aten* was therefore not only the god of Egypt but of Kush, Syria, and Palestine as well. This gave a new dimension to the Egyptian religion--a gradual awakening that divinity had to be universal and that divinity must include all humanity (Shibl,1974).

*Second:* The non-traditional triad of the Egyptian religious mind and the denunciation of myths and legends. *Akhenaten* rejected, e.g., the idea that the Nile was a personification of *Osiris*, but instead was governed by natural laws ruled by *Aten*. This difference was also highlighted in his order and instruction to remove the plural form of the word gods in the previous inscriptions to uphold the oneness of the divine (Hornung,2010).

*Third:* The *Akhenaten* Hymn involved elevated levels of thinking in the sense that it provided a generalized explanation of natural phenomena. They can be the development of the embryo in the womb of the mother or the hatching of the chick in the egg at a specific time. The uniqueness of the reforms of *Akhenaten*, therefore, lay in their focus on monotheism, but also in the intellectual subtlety and philosophical complexity implied by the treatment of the subject of causality and of natural order in the hymn (Aldred,2001)

### **Egyptian Religious Thought in Comparison with Monotheistic Faiths**

The level of sophistication in religious awareness reached the most high level in Egypt. In a number of ways, it parallels with monotheistic religions. This does not however, deny the relevance of the later monotheistic revelations, but instead it is a sign of an early effort to conceptualize divine unity.

This progression can be arguably explained by the absolute purity of Egyptian temperament, which frequently brought the Egyptians to the right spiritual path. This tendency is particularly evident when one compares the development of the Egyptian religious consciousness as a whole with the development of the

individual consciousness of the Prophet Abraham (peace be upon him) because in both situations, it was the sun that was recognized first, and then the One and Eternal God was realized. The other plausible reason--possibly an extension of the previous one--is the impact of the revealed monotheistic religions that had penetrated Egypt. These were, even though not wholly accepted, in any case very impressive, bringing the Egyptian religiosity nearer to the Egyptian doctrines on the unity of the divinity (Asfour, 1987).

The Egyptian belief in immortality of the soul is a good example. One of the first--indeed possibly the very first--to conceive human life as comprised of a mortal body and an immortal soul were the Egyptians. In the event of death, the soul was condemned through its earthly actions in the court of *Osiris* where it was weighed against the plume of truth (Abu Zahra, 1991). This concept has certain similarity with the Christian confession under the concept of absolution (Anriani, Sari, Junaidi, & Hamka, 2022).

The other notable characteristic is the intricacy of the Egyptian understanding of the immortality of the soul, which consisted of a long series of changes--even the pharaoh was supposed to experience it. This is well illustrated in the tombs of the Valley of the Kings, the corridors of which represented successive steps of spiritual elevation: the state of man, the state of the sages and priests, the state of demigods, the state of complete divinity. The belief that resurrection needed a physical body was reinforced by the mummified body of the pharaoh, which was stored in the funeral chamber. Therefore mummification. In case the body decomposed, the coffin was used as an alternative; in case even the coffin was lost, the spirit could be contained in the wife's paintings on the surrounding walls of the tomb. The art of Egypt thus depicted the shape of the pharaoh with artificial precision: the head in profile, the body in frontal, the feet bare--so that all the necessary details of the body would forever be obtained (Abu Zahra, 1991).

Considering these developments, i.e., texts, pictures, and mummification, one must inquire: Is it possible to consider this deep religious consciousness of the ancient Egyptian as something common and unworthy of close attention?

### **Visits of Monotheistic Prophets to Egypt and Their Influence on Egyptian Religion**

A particularly noticeable point when analyzing both the historical and intellectual process of Egyptian religion is the existence of gaps without any explanations. The Egyptian religion could hardly be called monotheistic; otherwise, how could it have reached a level of theological refinements so high and so independent of divine revelation? The question is: how did the prophetic monotheistic traditions that God sent his messengers to Egypt intersect with the Egyptian land? One of the most influential influences is the visits of the prophets themselves--and even of one of them--to Egypt.

The book starts with the life of the prophet Abraham (peace be upon him) who was born in Ur in the nineteenth century BCE. His trip, according to biblical records, was in a north-south direction of the Euphrates River into Harran, and then to the West into the Bekaa Valley to the northern Jordan, and then to the Canaan territory where he established himself in Hebron. Thence Abraham went at length to Egypt--a fact of special interest to our topic. The Middle Kingdom was the period when Abraham entered Egypt under King *Senusret II* or *III*. With the *Canaanites* having commercial links with Egypt, such an expedition was but natural (Susa, 1990).

The only account we have of the presence of *Abraham* in Egypt is his Torah. It documents that *Abraham* and his nephew *Lot* and his wife *Sarah*, whom he termed as his sister, went to the land to avoid injury by Pharaoh. When Pharaoh seized *Sarah*, he was punished by God, and he returned her to him, and commanded *Abraham* to go away safely, and even sent him soldiers as an escort (Genesis 13, NIV).

Joseph (peace be upon him): Another oracular figure of great weight was Joseph, the son of Jacob, whose account is given in the Qur'an: "Some of them said: Kill not Joseph but cast him into the bottom of the well; some travelers will find him, had you done something"(Qur'an, Surah Yusuf, 12:10).

Joseph was sold as a slave, finally, to a man of Egypt: "The one of Egypt who bought him said to his wife: Give him an honorable place. He can do us service, or we can take him in as a son. So, we set up Joseph in the land and we taught him the meaning of things"(Qur'an, Surah Yusuf, 12:21).

This was during the time the Hyksos and Joseph entered Egypt. He was thrown into jail when he opposed the overtures of the wife of the official, but it was there that he commenced his work. His success in dream interpretation, especially the one experienced by Pharaoh, made him go from being a prisoner to a royal administrator and eventually found himself in control of the granaries. Then his brothers came, his family, including Jacob, came later. And so, Egypt was the home of Abraham, of Lot, of Jacob, of Joseph, and of Moses and Aaron--a concentration of prophetic office unrivaled in history (Mehran,1989).

The fact that Joseph is known to have been part of the Egyptian administration indicates that his monotheistic message must have found some impression, directly or indirectly, on Egyptian religious thinking.

*Moses* (peace be upon him): The perspectives of scholars concerning the personality of Moses (peace be upon him) are quite different and, sometimes, divergent. There are some scholars who have depicted him as an Egyptian, in addition to, one of the advocates of the religion that was promoted by Akhenaten. Some of the prominent names that were linked with this opinion included Sigmund Freud who, although of Jewish origin, held the belief that Moses was an Egyptian and a close associate of Akhenaten. Freud also stated that, after the death of Akhenaten, Moses became the figure who aligned himself with a Semitic tribe and, finally, gave it the religion of Akhenaten, though in its stricter, more austere manifestation form (Freud, 1986).

It is important to note that Freud's theoretical perspective relies mainly on the distortion of the Israelite stories of the prophethood of Moses (peace be upon him) in Egypt. There are significant inconsistencies and contradictions in such accounts compared to the Quranic narrative which is one of the authoritative sources of studying the prophethood of Moses and his monotheistic mission in Egypt. It seems quite clear that the sub-text of Freud was, considering that he was Jewish by birth, to demonstrate the historical existence of the Hebrew Semitic group, the descendants of Abraham (peace be upon him), and to highlight the fact that Moses belonged to that group (Susa, 1990).

The key aspect to consider is the fact that there was indeed an appeal to monotheism which went to the people of ancient Egypt via the prophets of God (peace be upon them). Notwithstanding that the pharaohs were staunchly stuck to the worship of the deities grounded in their own imagination; it is still possible that the prophetic message had a significant impact on the change that took place in the Egyptian religious thought during the reign of pharaoh Akhenaten.

### **Reflections on Features Derived from Monotheistic Doctrines**

Suppose we agree that the prophetic customs which either visited or originated in Egypt must have made their mark on Egyptian religious thought, it is necessary to discover some such evidence in Egyptian religious thought which substantiate this judgment.

The Egyptian religion was based on the same principles as the revealed religions: faith in immortality, judgment, moral responsibility, and the afterlife. The artistic imagination used in the wall paintings depicted this eschatological vision; on one side of the scale, the heart of the dead was depicted, the feather of truth on the other, all the gods of the dead, Osiris and Anubis, presided over (Saif al-Din, 1991). This imagery was used to portray the nature of Egyptian religion as will be further depicted in the following section.

The greatest phenomenon was that of the call to monotheism of Akhenaten, which doubtless must have been inspired by earlier monotheistic doctrine, as it also in turn imprinted itself on later monotheistic doctrine. There exists a sharp parallel between the hymn of *Akhenaten* and Psalm 104 of David, both speaking of life and of creation, and sharing strikingly similar grounds of devotion to one God (Psalm 104, NIV,).

The other influence--monotheistic traditions on Egyptian religion--was highly effective as well. Later Christianity even used the Egyptian triad of *Osiris*, *Isis*, and *Horus*, which was transformed into the Father-Son-Holy Spirit doctrine (Al-Khashab, 1989).

The other instance is the use of the Egyptian ankh, or key of life, as a representation of the Nile flanked by two branches and its Delta in between. And when Christianity was officially adopted as the religion of the empire under Constantine, this emblem was reinterpreted as the Christian cross (Zakri, 1923).

Egyptian patterns of legitimization also influenced Christianity. The story of the birth of Christ, e.g., is based on divine births of some pharaohs, e.g., *Thutmose III* and *Hatshepsut*, whose births were elevated by the priesthood to achieve legitimacy. The Christian tradition of confession, too, is like the Egyptian tradition of the deceased declaring his negativity--his innocence of sins like fornication--before going to the underworld (Zakri, 1923).

All these similarities force us to abandon the reductionist perception that Egyptian religion was nothing more than primitive paganism, which valued the veneration of animals, plants, or humans. The system of thought that it displays in its doctrines is much deeper and more complicated.

Other scholars go to the extent of suggesting an Arabian origin of some of the Egyptian gods. An example of this is *Min*, the fertility god of Akhmim, supposedly of Semitic origin. Likewise, the goddess, *Nehbet*, of childbirth has her name based on the Semitic root, *naqaba* (to open), meaning to make childbirth easier (Khusheim, 1990).

The Egyptians believed in *Ashtoret*, who was the goddess of war and daughter of *Ra* and *Ptah* during the Twelfth Dynasty was. To the *Canaanites*, she was *Astarte*, and to the South Arabians, *Athirat*, the oldest daughter of the moon god *Sin*. The other example is the Egyptian god *Shai-Rab*, the god of luck, whose name itself refers to fate or destiny (Khusheim, 1990).

We therefore have the mediating elements of organic continuity and historical development between these traditions. Nothing was formed in a vacuum; every stage was born of the womb of its predecessor, and in this way, there formed a chain of continuity in the development of religious thought.

### **How Can We Describe the Ancient Egyptian Religion?**

Once the nature of a thing is comprehended, a description of it follows naturally, and more so when the description is a reflection of the nature of the object itself (Anriani, Sari, Junaidi, & Hamka, 2022). This is the difficulty of Egyptian religion, however. The multiple dimensions of it are faced with various interpretations by scholars, some of which contradict each other. Paradoxical things cannot be described in a paradoxical way. Thus it would be wrong so much to assert, that the Egyptian religion was exclusively polytheistic, that it was solely the worship of statues and images; and it would be an exaggeration to say that it was exclusively monotheistic and devoted to the worship of one god. Then the question is What then is the real character of Egyptian religion, and why, why should interpretations swing between these two extremes?

The solution might be in the accrual aspect of Egyptian beliefs. Throughout the course of history in Egypt, there was a formation of new religious ideas every historical period, which did not necessarily replace the previous ones. So totemism coexisted with theology and polytheism with monotheism (Erman, 1995).

To delimit the characteristics of this complex tissue, we must do it by following its different stages:

First: The initial point of departure is what made the religious thought in early Egypt--namely, that nature and the state were endowed with the religious nature.

This has been mentioned previously in connection with geography, surrounding, and the influence it creates on religion (Breasted, 1996). The other dimension was the impact of the political events and developments in generating change in religion.

The social conflict between the rulers and the ruled resulted in an increasing trend to raise the concept of justice to the eternal life. This is seen in the well-known Song of the Harpist: The mansions are destroyed, and the nobles have gone into death. And will any come back there and tell us how they died? (Shakir, 1993).

Second: Egyptian Religion: Polytheism and monotheism. Polytheism also cannot be ignored in Egyptian religion, as historians have carried a list of numerous gods and goddesses having various functions. But there were also scholars like *Pierret*, *De Rouge*, and *Grebaut* who claimed that this plurality was only a phenomenon, as meant to convey various forms of the divine spirit (Al-Khashab, 1989).

Even with monotheism, it was still hidden under the obvious incarnation of the deity. The water, fertility, good, and harvest was a personification of *Osiris*. And *Osiris* himself was embodied in the bull. When the crocodile was worshiped, it was due to the reason that it was the only animal which did not possess a tongue. Since, as Plutarch writes: The words of God require no tongue. The veiled eyes of the crocodile represented an anonymous prophet--Aton, the concealed one--and therefore referred to the veneration of the supreme deity by symbol (Mehran, 1989).

The entirety of the latent energies of gods were expressed in concrete signs, each of which embodied one of the enigmas, or qualities of them. Meanwhile other passages addressed the divine directly by name, that is, Ra, Atum, Khnum, Amun, or Ptah, but these were not perceived as different gods, but different manifestations of the same divine personality. It is a different interpretation compared to the monotheism of the Abrahamic religions that is strict (Mehran, 1989).

The Judgment of the Dead was the most resounding example of the belief in the afterlife, and it could be found in various inscriptions of different time spans. The dead man had to stand before *Osiris*, the king of the underworld, and demonstrate that during his life he had not committed sins that would represent the forty-two demons who represented the witnesses at the trial. In case of his acquittal, *Horus* welcomed him as a new member of the netherworld (Vandenberg, 1984).

## Conclusion

This paper has been able to come to the conclusion that ancient Egyptian religion cannot be termed as a purely polytheistic religion whose only focus was worship of statues and images through the stages of religion development. Neither can it be said that the opposite was the case--that it was a monotheistic religion at the very beginning, that it was based on the cult of one God--and this would be a serious exaggeration. So, then what is the reason behind this paradox?

The solution can be in the fact that Egyptian beliefs are cumulative. The successive periods in Egypt gave birth to new religious ideas and they co-existed with the earlier ones. The worship of symbols was not the only totemism; it was a set of attempts to comprehend the divine nature using its various forms in the universe and in life. The presence of many gods did not necessarily imply the division but it was an endeavor to represent the qualities of the One God in various forms. This led to the Atenist movement which was an outcome of a long cumulative evolution of Egyptian religious thought, propelled by the natural and political environment, as well as by the influence of the then monotheistic heavenly calls, which spread in Egypt.

In such a way, the present research has helped to provide a more balanced picture of what the nature of the religion of ancient Egypt was and to answer the primary question about its intellectual nature: it was a cumulative religion, which could unite profound religious feeling with logical interest in discovering the One

God- making it an incomparable example in terms of its influence in the progress of religious experience in the history of mankind.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> In this study, the term "Totemism" is used descriptively to refer to early religious traditions in ancient civilizations, where certain animals or plants served as religious symbols and identifiers for individuals and groups. This usage does not intend to confine Ancient Egyptian religious practices within the classical anthropological framework of totemism; rather, the term is employed here as an interpretive tool, not as a definitive classification. From this perspective, animal and plant symbolism in Ancient Egyptian religion reflects cosmic forces and complex religious ideas that developed within a more sophisticated theological system, and should not be understood as purely totemistic.

<sup>2</sup> The Hyksos: peoples of Amorite origin who entered Sinai during a period of weakness at the end of the Middle Kingdom (c. end of the 14th Dynasty). They ruled Egypt for about one hundred years until Ahmose I expelled them. See: Grimal, Nicolas, *A History of Ancient Egypt*, p. 193.

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