Polytheism and Monotheism in Jan Assmann's Concept of Mosaic Distinction

Some elements of »Axial« transformations in the Egyptian polytheistic inheritance as a cultural and existential prelude to the rise of Exclusive Monotheism

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Assmann's crucial concept in his theory of cultural memory is »the Mosaic Distinction« (die Mosaische Unterscheidung). It is the starting point of a new revolutionary distinction – between truth and falsehood in religion, and the entire spectrum of consequences as a result thereof – a break with all earlier traditions, and the process of formation of a new type of religion that stands apart from other religions and spheres of culture such as politics, law and economics. This revolutionary monotheism has replaced the ancient polytheistic world in which Assmann found the dynamic and creative system that has contributed in many elements to the rise of a new monotheistic synthesis rooted in Mosaic distinction. The purpose of this article is to offer a partial insight into this rather forgotten, »buried« world that Assmann has vivified with his erudition, presenting some important achievements of Ancient Egypt firmly incorporated into our civilisation.

Key words: *Akhenaten, Ancient Egypt, Axial Age (Axenzeit), Cosmotheism, Exodus, Jan Assmann, Monotheism, the Mosaic Distinction, Polytheism.*

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Introduction

In the field of philosophy of religion, religious anthropology, history of religion, or even theology proper, the focus of scientific research has changed over the course of the 20th century.[1] The traditional/conservative/Eurocentric view was for a long time firmly rooted in the evolutionistic paradigm of the historic development of religion and the perception of God which led to the superior position of monotheism.[2] However, critical opinion is always inclined towards a primary investigation of the proper identity of God in monotheistic religions, better to say of its proper distinction versus the world of polytheism, sometimes with the renewed plea for a form of polytheism which could be an intellectual alternative for the modern world.[3]

The new, fresh approach to the study of religious history, inaugurated towards the end of the twentieth century, had one of the pivotal starters with the publication of Egyptologist Jan Assmann[4], has also attracted considerable attention, not only among Egyptologists or ancient scholars but also from Old Testament experts in interdisciplinary fields of Judaic, religious, and cultural studies, up to the field of psychoanalysis. Assmann is one of the most highly respected and probably most well-known Egyptologists living today.

1. Understanding Polytheism: The Structure of the Divine World

Assmann's book *Of God and Gods*[5] synthetised investigations from his pivotal work: *Die Mosaische Unterscheidung*,[6] in the new survey of this dynamic process of mutual interdependences of religious cults and ideas. This process in certain epochs led to the formation of a specific structure of religious beliefs, later called polytheism and (exclusive) monotheism[7]. We are accustomed to following the historic line of religious development beginning with widespread

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[1] Cf. Hans G. KIPPENBERG, *La scoperta della storia delle religioni. Scienza delle religioni e modernità*, Brescia, Morcelliana, 2002, 11-40.

[2] Cf. Guy G. STROUMSA, *The Idea of Semitic Monotheism. The Rise and Fall of a Scholarly Myth*, Oxford University Press, 2021, 43-56.

[3] Cf. Gregor AHN, Monotheism, in: Kocku von STUCKRAD (ed.), *The Brill Dictionary of Religion*, Boston – Leiden, Brill, 2006, 1246-1248.

[4] Cf. Jan ASSMANN, *Moses the Egyptian, The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism*, Cambridge Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1997.

[5] Cf. Jan ASSMANN, *Of God and Gods: Egypt, Israel, and the Rise of Monotheism*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 2008.

[6] Cf. Jan ASSMANN, *Die Mosaische Unterscheidung: oder der Preis des Monotheismus*, München, Hanser, 2003.

[7] Exclusive monotheism is opposite: to henotheism in which the worship of one God does not deny the worship of other gods; and to monolatrism which recognise the existence of many gods but with the consistent worship of only one deity. Pantheism and panentheism are also beliefs opposite to exclusive monotheism because of unclear or non-existent distinction

polytheistic cults and praxis with its final disappearance into a triumphant monotheistic system. However, the categorisation of polytheism was possible only from a monotheistic point of view, as never before had anybody identified himself as a »polytheist«.[8] Assmann proposes a completely new understanding of polytheism; he is convinced that Egyptology can contribute directly to the study of monotheism. Ancient Egypt provides an ideal model for upcoming monotheism, not retrospectively, but prospectively from a period that preceded the rise of monotheism.[9]

The study of Ancient Egyptian religious texts led Assmann to a more systematic understanding of what Egyptian polytheism – and, to a certain degree, polytheism in general – is all about, and from there to a new appraisal of its counterpart and opposite: monotheism.[10] A clear distinction between culture in general and religion in Egypt was practically non-existent. The demarcation line between the outside world and secluded sites of cult and ritual are present, but they are two dimensions of the cultic meaning. Our notion of »religion« in the Egyptian world includes nearly everything that we call »culture«; all social aspects of life are religiously founded or connected.[11]

The program: »establish Ma'at and annihilate Isfet«, refers to the broad concept of religion, involving both cult and culture.[12] A further distinction establishes a narrower concept of religion: to »satisfy the gods« from a more secular way of establishing Ma'at, that is, to »judge«. In Egypt, the law was not a sacred institution as in biblical tradition, nor was it a medium to »satisfy the gods«.[13] In delivering justice to mankind, the king acts on a god's orders and represents divine justice. But this does not bear cultic context, and Ma'at does not relate to justice and morality but rather to order and abundance. The spheres of justice/ethics and cult are carefully kept apart, whereas in the Bible, particularly the prophetic books, they are constantly brought together.[14] Biblical monotheism has consciously eliminated the distinction between justice and cult. This rejection of sacrificial cultism by the Old Testament tradition repulses the idea to satisfy God through priestly action, whereby justice is more important than sacrifice. A revolutionary character of biblical monotheism allocated the idea of justice in the core of its religion. Thus, »pagan« religions were viewed short

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between divine and the universe. Exclusive monotheism beliefs in one God, distinctive and superior to the universe; other gods are non-existent, i.e. they are false gods.

[8] Cf. Jan ASSMANN, *From Akhenaten to Moses. Ancient Egypt and Religious Change*, Cairo – New York, The American University in Cairo Press, 2014, 48-51.

[9] Cf. Assmann, *Of God and Gods…*, 8.

[10] Ibid., 9.

[11] Ibid., 11.

[12] Cf. Jan ASSMANN, Ma'at. Gemeinschaftskunst im alten Ägypten, in: J. ASSMANN, H. SCHMIDT-GLINTZER, E. KRIPPENDORFF (ed.), *Ma'at – Konfuzius – Goethe. Drei Lehren für das richtige Leben*, Frankfurt, Insel Verlag, 2006, 40-42.

[13] Assmann, *Of God and Gods…*, 11.

[14] Ibid., 12.

of ethical normativeness and orientation. Ma'at was replaced by the will of God; Assmann sees here a sign of a huge shift he named »Axial Changes« (*achsenzeitliche Wende*).[15]

The distinction between »explicit« and »implicit« theology is important. For Assmann, explicit theology is a discourse about God and the divine world structured on argumentation, in contrast to »mythology« which follows the rules of narration. It does not exist in every religion; the majority of tribal and traditional religions do not have an explicit theology. In Egypt, for example, explicit theology emerged in the Middle Kingdoms with its apogee in the Ramesside Age through the collapse of the monotheistic epoch of Amarna. Implicit theology, in contrast, is a necessary prerequisite of every cult or religion »in the narrow sense«. For Egyptians, implicit theology sizes the narrow sense of satisfying the gods, the inner structure of worship and sacrifice, visible in the three most profiled dimensions of the Egyptian notion of deity: the cultic or political, the cosmic, and the linguistic.[16]

2. Explicit Theology

Egyptian implicit theology is one of the utterly developed expressions of polytheism; rich in religious evidence and synthesis of this dimensions of access to the divine world. Following the intention of this paper, within the implicit theology is impossible to find a connection to exclusive monotheism or elements of »Axial« transformation. Thereafter it is necessary to find an alternative bridge between (Egyptian) polytheism and the decisive step of rise of (exclusive) monotheism, through the concept of Mosaic distinction.

As may be expected, explicit theology starts with creation theology, focusing not so much on cosmogony as on sovereignty and dependence. Implicit theology can be called »constellational« since it deals with the deities as an interrelated plurality. Explicit theology, conversely, is non-constellational, centred on the One who is the origin and power centre of all. Paradoxically, explicit theology in ancient Egypt is very different from, and almost the opposite of, implicit theology. The relevant text: *The Instruction for King Merikare*, dating from the early second millennium BCE, speaks of »God«. Other gods are not mentioned. The culmination of these tendencies is reached when the whole pantheon comes to be seen as just aspects of one supreme god.[17]

Akhenaten's revolution left a deep impression on Egyptian thought that led to a spread of explicit theological discourse on the oneness of God. The

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[15] Cf. Jan ASSMANN, *Ma`at. Gerechtigkeit und Unsterblichkeit im alten Ägypten*, München, Beck, 1995, 282.

[16] Cf. Assmann, *Of God and Gods...*, 13.

[17] Ibid., 62-65.

traditional paradigm of creation and sovereignty was now complemented by the new paradigm of hiddenness and manifestation. The traditional concept of primacy has both a temporal and hierarchical meaning. The first contains in his essence all that comes later; primacy means allness. The name Atum means »to be complete« in this very sense of primordial or pre-existing primacy. By turning from creator to maintainer, however, the first and highest god has to resign from his all-encompassing and all-absorbing position in relation to the other gods. Creation needs partners and turns into cooperation. Oneness is the quality of chaos or pre-existence, whereas existence and cosmos are characterised by difference, diversity, antagonism, and cooperation. »Maintenance is teamwork, and consequently the One must become a partner«.[18]

Cosmotheism: The origins of this cosmotheistic theology date back to the post-Amarna period in the time of Ramesses III.[19] God is the hidden power manifesting himself in the world. The ten Ba's of Amun are a symbolic expression of the polytheistic universe as an »interface« between god and the world. *Bes*, the god of the mask, embodies this interface. However, the world, with sky and earth, sun, air and water, appears as the body of the One. The visible cosmos is the body of a god, animating it from within. The idea of the world as the embodiment of a soul-like god and god as a soul animating the world remained central in Egyptian theology even after the New Kingdom. We can trace here the origin of a conception of the divine that was to become supremely important in late antiquity, namely, the »cosmic god«, the supreme deity in Stoicism, Hermetism, and related movements.[20] Despite these changes, there is a remarkable consistency of questions and answers. Their most explicit codification is to be found in the texts comprising the *Corpus Hermeticum.* The »pantheistic« motif of One-and-millions appears in the Greek texts as the One and the All, *to hen kai to pan,* or *hen to pan.*[21] The cosmotheistic aspect is expressed in statements about the world as the body of God.[22]

Hypercosmism: However, even this form of cosmotheism does not seem to constitute the final stage of evolutionary monotheism. In his *Speech of Praetextatus,* Macrobius distinguishes between »encosmic« and »hypercosmic« gods.[23] This points to a further evolution of cosmotheism into what could be called »hypercosmism«, a religion not of immanence but transcendence or, rather, of both. Hypercosmism has a long tradition in Greek philosophy, going back (at least) to Plato's idea of Go(o)d »beyond being« (*epékeina tês ousías*)

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[18] Ibid., 65.
[19] Ibid., 70.
[20] Ibid., 71.
[21] Cf. Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian…*, 204-207.
[22] Cf. Assmann, *Of God and Gods…*, 72.
[23] Cf. Wolf LIEBESCHUETZ, Significance of the Speech of Praetextatus, in: P. ATHANASSIADI, M. FREDE, *Pagan Monotheism*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1999, 185-205.

and Aristotle's »unmoved mover«.[24] Praetextatus was a typical proponent of the principle »All gods are One«, holding not only that all gods are aspects of a single supreme deity, but also identifying this deity with the sun. However, he applied the principle only to the »encosmic« gods. All encosmic gods are One, but beyond the One, who is the sun, is the hypercosmic divine. There are no limits to »going beyond«, even along the evolutionary lines of cosmo-monotheism.

This god is called »Ba« because there is no name for him. His hidden, all-embracing abundance of essence cannot be apprehended. »Amun« is merely a pseudonym used to refer to him in the worldly sphere. Every divine name is essentially a name of the hidden one, but the term »Ba« is used when the hidden one behind the many personifications is meant. There is no evolutionary line that leads from polytheism to biblical monotheism; the main difference between biblical and evolutionary monotheism is present in clear credo: in place of »All gods are One« stands »God is One«. Instead of the former connection, now a distinction was drawn between God and gods. Ultimately, an even more prominent distinction is now evident: that between God and the world. Evolutionary monotheism does not draw this distinction; on the contrary, God *is* the world.[25] Revolutionary (exclusive) monotheism severs the links between creation and sovereignty as well as between cosmic and political order, building the distinction between God and the world. A force of this link is the centralised power structure common to both the divine and human worlds. The pharaoh is no longer God's deputy on earth. His new position is equal to all humans: he is a creature and servant of God. Revolutionary monotheism brought about a historic achievement: it disunited the old alliance of creation and dominion, or cosmic and liberal power, and liberated religion from the political-cosmological power structure.[26]

3. Monotheism as an Axial Movement

Robert N. Bellah developed a classification of five stages of religious development: primitive, archaic, historic, early modern, and modern, each marked by combinations of distinct features of belief, ritual practice and organisational type.[27] A particularly important threshold in this developmental sequence was

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[24] Cf. Dale B. MARTIN, *Inventing Superstition: From Hippocrates to the Christians*, Cambridge, Massachusetts – London, Harvard University Press, 2004, 13-16.

[25] Cf. Assmann, *Of God and Gods…*, 74.

[26] Cf. Jan ASSMANN, *The Price of Monotheism*, Redwood City, Stanford University Press, 2009, 39-48.

[27] Cf. Robert N. BELLAH, 'Religious evolution', *American Sociological Review*, 29 (1964) 3, 358-374; https://www.scribd.com/document/347369142/Religious-Evolution-by-Robert-N-Bellah-American-Sociological-Review-29-no-3-pp-358-374-pdf.

seen to have occurred between the so-called archaic and historic phases. With the shift to the historic stage, however, religion became increasingly transcendental in its reference, as the gods and the sacred realm were understood more and more as separate from the natural world, where an elevated concern for salvation took hold.[28] Coincidentally the emergent institution of the priesthood achieved a degree of autonomy, the political and religious spheres tended to become distinct, and for the first time, the possibility arose for tensions and conflict between holders of authority in the two spheres. The change appears to correspond to what Karl Jaspers identified as the great Axial Shift.[29]

The theory of the Axial Age was formulated between 1935 and 1956 by three thinkers: sociologist Alfred Weber: *Kultursoziologie* (1935), philosopher Karl Jaspers: *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte* (1949), and political philosopher Eric Voegelin: *Order and History* (1956).[30] The exact meaning of the concept of an Axial Age, origins of the term, and roots of the idea behind it is a complex question.[31] What exactly does the Axial Age thesis refer to, despite undisputed facts of strong parallelism in the cultural and social transformation of a few major civilisations in the middle of 1st Millennium BCE? American sinologist Benjamin Schwartz called the Axial Age »the age of transcendence«, but perhaps a more appropriate description is the elaborated »age of the emergence of the idea of transcendence«.[32] In Jaspers' sentence, its decisive feature is »man's reaching out beyond himself by growing aware of himself within the whole of Being«.[33] »In some way or other man becomes certain of transcendence« and thereby becomes human in a new and decisive sense: It is impossible for man to lose transcendence, without ceasing to be man«.[34] Reference to transcendence is the defining characteristic of Axial man. Transcendence is »the infinitude of the Comprehensive«,[35] the ultimate reality that exists beyond the world. It is the ultimate non-objective One that grounds them. Faith is the immanent mode of existence that is aware of and directed to transcendence. »Faith alone sets in motion the forces that master man's basic animal instincts, deprives them of overlordship, and transforms them into motors of upsurging humanity«.[36] Humanity is defined by reference to a transcendence that by its

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[28] Cf. John MADELEY, Religion and the State, in: Jeffrey HAYNES (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Politics*, London – New York, Routledge, 2009, 175.

[29] Cf. Samuel EISENSTADT, *The Origins and Diversity of Axial-age Civilizations*, Albany, State University of New York, 1986.

[30] Cf. Hans JOAS, The Axial Age Debate as Religious Discourse, in: Robert N. BELLAH, Hans JOAS (ed.), *The Axial Age and Its Consequences*, Cambridge, Massachusetts – London, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012, 9.

[31] Cf. Jan ASSMANN, Die Monotheistische Wende, in: K. E. MÜLLER (ed.), *Historische Wendeprozesse, Ideen, die Geschichte machten*, Freiburg – Basel – Wien, Herder, 2003, 45-46.

[32] Joas, *The Axial age…*, 11.

[33] Karl JASPERS, *The Origin and Goal of History*, New York, Routledge, 2010, 4.

[34] Ibid., 219.

[35] Ibid., 259.

[36] Ibid., 220.

very nature will never be fully present in this life. Therefore, being oriented by transcendence manifests itself in permanent human *transcending*. Thus, the human search for unity in a common history will be an unending task.

> »Unity as the goal... cannot become real... The One is rather the infinitely remote point of reference, which is the origin and goal at one and the same time; it is the One of transcendence«.[37]

The quest for transcendence, then, is the humanising force of human history. It is a quest for a reality that can never become fully present in history, but overcomes history.

3.1. The Logic of Transcendence: Drawing a Distinction

The above citations confirm Jasper's persuasion that the quest for transcendence is eternal, beyond history, and the true world of Being. We are looking for a reference point for such a transcendent world. What is its ontological character and status? This vision of a true world beyond the phenomenal world of experience and history is only one way to understand transcendence. To indicate its range of meaning, Ingolf Dalferth had recalled five founding paradigms of (understanding) transcendence in the Western tradition: True World, Eternal Truth, True Knowledge, True Self, and True Other.[38] Some have described shifts in the meaning of »transcendence« marked by the sequence of the paradigms of »ontological, divine, epistemic, subjective,« and »ethical transcendence« as a change from »vertical« to a »lateral« or »horizontal transcendence«.[39] A »vertical transcendence« suggests leaving the immanent world, the phenomenal, for another world, either in a transcendence to the heights or a transcendence to the depths. A »horizontal transcendence« is the project of self-transcendence, the understanding that we are incomplete.[40]

Voegelin was the first to give a comparably clear description of the »pre-axial« world, a world that Israel and Greece left behind. A theory that in Weber's and Jaspers' reconstruction was a sort of antithesis of Europe, which took a positive image in Voegelin's description as a world in its own right, a proper alternative to biblical monotheism and Greek philosophy. Voegelin's term for the pre-axial world was »cosmological«.[41] He explained the decisive axial transformation as a breakthrough (or »leap in being«) from the »cosmological myth«,

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[37] Ibid., 264-265.

[38] Cf. Ingolf U. DALFERTH, The Idea of Transcendence, in: Bellah, Joas (ed.), *The Axial Age...*, 147.

[39] Catherine PICKSTOCK, *After Writing. On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1998, 183.

[40] Cf. Dalferth, *The Idea...*, 152-153.

[41] Cf. Eric VOEGELIN, *Order and History. Vol. I, Israel and Revelation*, Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1956, 13.

leading in Israel to history and monotheism, and in Greece to philosophy and metaphysics. He described this breakthrough as a process of conceptual transformation from »compactness« to »differentiation«. Israel and Greece were able to recognise differences and draw distinctions, whereas oriental societies used »compact« concepts that systematically distracted these differences.[42]

The Egyptian evidence confirms this approach, especially concerning the distinction between the political and religious spheres. The specific axial transformation that the Bible represents as the Exodus from Egypt and the Israelite's entering into a new form of religious and political order primarily involves the distinction between and separation of state and religion. Assmann accentuates what only Egyptology can bring to light: that this axial breakthrough had forerunners in Egyptian history. The appearance of these forerunners may be caused by breakdowns and disappointments in the political sphere, and historical experiences of individual or collective trauma.[43] This idea gives the impulse to modify the Axial Age theory in two respects relevant to Assmann's general search for the roots of monotheism. One is the differentiation of the notion of an »Axial Age« into a network of different degrees of »axiality«. Another is the possibility of integrating those transformations into a larger context of historical changes. Assmann analyses the concrete traces of the »axiality« in ancient Egypt; he called these traces the antecedents, explaining some of them.[44]

3.2. Antecedents in Ancient Egypt

The Judgement of the Dead: In the process of judgement, a deceased person had to be prepared for any and every possible accusation by humans, but also by deceased and divine accusers. Without an accuser, there was no lawsuit. This form of postmortem litigation was considered just one of many dangers of the liminal state between this world and the next. However, it was not yet considered the necessary and inevitable threshold or passage between this life and the afterlife.[45] The idea of an examination that every dead person had to pass before entering the other world developed only after the demise of the Old Kingdom at the beginning of the second millennium BCE. Here one is clearly dealing with a tribunal where all must present themselves after death. The decisive difference between the old and new concept is the fact that now the accuser is a god.[46] With this new position, the notion of sin emerged with its

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[42] Cf. Assmann, *Axial Breakthroughs'…*, 134.
[43] Ibid., 135-136.
[44] Cf. Assmann, *Of God and Gods…*, 78.
[45] Cf. Jan ASSMANN, *The Mind of Egypt, History and Meaning in the Time of the Pharaohs*, New York, Metropolitan Books, 2002, 162-165.
[46] Cf. Assmann, *Axial Breakthroughs'…*, 136.

longstanding consequences, because the violation of the divine law meant not only a transgression against secular law but a disrespect of God.[47]

The Discovery of Inner Man: The idea of the judgement of the dead by a divine court was a breakthrough not only with respect to an outer but also to an inner transcendence, involving an important shift in what may be called »the history of the heart«.[48] The emergence of an already analysed general judgement of the dead puts a renewed emphasis on the idea of the heart, or the inner man as the centre of moral responsibility, conscience and accountability. The biographical inscriptions unveiled that the word »heart« is a new acquisition, but there is no data for it in the inscriptions of the Old Kingdom. The invention of the heart as a symbol of »inner directedness« and moral responsibility is the result of a long process that contributed to a new configuration of personhood.[49] The heart appears not only as an inner force of will, but also, and more importantly, as a moral instance and agency whose orders and instructions must not be »violated« or »transgressed«. The voice of the heart is not that of a self-reliant individuality. It is the voice of social and moral responsibility, and as such, of divine character; hence, the notion of the heart comes close to our notion of conscience (*Gewissen*). It is a medium of the spirit of collectiveness.[50]

The Rise of Personal Piety: This expression of Egyptian religiosity concerns the rise and final disappearance of a religious trend Egyptologists call »*Personal Piety*« . An individual forms a special relationship with a certain deity, which in Egyptian is paraphrased in formulas such as »putting god N into one's heart«.[51] Akhenaten was the first in history to apply the distinction between true and false to religion. Akhenaten radically changed Egyptian cosmology but did not transcend it. His god was the sun, a form of cosmic energy, without any personal and ethical traits. He did not change the strong unity between religion and politics; whereas Aton presented himself to humanity as a cosmic energy, it was Akhenaten who presented himself as the object of *Personal Piety*.[52]

Trauma and Reorientation: The mentioned experience of historical trauma is extremely important for Israel. The semantic transpositions contributed to the rise of biblical monotheism and covenant theology, developed after the fall of Samaria and Jerusalem, in the time of so-called Babylonian exile. The transference of the political institutions of alliance, treaty, and vassaldom from the sphere of politics to the transcendental sphere of religion is the crucial change.

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[47] Cf. Assmann, *Die Monotheistische Wende…*, 54-55.

[48] Cf. Jan ASSMANN, Zur Geschichte des Herzens im Alten Ägypten, in: J. ASSMANN, T. SUNDERMEIER (ed.), *Die Erfindung des inneren Menschen*, Gütersloh, Gütersloher Verlagsanstalt, 1993, 81-112.

[49] Cf. Miriam LICHTHEIM, *Ancient Egyptian Autobiographies Chiefly of the Middle Kingdom. A Study and an Anthology*, Freiburg, Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1988, 142.

[50] Cf. Assmann, *Axial Breakthroughs'…*, 141.

[51] Assmann, *Of God and Gods…*, 80; cf. Assmann, *The Mind of Egypt…*, 229-245.

[52] Cf. Assmann, *Axial Breakthroughs'…*, 144.

Association with *Personal Piety* in Egypt is obvious, as is a transposition of the semiology of loyalism from the political to the religious sphere. Biblical tradition is in a process of sanctification and theologising the semiology of foreign politics (vassal treaties) of neighbouring states: Egyptian, Hittite, Babylonian, Assyrian.[53] After the fall of the sovereign state, »Israel« tried to reinvent itself, but not on a political level. Its process of redefinition into a purely religious term is still ongoing. Assmann connected the Old Testament's transformation with Saint Paul's radical de-ethnicisation of the concept of »Israel«.[54]

4. Axiality and the Mosaic Distinction

By »Mosaic distinction« Assmann means primarily the distinction between true and false in religion.[55] His thesis is that this distinction, rather than the widespread idea of the unity of the divine, was an even greater innovation that transformed the ancient world in the form of an axial breakthrough. It was unknown to the »primary religions",[56] where distinctions such as pure and impure, sacred and profane, are essential. With this revolutionary distinction, a *new typ*e of religion was created. For the first time, a religion set itself off, not only against other religions and its own religious tradition, but also against other cultural spheres such as politics, law, and the economy. In addition, this distinction is not only a demand for an autonomous sphere but a request for superior authority and normativity, forcing the other spheres to come under its supervision.[57]

The radicality of the Mosaic distinction between true and false, in comparison to the one made by Akhenaten, lies in its connection to the distinction between religion and politics.[58] In Akhenaten's case, true and false formed the basis for the abolition of the traditional religion of ancient Egypt but did not include a separation between the spheres of religion and politics. In Egypt, the state always acted as a kind of »church«, being practically the only true religious institution. Thus, the separation of politics and religion, (»Herrschaft« and »Heil«), the profane and the transcendental, was exclusively the achievements of Israel, connected with the name of Moses. By leaving Egypt, Israel separated itself from a political system that was denounced as false and oppressive. Monotheism appears not only as a political movement of liberation but as the foundation of an alternative way of life. Egypt is the symbol of »false reli-

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[53] Cf. Assmann, *Of God and Gods…*, 83.
[54] Ibid., 84.
[55] Cf. Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian…*, 1-8.
[56] Cf. Theo SUNDERMAIER, Religion, Religionen, in: Karl MÜLLER, Theo SUNDERMEIER (ed.), *Lexikon missionstheologischer Grundbegriffe*, Berlin, Reimer Dietrich, 1987, 411-422.
[57] Cf. Assmann, *Of God and Gods…*, 84.
[58] Cf. Assmann, *The Mind of Egypt…*, 214-228.

gion«, and above all of »false politics«, as the »house of serfdom«.[59] Moreover, an alliance with God and accepting His Law did not mean the founding of a new state. Egypt was the paradigmatic »state« including in itself both political and divine power and order. A very significant and far-reaching difference between Egypt and Israel is that in Egypt the state freed the people from oppression by natural order, whereas in Israel, the law freed them from oppression by the state.[60] In this process, Exodus created a radical break with the boundless principle of rulership, establishing a polity with the principle of relatively limited kingship. In the same way, God also »emancipates« Himself from political representation, which is a revolution on its own. Religious salvation is now the exclusive competence of God, who takes the initiative of historical action and withdraws the principle of salvation from *political* representation.[61]

The use of the model of a political alliance as a new form of a relationship between God and man meant the creation of a completely new form of religion, which proved able to withstand the pressures of political oppression. From now on, politics and religion, or »state« and »church«, are different spheres whose relationship had to be laboriously negotiated and whose reunification can only be achieved by force. Political theology turns into a critical discourse which, in the biblical tradition, is critical of government, and in the Greek tradition is critical of religion. The distinction between, and the separation of religion and politics, or state and church, has to be regarded as one of the most important features of axiality. Therefore, attempts to reunite these two spheres are to be regarded as shifts towards de-axialisation.

Conclusion

The main concept of Assmann's scientific theory of Mosaic distinction is surely a part of Axial transformation. The elements of this long process were very present, not just in separate cultic praxis, but also in the dramatic religious-social life and history of ancient Egypt. The inclination to transcendence and process of differentiation were among the most prominent pre-axial dynamic tendencies in Egypt. We cannot pursue in detail the lines of these processes, but are free to form bold conclusions. The traditional opposite expressions *natura non facit saltus* and *cultura facit saltus,* presuppose that in cultural revolutionary events where epochal novelties are created, we need a strong springboard to reach a higher level of culture. Ancient Egypt left a priceless cultural requisite for upcoming civilisations.

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[59] Assmann, *The Price of Monotheism*…, 43-49.
[60] Ibid., 49.
[61] Cf. Assmann, *Axial 'Breakthroughs'*…, 150.

Ivica Musa* – Ivan Šestak**

Politeizam i monoteizam u konceptu mojsijevskog razlikovanja Jana Assmanna

Elementi »osovinske« transformacije staroegipatskog religijskog naslijeđa kao kulturni i egzistencijalni preludij razvoju ekskluzivnog monoteizma

Sažetak

Središnji koncept Assmannove teorije kulturnog sjećanja je »mojsijevsko razlikovanje« (*Die Mosaische Unterscheidung*). Ono je ključ razumijevanja novog revolucionarnog razlikovanja: između istinitog i lažnog u religiji, što povlači spektar posljedica: prekid sa svim ranijim tradicijama i proces formiranja novog tipa religije koja se odvaja od svih drugih vjerovanja i područja kulture kao što su politika, pravo i ekonomija. Ovaj revolucionarni monoteizam je zamijenio antički politeistički svijet, u kojemu Assmann nalazi dinamičan i kreativan sustav koji će po mnogim sastojnicama pridonijeti usponu nove monoteističke sinteze sadržane u ideji »mojsijevskog razlikovanja«. Svrha ovog članka je ponuditi ograničen uvid u ovaj podosta zaboravljeni, »pokopani« svijet, kojega Assmann oživljava svojom erudicijom, predstavljajući neke od važnih postignuća drevnog Egipta, koja su čvrsto ugrađena u našu civilizaciju.

Ključne riječi: aksijalno (osovinsko) doba, antički Egipat, Eknaton, Exodus, kozmoteizam, Jan Assmann, mojsijevsko razlikovanje, monoteizam, politeizam.

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