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PRACTICAL RELIGION AND PIETY[1]

By JOHN BAINES

Official religion is presented as centring on royal–divine relations; decorum excludes human non-funerary religious concerns. For want of evidence, pre-New Kingdom personal religion must therefore be approached through constructing hypotheses rather than accumulating evidence. A biographical model suggests that practical religion—religious action in an everyday context—may focus on affliction, to which responses include communication with the dead—letters to the dead among the literate—and perhaps divination through oracles and consulting seers. These approaches may precede further, unknown actions. The use of intermediaries to deities and the deification of non-royal individuals does not certainly extend beyond the élite. Piety—personal relations with deities—is most clearly attested in personal names, while the élite display of personal religious involvement implies some general aspiration to divine contact. Later Egyptian society, in which practical religion and piety are more visible and integrated, had different rules of decorum and perhaps a different organization, in which values and religious action were less local in their focus.

Introduction: the élite context

EGYPTIAN religion before the New Kingdom is poorly known in all but its funerary aspects. In this paper, I present hypotheses on the character and spread of non-funerary religious practice in earlier periods. My chief purpose is to suggest ways of filling some gaps in the pre-New Kingdom record from the perspectives of practical religion—religious action in an everyday context—and piety—here loosely defined as relationships between individuals and deities. My suggestions have the character of designs for research, but some designs may be feasible and others not. Even if a particular line of enquiry cannot be pursued, hypotheses in that area may still be worthwhile. Any attempt to round out understanding involves interpretative assumptions: hypotheses provide the context for detailed research. Less abstractly put, intuitive ideas about the general shape of religion in society are part of any approach and are best formulated explicitly. It is worth considering the general shape of religion because the alternative of taking the material we have as being truly representative, particularly in its statistical distribution, is implausible. Odd hints of religious practice may help to illuminate gaps in knowledge and to formulate more general models of the context into which such evidence can be fitted.

This strategy implies a looser, more complex picture of religious practice than has

[1] Revised version of a paper delivered at the Fourth International Congress of Egyptology, Munich, August 1985, and at the University of Copenhagen and American University Cairo. I am grateful to Christopher Eyre, Geraldine Pinch, and John Tait for criticisms of drafts, to Paul Frandsen and David Silverman for corrections suggested during the discussion in Munich, and to Edward Brovarski and Jan Quaegebeur for information. Geraldine Pinch's forthcoming book on New Kingdom popular religion has influenced my thinking on the general character of earlier religion. The published abstract of this paper (International Association of Egyptologists, Fourth International Congress of Egyptology, Munich 1985, *Abstracts of Papers* (ed. S. Schoske), 4–7) is a short version of the whole; not all the points covered in it are repeated here.

For a valuable summary of several of the issues discussed in this paper see H. Brunner, *LÄ* II, 479–83. Brunner emphasizes usefully the extent to which the Egyptians viewed the cosmos and the individual's fortune as being under threat and uncertainty.

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been the norm, and a broad, non-evaluative conception of what counts as religion. Religion need not be seen as a unitary, well-defined phenomenon. In considering these possibilities, I use as a point of departure a theoretical study in which I considered religion as a mode of discourse whose unified application proliferated greatly in the late New Kingdom and Late Period, in a process I termed 'sacralization'.[2] Here, I explore for earlier periods other forms of action that are considered 'religious' in the study of most societies, but are not so centripetally organized and have tended to be minimized in Egyptology. My approach contrasts, for example, with those of Morenz[3] or Assmann,[4] who see religion as completely pervading early Egyptian civilization and, it seems, as being ultimately unitary, so that the attested élite forms would be a reliable guide for the society as a whole. If, however, religion need not be a single, homogeneous mode of discourse, there is no reason, apart from some overarching theory, for insisting that a single form of it pervaded all of life from the beginning of history; diversity and sacralization become real possibilities. In this context, the 'practical religion' I discuss could be termed more loosely and explicitly 'non-material modes of action and response'.

Early religion is, I suggest, less well known, and probably less knowable, than is often assumed. Its complexity and diversity may be related to the complex society of Egypt, but there is no easy equation between society and religion, and no society is truly 'simple'. A stratified, politically centralized society is, however, unlikely to be equivalent in its religious beliefs and practices to a homogeneous, local, small-scale society. But it remains worth asking whether elements or traces in religion find their best analogies in such small-scale societies, a possibility that is relevant to much of my discussion. First, however, the model and evidence to be considered should be set in the centralized institutional context.

Old and Middle Kingdom monuments, especially the former, focus on the king, whose mortuary complex is altogether larger than divine cult temples. Although temples have been more subject to destruction than pyramids, the record is probably not completely misleading here. The king dominates human society and appears to stand between mankind and the gods—but this appearance may be in part an illusion created by centripetal sources. The focus of society appears political and institutional as much as religious, in part because the king's role as sole protagonist of the cult pre-empts the religious burden. Religious work is delegated to priests (the king's own cult responsibilities were probably heavy), but most priests are themselves at most part-time officiants. Among the élite, their chief appointment is in the political and institutional sphere; the remainder are perhaps prominent members of local communities. The king is a general ideological focus as well as a religious one. The most pregnant formulation of this point is in the treatise on the king's role in the solar cult, a text probably dating to the Middle Kingdom, which states that the king is on earth 'for ever and ever, judging mankind and propitiating

[2] *GM* 76 (1984), 25–54.
[3] *Ägyptische Religion* (Stuttgart, 1960) (= *Egyptian Religion*, tr. A. E. Keep (London, 1973)), 6–15.
[4] *Ägypten: Theologie und Frömmigkeit einer frühen Hochkultur* (Stuttgart, 1984), 9–14.

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(*sḫtp*) the gods, and setting *mꜣꜥt* in place of *jzft*. He gives offerings (*ḥtpwt*) to the gods and mortuary offerings to the spirits (*prt-ḫrw n ꜣḫw*).'[5] This gives a place to living humanity only in so far as the king 'judges' them. Parallels quoted by Assmann[6] suggest that 'judging' here means creating justice and well-being among people, but the word also has repressive associations and does not depict the king as a primarily beneficient force. In addition, the text emphasizes aggressive action by the king in relation both to the potential aggression of the gods and to this world. For anyone but the king, it makes a bleak, centripetal statement that largely disregards the questions I ask, even if it does speak of justice and mentions the gods and the spirits.

Within the centripetal, politicized world of the élite, mortuary provision serves the prestige of the living to a great extent. If the dead were accepted in official ideology and among the élite in general as being a continuing force in the life of the living, one might expect their tombs to be better protected, so that they would be less universally and quickly robbed, and to contain more evidence for interaction between the living and the dead. In fact, the texts and representations in Old Kingdom tombs are very much concerned with the deceased's status in this life and much less with his aspirations for and activities in the next.[7] An exception to this is in formulae where the recipient of offerings says that he will intercede in the hereafter on behalf of whoever pronounces an offering text—the texts only imply what the intercession might be for, conceivably judgement after death or acceptance in the next world; threats of action and litigation are also part of the formulae.[8] But even if most of the dead did not retain much attention beyond, say, a generation after their demise (and that may be a liberal estimate), they are an essential part of Egyptian society, which consists of the four categories of the treatise quoted above: gods, king, and dead, as well as, far behind, mankind (the text omits further possible, less auspicious categories, as well as any form of being 'below' humanity, such as animals). A similar integration of the dead in the society of the living is well attested in other cultures;[9] what is Egyptian is the inequality, to which the apparent lack of reciprocity between living and dead might be related.

Outside these ideologically central sources, there are multiple relations possible between human beings and the three main categories of the treatise. Human relations with the king are not my concern here, except if kings are deified. There remain human relations with the gods or the dead, either direct or mediated by the king, by other human beings, or by specialized modes of communication, of which

[5] J. Assmann, *Der König als Sonnenpriester* (Glückstadt, 1970), 22; idem, *Sonnenhymnen in thebanischen Gräbern* (Mainz, 1983), 48–9; idem, *Ägypten: Theologie und Frömmigkeit*, 11.

[6] *Der König als Sonnenpriester*, 58–65.

[7] Cf. J. Spiegel, *Die Idee vom Totengericht in der ägyptischen Religion* (Glückstadt, 1935); J. Assmann, in A. Assmann *et al.* (eds.), *Schrift und Gedächtnis: Beiträge zur Archäologie der literarischen Kommunikation* (Munich, 1983), 71–9. For a more absolute and rather problematic formulation see F. Junge, in J. Assmann and G. Burkard (eds.), *5000 Jahre Ägypten. Genese und Permanenz der pharaonischen Kunst* (Nussloch/Heidelberg, 1983), 43–60.

[8] See in general E. Edel, *MDAIK* 13 (1944), 1–90; for judgement see p. 17. See also R. J. Demarée, *The ꜣḫ iḳr n Rꜥ-stelae: on Ancestor-Worship in Ancient Egypt* (Leiden, 1983), 204–12.

[9] See I. Kopytoff, *Africa* 41 (1971), 129–42; his views have been much discussed, cf. C. J. Calhoun, *Man* NS 15 (1980), 304–19, with refs.; correspondence ending with M. Fortes, *Man* NS 16 (1981), 300–2.

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later examples are dreams and oracles.[10] Direct contact with deities is seldom the norm for a religion; where it occurs, it falls in part under the heading of piety, which I consider later. It is virtually absent from the Egyptian record—except where it is wished for or assumed to take place in the hereafter—but this exclusion may be partly a function of the system of decorum,[11] which specifies in hierarchical terms what may be depicted in what context, as well as probably affecting the content of many textual sources: a topic that is out of place or not of official concern is not a legitimate topic. Despite the bleakness and aggression in the formulation of the treatise, a vital additional feature of decorum is that what is negative is not presented (which could relate to the text's not being attested in normal public contexts[12]). The gods in their beneficence created the world and its riches and call forth rapturous acclamation from mankind[13]—sweetness and light dominate official sources. But much of religion in the world at large, and perhaps also in Egypt, is concerned with the negative and untoward; in Egypt this is visibly the case for private affairs in later periods and decorum probably masks its fundamental importance for many contexts, creating severe obstacles to an integrated view of society.[14] Decorum and élite ideology go together here in ignoring suffering along with the rest of society. Because of all these factors, a better, or rather less optimistic, balance of beliefs and practices should be posited in relation to gaps in the record (see n. 21 below). Texts like the treatise and the declaration by the deceased in Book of the Dead 125 acknowledge that this applies to the gods too by terming the cult 'propitiation'.[15]

[10] For dreams see P. Vernus, *LÄ* VI, 746–9. Dream books may date back to the Middle Kingdom, cf. A. H. Gardiner, *Hieratic Papyri in the British Museum Third Series: Chester Beatty Gift* (London, 1935), 9–11. This dating is disputed by S. I. Groll, in eadem (ed.), *Pharaonic Egypt, the Bible and Christianity* (Jerusalem, 1985), 71–118.

[11] For this concept see Baines, *Fecundity Figures: Egyptian Personification and the Iconography of a Genre* (Warminster and Chicago, 1985), 277–305. The term was devised for phenomena in iconography; for textual extensions see Baines, *JEA* 72 (1986), 41–53; idem, 'The Stela of Khusobek: Private and Royal Military Narrative and Values', in J. Osing and G. Dreyer (eds.), *Form und Mass: Festschrift für Gerhard Fecht* (Wiesbaden, 1987), 42–61.

[12] For discussion see J. Assmann, *Re und Amun: die Krise des polytheistischen Weltbilds im Ägypten der 18.–20. Dynastie* (Freiburg/Göttingen, 1983), 24–5 (his assumption that one copy of the text was deliberately made unintelligible is not necessary). Despite its ideological importance, the text is known from only four very restricted temple sources; it later achieved wider currency as a 'hymn' (which it is not). The same pattern of attestation applies to the hymns of the hourly solar ritual, which have a more violent, problematic character than more widely disseminated texts: ibid. 33–53.

[13] Cf. E. Hornung, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt: the One and the Many* (Ithaca and London, 1982/3), 196–205 (= *Der Eine und die Vielen* (Darmstadt, 1971), 192–200).

[14] On the importance of the untoward see, for example, C. Geertz, in idem, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, 1973), 87–125; P. L. Berger, *The Social Reality of Religion* (Harmondsworth, 1973) (= *The Sacred Canopy* (Garden City, NJ, 1967)), 61–87. On the central significance of misfortune to the analysis of societies see, for example, M. Douglas, *Evans-Pritchard* (Glasgow, 1980), esp. 12–13. In these terms, Egyptian ideology deliberately suppresses something that is crucial to society.

[15] E. Naville, *Das aegyptische Todtenbuch der XVIII. bis XX. Dynastie*, II (Berlin, 1886), 316; see, for example, T. G. Allen, *The Book of the Dead or Coming Forth by Day* (Chicago, 1974), 99. If the arguments of Assmann on the dating of the treatise (*Der König als Sonnenpriester*; *Re und Amun*, 24–5), and Yoyotte on that of BD 125 (in *Le Jugement des morts* (Sources orientales 4, Paris, 1961), 58–65) are followed, the two texts will be of similar date, perhaps from the early Middle Kingdom. Like the treatise, BD 125 may document 'secret' élite knowledge of uncertain validity for society as a whole. For a hypothesis on its original context of use see R. Grieshammer, *ZDMG Suppl.* 2 (1974), 19–25.

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Public official sources say little about supernatural beings other than deities. Such beings are known from the Pyramid Texts on and pervade the next world. For this world, they are amply attested in magical texts and are mostly malevolent—which is why they are excluded from official contexts. The margins of the cosmos are beset with ambivalent forms and beings, who may also appear within the ordered sphere at any time.[16] Demons and marginal beings have a position in the hierarchical order of the world analogous with that of magic among modes of response to the supernatural.

Individual biographies and affliction

In order to circumvent the distortions of decorum, I now present a model of contexts for religious action, and to a lesser extent experience, and evaluate modes of response of living human beings and others. The model is in continuous form, organized around an individual's biography, and draws on studies of living religion in small-scale societies.[17] Not all the possibilities it implies need have been realized in Egypt, and societies vary greatly in the extent to which they sacralize social life or individual biographies and experience. I then discuss some types of religious action that may fall within the areas suggested by the model.

In an individual's life, vital points of transition are birth, puberty and the assumption of an adult role, marriage with parenthood (which starts the cycle over again), and death. These experiences involve most of the minority of people who survive long enough.[18] Less regular and orderly, but nearly universal, events disturb this pattern. These include illness, sudden or premature death, loss through aggression or machination, disasters such as are termed in Anglo-Saxon law 'acts of God', and so forth. Many people also become temporarily or permanently unable to sustain their roles in society and are now said to suffer breakdowns or be mentally ill.

The 'regular' transitions of life may be the subject of rites of passage. The 'irregular' disturbances may be termed afflictions[19] and have as their rarer counterpart benedictions, cases where an individual or a group experiences favour. Our sources say much about the latter, especially if the source of favour is the king—they are an essential subject of biographical texts—but little about the former.

Personal religious practice may be concerned with major transitions, in rituals that are sparsely and unevenly distributed throughout a life. Perhaps because of the liminal character of these experiences, several of the non-human beings directly

[16] See, for example, E. Hornung, *Altägyptische Höllenvorstellungen* (ASAW 59, 3, 1968); idem, *Conceptions of God*, 172–85 (= *Der Eine und die Vielen*, 166–79); D. Meeks, in *Génies, anges et démons* (Sources orientales 8, Paris, 1971), 18–84; H. te Velde, *LÄ* I, 980–4.

[17] For the biographical organization see, for example, P. L. and B. Berger, *Sociology: a Biographical Approach* (rev. edn., Harmondsworth, 1976). For studies of religion see, among many others, E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion* (Oxford, 1956); M. Fortes, *Oedipus and Job in West African Religion* (1959; repr. with an essay by R. Horton, Cambridge, 1983); C. Geertz, *The Religion of Java* (1960; repr. Chicago, 1976); R. G. Lienhardt, *Divinity and Experience: the Religion of the Dinka* (Oxford, 1961).

[18] For the context of life-expectancy see Baines and C. J. Eyre, *GM* 61 (1983), 72–4, with refs. (figures probably too low for the élite, but valid for the wider population).

[19] For the term in studies of religion see, for example, Berger, *The Social Reality of Religion*, 76; V. W. Turner, *The Drums of Affliction* (Oxford, 1968).

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involved in birth, for example, are not normal deities but shadowy beings with anomalous characteristics.[20] Some individuals—an unquantifiable proportion of the population but surely a minority—also participate in the major cults.

Official ideological sources in Egypt implicitly acknowledge the socially destructive effects—and causes—of affliction by asserting that reciprocity and the interlocking solidarity of successive generations are vital in the proper order of things. This is a bland, élite presentation of one side of the truth.[21] When later sources are more open in their presentation of loss and suffering, this may reflect both their generally greater loquacity and the loosening of decorum. They provide the most informative accounts of affliction, but have no earlier parallels, so that analysis is forced back on more theoretical considerations.

Where religious practice relates to affliction, it may be prophylactic, a complex of observances aimed at keeping influential forces well disposed, while also celebrating their benignity, or it may be a corrective response to affliction. In the former case, observance could be of any type, from official cult and participation in festivals to wearing amulets and making superstitious gestures: 'religion' blends into 'magic' and the two should not be separated.[22] Magic is well attested in texts from the Pyramid Texts on and enough is preserved to show its prominence among the living, at least for the élite, but there is relatively little archaeological evidence for it from early periods, except from tombs. I do not study it here because élite magic cannot easily be related to the more widespread practices which probably existed, and it warrants extensive consideration in its own right. Texts integrate magic and religion explicitly by stating that magic is one of the resources given by the creator to mankind.[23] Magic is the main relevant area where the chief thrust of activity is forestalling or countering affliction, so that this legitimation offsets, in rather ambivalent fashion, the bleakness and irrelevance of the human condition as seen in central sources. It is the opposite of the belief in mankind's origin in tears and the creator's bald statement that theodicy is a problem brought into being by mankind (even if he did create the world in a beneficent fashion before it was spoiled).[24]

For pre-New Kingdom times, there is no reason why the whole range of practices

[20] See W. Westendorf, *LÄ* II, 459–62; G. Pinch, *Or* 52 (1983), 405–14, with refs. For a new interpretation see L. Bell, in Munich *Abstracts* (n. 1 above), 9. The royal context is presented by H. Brunner, *Die Geburt des Gottkönigs* (Wiesbaden, 1964).

[21] Thus the analysis of J. Assmann, in *Studien zu Sprache und Religion zu Ehren von Wolfhart Westendorf*, II (Göttingen, 1984), 687–701, reports on an élite view but does not set it in a broader social context. For the related concept of person and social role see idem, *LÄ* IV, 963–78; and, in general, M. Carrithers *et al.* (eds.), *The Category of the Person: Anthropology, Philosophy, History* (Cambridge etc., 1985).

[22] Apart from the analytical importance of this point, the attitude is part of general Egyptian belief, as is shown by the fact that the archetypal magician was the chief lector priest, the central figure in normal temple cult. This does not imply a lack of awareness of differences between magical and other activities, since such an awareness is clearly visible in stories. Cf. J. F. Borghouts, *LÄ* III, 1146, with refs.

[23] See, for example, Hornung, *Conceptions of God*, 207–10 (= *Der Eine und die Vielen*, 203–6); idem, *LÄ* II, 790; Borghouts, *LÄ* III, 1141.

[24] Hornung, *Conceptions of God*, 212–13 (= *Der Eine und die Vielen*, 208–9). For the implied attitudes to the past see Baines, 'Ancient Egyptian Concepts and Uses of the Past: 3rd–2nd Millennium Evidence', in R. Layton (ed.), *Who needs the Past? Indigenous Values and Archaeology* (London, in press). For theodicy see also n. 13 above.

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I have enumerated should not have occurred—as well as others—but their relative frequency cannot be estimated. Response to affliction should ideally include discovering its cause—in the broadest terms, divination—and suitable action to overcome it. A host of agents may cause affliction, from snakes against which an appropriate charm has not been used to the anger of a deity.[25] Not all agents are supernatural, but most problematic ones are; non-supernatural agents may belong in an overarching supernatural context that shows why a particular person is struck at a particular time—an exalted case would be Ramesses II at the Battle of Qadesh.[26] Divine affliction may not be altogether bad, because the deity singles out the sufferer, who is transformed by the adverse experience, and especially by overcoming it, into one of the select:[27] in a harsh world, affliction and benediction are not always distinct. An example of this in a this-worldly élite context is the early Fifth Dynasty case of Rewer, whose king's inadvertent near-condemnation of him was a sign of favour because of the king's corrective action.[28]

The complexity of beliefs on this subject is well exemplified in the oracular amuletic decrees of the Third Intermediate Period, where the concern to protect children leads to enumerations of almost any conceivable agent, including gods, demons, a particular kind of spirit called a *wr(t)*, magicians, dreams, and personal destiny; random afflictions like the collapse of a house wall were also to be guarded against.[29] To all of these can be added the dead, who are attested as harming the living from the Old Kingdom on,[30] and living human beings, whose malice may be

[25] Such possibilities are known chiefly from later times and from spells to forestall or counter them or from such sources as the calendars of lucky and unlucky days (which go back to the Middle Kingdom). The area has been little studied; for a summary see E. Brunner-Traut, *LÄ* VI, 153–6. See also I. E. S. Edwards, *Oracular Amuletic Decrees of the Late New Kingdom*, Hieratic Papyri in the British Museum, 4th series (London, 1960), xix–xxiii. For an additional related text see P. Vernus, *RdE* 33 (1981), 89–106.

[26] For example, T. von der Way, *Die Textüberlieferung Ramses' II. zur Qadeš-Schlacht: Analyse und Struktur* (Hildesheim, 1984), 302–7. The same essential point is much discussed in the ethnographic literature (see especially E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford, 1937)), and has been at the centre of the debate on rationality; see material cited in *GM* 76 (1984), 50–4; J. Overing (ed.), *Reason and Morality* (London, 1985).

[27] This attitude is visible in 'personal piety' stelae from Deir el-Medina, see, for example, J. Assmann, *Ägyptische Hymnen und Gebete* (Zurich/Munich, 1975), 349–407 (nos. 148 and 150, among many others). It is prominent in redemption in Christianity from the conversion of Paul on. For an ethnographic analogy compare the ambivalent material discussed by C. Lévi-Strauss, *Anthropologie structurale* (Paris, 1958), 183–203. In two cases, the appearance of Hathor in a dream, in a context similar to that of other personal piety documents, was a pure 'benediction': J. Assmann, *RdE* 30 (1978), 22–50; H. Satzinger, in *Mélanges Gamal eddin Mokhtar*, II (Cairo, 1985), 249–54. Such instances might be much more widespread than the documentation suggests. The occurrence of benedictions in a class of material mainly concerned with affliction is typical of the idealizing monumental record.

[28] This addresses only one aspect of the text, which is much cited but has not been discussed *in extenso* (*Urk.* I, 232; A. Roccati, *La Littérature historique sous l'Ancien Empire égyptien* (Paris, 1982), 101–2).

[29] See Edwards, *Oracular Amuletic Decrees*, xix–xxiii.

[30] For the dead see G. Posener, *MDAIK* 16 (1958), 252–70; W. Spiegelberg, *ZÄS* 65 (1930), 130–1; A. H. Gardiner and K. Sethe, *Egyptian Letters to the Dead* (London, 1928), 12; Gardiner, *The Attitude of the Ancient Egyptians to Death and the Dead* (The Frazer Lecture 1935, Cambridge, 1935), 16, 18–24, 33; J. Černý in R. A. Parker, *A Saite Oracle Papyrus from Thebes in the Brooklyn Museum* (Providence, RI, 1962), 39 (the deceased Neskhons should be kindly disposed to her widowed husband and not seek to do him any harm); P. Kaplony, *LÄ* VI, 648–56. For material in the medical texts see H. Grapow, *Kranker, Krankheiten und Arzt* (Berlin, 1956), 31–5. Note also the belief that one's death could be under the control of a particular god: J. Černý and G. Posener, *Papyrus hiératiques de Deir el-Médineh*, I (Cairo, 1978), 5–8.

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implied by the listing of both foreigners and Egyptians in execration texts of the Sixth Dynasty and later.[31]

Responses to affliction

In seeking out the agent of affliction, one may look to disturbances in one's social surroundings, which are often more easily tackled and comprehended than, for example, the medical cause of an illness. Despite the execration texts just cited, human malice, whose manifestation might be witchcraft or sorcery, is not prominent in Egyptian material; this may be a chance of the record.[32] Attempts to find human agents of affliction are likely to involve divination rather than detective work—although the two are not incompatible—and suitable people must be consulted or special techniques used. If the agent is outside this world, an informant should have privileged access to another world or a mode of enquiry should lead reliably in that direction. Although it is difficult to be sure that one's source has produced the right answer, definite action is needed, so that doubts may be suppressed.

I consider three among many possible modes of reaction to affliction or prophylactic measures: communication with the dead; oracles and the status of intermediaries in official cults; and human beings with special powers.

Communication with the dead

The letters to the dead show that people who felt that they had suffered injustice could turn to the dead for assistance,[33] probably after mundane attempts had failed or where they had little chance of success. There is thus a very close parallel between an Old Kingdom text recording the verdict of a court over an inheritance and a contemporary letter to the dead.[34] The supplicants could expect the dead to act on their behalf unless they had been slighted. The dead could feel wronged by actions of others when they were alive or after their death and the sense of wrong could spill over into litigation in the hereafter.[35] The living might feel afflicted by the dead, whether they were at fault or not (of course, they claim not to be). All those approached appear to have been only a few years dead and some may have been reached through intermediaries who had died still more recently;[36] intercession accompanies offerings and may be prefaced by a reminder of favours or evocation of

[31] J. Osing, *MDAIK* 32 (1976), 133–85, with refs.

[32] Cf. Borghouts, *LÄ* III, 1142–4.

[33] R. Grieshammer, *LÄ* I, 864–70, with refs.; J. Černý, *A Community of Workmen at Thebes in the Ramesside Period* (Cairo, 1973), 369–70, with refs.; E. F. Wente, *OLP* 6–7 (1975–6), 595–600. There is another possible letter from Naga' el-Deir, knowledge of which I owe to E. J. Brovarski.

[34] Gardiner and Sethe, *Letters to the Dead*, no. 1 (translation: Roccati, *La Littérature historique*, 296–7); Sethe, *ZÄS* 61 (1926), 67–79.

[35] As noted by Grieshammer, *LÄ* I, 867–9, several letters allude to such litigation, while related spells in the Coffin Texts (38–41) make play with the same possibility; see also idem, *Das Jenseitsgericht in den Sargtexten* (Wiesbaden, 1970), 12–30; *OLP* 6–7 (1975–6), 231–4, with refs. Litigation could be between this world and the next or wholly in the next world. It dramatizes the tension between generations, in which the elder feels displaced by the younger and the younger feels that the elder thwarts its assumption of a full and independent role; cf. Fortes, *Oedipus and Job*, 11–31.

[36] Gardiner and Sethe, *Letters to the Dead*, 12 (Additional Note).

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a gesture of moral solidarity by the deceased.[37] One early letter asks that the deceased 'intercede' on the writer's behalf, perhaps in a next-worldly tribunal,[38] while only the latest preserved letter uses the deceased explicitly as intermediaries to gods.[39] Is this interaction between the living and the dead the literate tip of a non-literate iceberg? Written form seems unnecessary to such communication, and the letters might in any case have been said out loud at the time of deposition. Comparable oral practice could be extremely widespread. The dead who were addressed could be of either sex and may have been people of authority in families, but two New Kingdom wives who may have died quite young are unlikely to fit such a description.[40] For the high proportion of people whose relatives may have had no proper burial, there could still be some contact with the recently dead. Alternatively, some might have appealed to figures of higher authority, such as local 'deified' dead (but see below). Thus, despite the poor attestation of these letters, they may point to a widespread and socially significant practice. They may also be continuous with cults of ancestors (however recently dead), as attested at Deir el-Medina and elsewhere in the New Kingdom.[41] When integrated with regular offerings to the recent dead and practices like the Beautiful Festival of the Valley,[42] recourse to the dead in affliction may be both prophylaxis and response. Like the gods, the dead can be capricious and unpredictable: if there was divination, it must have come before the letters were written; only one letter plays on uncertainty about the agent of affliction.[43]

Whereas there is almost no archaeological material that might fill out the record of the letters to the dead, Old and Middle Kingdom cults of the deified dead are relatively well known,[44] including those of Hardjedef,[45] Ptahhotpe,[46] and Kagemni[47]

[37] Ibid. 16. See also the fundamental review of B. Gunn, *JEA* 16 (1930), 147–55.

[38] n. 35 above; see also Wente *OLP* 6–7 (1975–6), 595–7 with n. f.

[39] Even there, this is not the main message of the text (Černý, *Community of Workmen*, 369–70). The letter is formally addressed to Akhtai's coffin, not directly to the deceased.

[40] The author of P. Leiden I 371 seems to have been married to his deceased wife for relatively few years (Gardiner and Sethe, *Letters to the Dead*, no. 6). Butehamun's wife Akhtai probably died young (Černý, *Community of Workmen*, 366–9). The affliction caused by deceased women may have been different from that caused by men.

[41] See, for example, J. L. Keith-Bennett, *BES* 3 (1981), 43–71; Demarée, *The ꜣḫ iḳr n Rʿ-stelae*; F. Freedman, *JEA* 71 (1985), 82–97. In addition to Keith-Bennett's often poorly provenanced material, an 'ancestor' bust has been found in the Egypt Exploration Society's excavations at Memphis; it is clear that the practice was not restricted to a single community.

[42] E. Graefe, *LÄ* VI, 187–9, with refs.

[43] Two letters mention dreams (W. K. Simpson, *JEA* 52 (1966), 45; Wente, *OLP* 6–7 (1975–6), 599–600), one perhaps as a premonition which prompted its writing (cf. G. Fecht, *MDAIK* 24 (1969), 111), but it is not clear whether divinatory dreaming is involved. Wente assumes that something of the sort is present in the letter he publishes. There seems to be no reason why divination should not have preceded letter-writing, and dreaming is one of its possible forms. Since a strong approach is desirable, it would not normally be appropriate to dwell on divination in the letter itself. The letter in which the writer shows uncertainty is Gardiner and Sethe's no. 4.

[44] For deification of Old Kingdom individuals see in general W. Helck, *WZKM* 63–4 (1972), 18–19; for other examples see next three notes; H. Goedicke, *JEA* 41 (1955), 31–3, is to be rejected. See also in general H. de Meulenaere, *LÄ* VI, 973–4; H. Goedicke, ibid. 989–92.

[45] K. Baer, *Rank and Title in the Old Kingdom* (Chicago, 1960), 74–5.

[46] H. Junker, *Giza*, VII (Vienna, 1944), 26–7; idem, in *Studi in memoria di Ippolito Rosellini . . .*, II (Pisa, 1955), 131–40; H. Goedicke, *ASAE* 55 (1958), 35–55.

[47] C. M. Firth and B. Gunn, *Teti Pyramid Cemeteries*, I (Cairo, 1926), 1–30.

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at Giza and Saqqâra, of Izi at Edfu[48] and Heqaib at Aswan.[49] A comparable phenomenon is the deification of King Wenis and the partly consequent cemetery around the west end of his causeway, which continued in use in the Middle Kingdom.[50] Despite its apparent wealth, this material remains problematic and its significance for personal religion hard to assess. The cases from the capital are known only from inscribed necropolis finds, and the same applies to Izi. Only Heqaib is known to have had an urban monument (although Izi's tomb is very near the town). Almost no small finds or votive objects are reported in connection with any deification, so that worship of these people cannot be proved to extend beyond the lower élite who could afford nearby burials and whose titles show that they were personally involved in the cult; the general quality of Heqaib's monuments is also high, including several royal statues. If the excavation reports are adequate, the cults must have been conducted with perishable offerings only. Large quantities of votive pottery, for example, would probably be mentioned in publications, and for Heqaib it is clear that they were not present.[51]

Since the analogy for these cults is communication with the dead, the necropolis is an obvious focus for them, but parallel worship in settlements is possible. A funerary forerunner of Heqaib's sanctuary is known in the settlement on Elephantine Island,[52] so that mortuary cults of late Old Kingdom notables may have been conducted both in the town and in the necropolis; something similar is attested in the Middle Kingdom text of Djehutihotpe at el-Bersha, who had a 'lower [chapel]' in the town, which was some distance away.[53] The general lack of evidence from early urban sites renders any hypotheses about the cult in them fragile; some popular, semi-mortuary activity could have occurred. None the less, the evidence for deification is not impressive testimony to religious activity that reached out beyond the élite and cannot be compared with what is known for the Late Period.[54] This seemingly promising area of interaction between the living and the dead and the human and the divine is of demonstrable relevance only to local élites; any extension to the rest of the population is speculative.

Oracles and intermediaries

Oracles are a form of divination or of delegated decision-making and may constitute another kind of prophylaxis;[55] in discussing them, I also consider the problem of

[48] M. Alliot, *Rapport sur les fouilles de Tell Edfou (1932)* (Cairo, 1933); idem, *BIFAO* 37 (1937–8), 93–160.

[49] Labib Habachi, *Elephantine IV. The Sanctuary of Heqaib* (2 vols., Mainz, 1985). The cults of both these men continued into the Second Intermediate Period.

[50] Ahmed Mahmoud Moussa, *MDAIK* 27 (1971), 81–4; H. Altenmüller, *SAK* 1 (1974) 1–18; Moussa and Altenmüller, *MDAIK* 31 (1975), 93–7; P. Munro, *GM* 63 (1983), 81–109. Compare also the Middle Kingdom cult of Snofru at Dahshur, cf. R. Gundlach, *LÄ* VI, 971–2, with refs.

[51] Habachi, *The Sanctuary of Heqaib*, 19–21.

[52] W. Kaiser, *et al.*, *MDAIK* 32 (1976), 98–107 (F. Junge).

[53] P. E. Newberry, *El-Bersheh*, I (London, n.d.), pl. 12 col. 12; K. Sethe, *Aegyptische Lesestücke*[2] (Leipzig, 1928), 78 l. 2, restored [*ḥwt-kꜣ*]-*ḫrt*; the wording is uncertain but the sense is clear.

[54] See E. Otto, *MDAIK* 15 (1957), 193–207; S. Morenz, *Religion und Geschichte des alten Ägypten* (Weimar, 1975), 263–80 (= *ZÄS* 84 (1959), 132–43); D. Wildung, *Imhotep und Amenhotep: Gottwerdung im alten Ägypten* (Munich/Berlin, 1977); idem, *Egyptian Saints: Deification in Pharaonic Egypt* (New York, 1977).

[55] See in general L. Kakosy, *LÄ* IV, 600–6; Černý, in Parker, *Saite Oracle Papyrus*, 35–48.

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general access to temples. They are well known in New Kingdom and later sources, but are generally assumed not to have existed earlier.[56] The context of major oracles is cult temples of deities, but the deified, of whom Amenhotpe I at Deir el-Medina is an important intermediate example,[57] can also be approached; in later times animals also played a significant part as intermediaries or approachable manifestations of deities. I see no reason why oracles could not have been consulted in earlier times; the argument that they should not be sought because they are 'completely alien' to earlier religion (see n. 56) assumes that its general character is better known than I believe it to be. Both accidents of preservation and the operation of decorum may have robbed us of concrete evidence. I discuss three possible examples in texts.[58] Two are probably fictitious, but are no less relevant.

The first case is where Ankhtify of Moalla claims that Horus led him to conquer Edfu.[59] This is probably a rationalization after the event and part of its function is to replace the normal royal sanction or initiative of an Old Kingdom biography. None the less, the formulation should be meaningful and morally persuasive in its own terms. If Ankhtify was inspired to conquer Edfu or dreamed that he should, and such experiences were accepted guides to action, this legitimation would be coherent, but it would not be subject to public involvement or social sanction. An oracle would have the advantage of bringing in an outside agency and displaying both the protagonist's accountability and his prestige. It is irrelevant whether Ankhtify actually consulted or received an oracle. In legitimating his action, his text refers to divine authorization. Such authorization is best seen against a background of divinatory practice, one of whose possible realizations is the oracle.

The next example is the late Thirteenth Dynasty Haremkhauef of Hierakonpolis, who states that Horus sent him to Itjtawy to fetch his new cult image.[60] This journey is the sole significant event narrated on Haremkhauef 's stela and should thus be seen as a privilege or benediction. Some process should lie behind the selection of Haremkhauef, who is unlikely to have been the only person eligible for the mission. If the text meant merely that the person in authority decided to send Haremkhauef, the formulation is very grandiose. If there was a genuine choice among candidates, an oracle would be a suitable method of making it, because it is public and detached from the persons involved. It seems to me to be the best way of understanding the passage. As with Ankhtify, the oracle would to some extent replace a central or royal authority. It is appropriate to local or minor concerns, but cannot be addressed to the king, because he can answer back in person; consultation with him has a different

[56] For example, Assmann, *Ägypten: Theologie und Frömmigkeit*, 188.

[57] See Černý, in Parker, *Saite Oracle Papyrus*, 41–3, with refs. The legal aspects of the cult are being studied by Andrea Newman (University of Pennsylvania).

[58] Texts are not necessarily a good source of evidence for oracles, so that the problem of bias is acute here. See also related discussions further below.

[59] J. Vandier, *Moʿalla* (Cairo, 1950), 20; G. Fecht, in W. Helck (ed.), *Festschrift für Siegfried Schott zu seinem 70. Geburtstag am 20. August 1967* (Wiesbaden, 1968), 54 with n. 5; M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, I (Berkeley etc., 1973), 85. The oracular interpretation was originally suggested tentatively by Vandier and seemingly endorsed by Fecht. For an alternative view see Assmann, *Ägypten: Theologie und Frömmigkeit*, 188.

[60] W. C. Hayes, *JEA* 33 (1947), 3–11; Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, I, 129–30.

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character. In the New Kingdom, when the king states that he himself consulted oracles, this may tell us something about the changing status of kingship and of the gods or about the changing quality of the record. We cannot exclude the possibility that kings consulted oracles in earlier times. From the Middle Kingdom on they state that they received divine commands, and these could have come in the form of oracles.[61]

The last example is avowedly fictitious.[62] Sinuhe makes much play of a god's having caused his flight to Palestine, although he does not even know which god it was. One reason for dwelling on this point is Sinuhe's casuistic self-exculpation—that is, in one sense a reaction to affliction long after the event. His recourse to a god is not an oracle, but it is relevant here because of the assumptions it implies about the role of the gods in human affairs and the difficulty of knowing who the god was and what he did. In contrast with the other cases, it is explicitly polytheistic and aleatory. It would fit well in a context where divination was normal. Sinuhe's motivation may have been direct inspiration—if one thinks his narrative is presented as being in good faith—but the putative search for its meaning and source belongs better in a context of divination.[63]

The use of divine oracles need not be distinct from other modes of access to gods. The most obvious area of potential overlap between oracles, approaches to the deceased through letters and other activities that centred on their burial places, and other modes of action, is in the use of intermediaries: most people had no direct access to the gods in temples and would have had to use priests who deposited their offerings or presented their questions and returned the answers. From the New Kingdom on, intermediary statues are attested both from inscriptions that invite passers-by to make use of them and from the largely undatable signs of wear on the pieces themselves. Here, two scribe statues of the Twelfth Dynasty vizier Mentuhotpe from Karnak are of interest.[64] These are in a pose known elsewhere for intermediary statues.[65] They were restored and given new heads in the Nineteenth Dynasty, so that they must have been openly accessible for some 700 years. They are not heavily worn and cannot have been in a very public place, but they could have been venerated by priests who penetrated the inner parts of the temple (the public

[61] Cf., for example, Hornung, *Conceptions of God*, 211 (= *Der Eine und die Vielen*, 207); Vernus, *LÄ* VI, 745–9. In a fragmentary context, Senwosret I appears to have been influenced by a dream to build a temple at Elephantine (W. Schenkel, *MDAIK* 31 (1975), 116, 118 n. a; W. Helck, *MDAIK* 34 (1978), 70–1).

[62] Cf. Baines, *JEA* 68 (1982), 40–2 with n. 39. For different views see Assmann, *Ägypten: Theologie und Frömmigkeit*, 188; J. G. Griffiths, 'Intimations in Egyptian Non-Royal Biography of a Belief in Divine Impact on Human Affairs', in T. G. H. James *et al.* (eds.), Edwards Festschrift.

[63] Deities need not be the only dispensers of oracles. Other possible oracles are ancestors, the deified dead, kings, or 'sacred' animals (compare, for much later times, J. D. Ray, *The Archive of Hor* (London, 1976), 130–1). There could also have been non-supernatural oracles such as are well known from the Azande (Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic*). (For oracular names see nn. 83 and 86 below.)

[64] S. Sauneron, in *Karnak V 1970–1972* (Cairo, 1975), 65–76; [J. F. Romano], The Luxor Museum of Ancient Egyptian Art, *Catalogue* (Cairo, 1979), nos. 31, 34; for Mentuhotpe see also D. Franke, *Personendaten aus dem Mittleren Reich (20.–16. Jahrhundert v. Chr.): Dossiers 1–796* (Wiesbaden, 1984), 183–4 no. 262.

[65] For example, statues of Amenhotpe son of Hapu and Paramesse found by the tenth pylon at Karnak: PM II², 188 (584); *Urk*, IV, 1832–5; 2175–6; see comments of J. Yoyotte, in *Les Pèlerinages* (Sources orientales 3, Paris, 1960), 42–3; J. J. Clère, *JEA* 54 (1968), 141–8; H. te Velde, *LÄ* IV, 161–3.

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areas from which later intermediary statues come had not been constructed when these ones were made). Such objects could therefore be forerunners of later intermediary practices, but used by fewer people. The Karnak of the Middle Kingdom was a much smaller institution than its New Kingdom successor and served a smaller local population, so that a more restricted earlier practice could have had a proportionately larger impact. People could also have had intermediaries to intermediary statues. But, despite these extra possibilities and factors, these statues are no more than possible examples of pre-New Kingdom individuals acting as intercessors before the gods.

If prominent pre-New Kingdom individuals could act as intermediaries—and that is a major proviso—this role might be visible in other material: as something that demonstrated their status and provision for others, it could be another stage in the process that led to private deification and could be worthy of report in biographies. This does not seem to have happened, perhaps in part because decorum would not allow private religious matters and cult activities to be displayed, but, from the late Old Kingdom on, biographies do give importance to people's position in the cult of provincial deities.[66] Here, their actions, which one suspects are modelled on the king's role (specified in the treatise quoted earlier), cannot be compared directly with royal activity, because no royal inscriptions are concerned with such matters before much later times. The general context is the assertion that the protagonist had an ideal life in his career and in his exemplary performance of duties, as well as in his moral concern for his fellow men, which includes the non-élite 'hungry' and 'naked' to whom he 'gives' (see n. 6 above). He does not claim in so many words that he performed the cult on behalf of the local people as a whole, but that is probably implied. Other motifs, such as the prestige of his access to a deity—denied to most people—are, however, also involved. This does not point directly to an intermediary role, but the attitudes are compatible with one or it might grow from them. The ruler or the superior takes on responsibility for cult in implied return for the labour given him by the people. The superior's view is thus that the rest of humanity need not be concerned with the cult and the maintenance of sweetness and light, so that there is a social division of care, but the rest of society need not have agreed about this. Apart from evidence pointing in another direction, such as personal names, both the fact that a superior presents the cult as an object of prestige, and the reality of human ambition, argue against there being general agreement. With the disappearance of central authority in the First Intermediate Period and a probably looser social hierarchy, local involvement in religion could have become more significant. This may then apply more strongly to the Second Intermediate Period, which came after a time when rules of decorum had loosened and religious material was a little more freely available for private monuments than it had been in the Old Kingdom.

[66] The best Old Kingdom example is the biographical inscription of Pepyankh the Middle at Meir (*Urk.* I, 221–4; Roccati, *La Littérature historique*, 234–6). Such concerns are commonplace in Middle Kingdom stelae from Abydos, e.g. Sethe, *Aegyptische Lesestücke*[2], no. 15.

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These arguments cannot prove anything; they are meant to show how gaps in knowledge leave space for more religious action and participation related to the cult than is mostly assumed (apart from part-time minor priesthoods, which are documented in quite large numbers by the Abusir and Illahun papyri[67]). There could be a continuity between practices like oracles, intermediary action, and public festivals, of which the last appear to have been common to all periods. But the arguments remain tentative and cannot be related to specific or archaeological evidence—as is true of most of the problems I consider.

One major difficulty here is the small scale of temples in pre-New Kingdom times. This does not imply that the cult was unimportant, but it shows that the centrality of the king in ideology had its economic counterpart and it renders religious action in and around the temples still less accessible. In any case, material from such minor sites as Medamud[68] and Tod,[69] as well as possible early objects from Karnak,[70] suggests that temples may have been more significant than would otherwise appear from the record. There are a few deposits of votive offerings, many of high quality, from Early Dynastic and Old Kingdom sites,[71] so that their absence from Middle Kingdom sources is the more striking. It remains clear that, in comparison with the New Kingdom, private and non-élite participation must have been small and indirect. Material like the stelae from Abydos, which show religious involvement but place most of their emphasis on the next world, probably also symbolize and present indirectly something of religious action and belief in this world, and part of the reason for their reticence may be restrictions upon what may be said publicly about such action. Here, for example, the stela of Ikhernofret reports only cult actions that took place during a public performance that was partly oriented to the next world, and otherwise deals with the tending of the god's shrine and statue.[72] His account is coherent and meaningful in its own terms, but its focus on social prestige and the externals of religion does not exclude the existence of underlying personal concerns. In comparison with Ikhernofret, Pepyankh the Middle of the Sixth Dynasty, who states that he entered and saw Hathor in the cult (n. 66 above), is a little more informative. His high local status as nomarch and the placing of his inscription in his tomb, away from cult areas, may be significant as separating the statement from a context in which it could be contrary to decorum (such an argument is particularly hypo-

[67] Abusir: P. Posener-Kriéger, *Les Archives du temple funéraire de Néferirkarê-Kakaï* (*Les papyrus d'Abousir*) (Cairo, 1976); the organization of the temple personnel is being studied by A. M. Roth (University of Chicago). Illahun: U. Kaplony-Heckel, *Ägyptische Handschriften*, I (Wiesbaden, 1971); work by U. Luft in progress, see *Oikumene* 3 (1982), 101–56.

[68] C. Robinson and A. Varille, *Description sommaire du temple primitif de Medamoud* (Cairo, 1940).

[69] D. Arnold, *MDAIK* 21 (1975), 175–86; C. Desroches Noblecourt and C. Leblanc, *BIFAO* 84 (1984), 81–90.

[70] Romano, *Catalogue*, no. 10; B. V. Bothmer, *SAK* 6 (1978), pl. 12; J.-C. Goyon and C. Traunecker, in *Cahiers de Karnak VI 1973–1977* (Cairo, 1980), 132–8, pls. 36–40 (prefer later dating).

[71] Material valuably surveyed and discussed by G. Dreyer, *Elephantine VIII. Der Tempel der Satet: Die Funde der Frühzeit und des Alten Reiches* (Mainz, 1986).

[72] H. Schäfer, *Die Mysterien des Osiris in Abydos unter König Sesostris III* (Leipzig, 1905); Sethe, *Aegyptische Lesestücke*, no. 14; Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, I, 123–5.

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thetical because of the absence of private temple inscriptions from the Old Kingdom).

This line of reasoning could be extended for Middle Kingdom material. Texts like the contracts of Hapidjefai at Asyut show the deep involvement of the local élite with the priesthood in this life and beyond,[73] while the tomb of Wekhhotpe at Meir, in which there is no biographical text but widespread allusion to the cult of Hathor, renews the religious focus in that of Pepyankh the Middle.[74] On another level, religious material from houses, slightly better attested than that from temples, includes objects of types that occur in new Kingdom temples and may suggest a continuity of practice between the two spheres and periods.[75]

Seers

My third illustration is the seer.[76] The most definite evidence for using a seer—a person who has privileged insight or techniques of insight into events and their causation—comes from Deir el-Medina documents. In one, a man writes to a woman, perhaps his wife, about what should be done on the death of two children, and refers to possible consultations with another women who is called *ỉ͗r rḫt* 'the wise woman'. Two further texts report on what 'the wise woman' said about affliction suffered by questioners through the 'manifestation (*bꜣw*)' of deities, while another records that an oracular(?) movement by the deified Amenhotpe I in a procession was predicted by the 'wise woman'. The cases appear to record consultations over divine afflictions or other matters involving divination and, significantly, include prior consultation about something that was itself a consultation. The divinatory process might thus be many-layered. The allusions all appear to be matter-of-fact, suggesting that recourse to the 'wise woman' was normal. It is unlikely that evidence for such practices would be preserved from earlier times, so that it is worth considering whether seers or mediums may have been a feature of practical religion of the New Kingdom and earlier times. Recourse to seers would fit well with material like the letters to the dead and has many parallels in other cultures, where such specialists are often women.

All these illustrations have been drawn from literate, and therefore élite, material; only by extension can such practices be posited for the rest of the population. They are, however, of types compatible with widespread use, even for relatively minor concerns, as oracles were used in later times. Because the earliest examples of oracles that have often been discussed are royal and involve major matters of succession or of the waging of war, it is generally assumed that they filtered down from there

[73] For example, Sethe, *Aegyptische Lesestücke*[2], 92–6.

[74] A. M. Blackman, *The Rock Tombs of Meir*, VI (London, 1953).

[75] For example, W. M. F. Petrie, *Illahun, Kahun and Gurob* (London, 1891), 11; G. Brunton, *Qau, and Badari*, III (London, 1930), 7, pls. 9–10; B. Fayolle, *Le Livre du Musée Guimet de Lyon* (Lyon and Paris, [1958]), 81. I am very grateful to Geraldine Pinch for these references.

[76] Penetrating discussion by J. F. Borghouts, in R. J. Demarée and J. J. Janssen (eds.), *Gleanings from Deir el-Medîna* (Leiden, 1982), 24–7. See also B. Letellier, in J. Vercoutter (ed.), *IFAO, Livre du Centenaire* (Cairo, 1980), 127–33. Both authors consider the possibility that *ỉ͗r rḫt* is a name; this can almost certainly be discounted.

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to minor, everyday concerns. This is not necessarily correct; although no early evidence can be cited for frequent or 'trivial' use of oracles, the possibility is worth considering. The variety of religious and divinatory practices can be seen as integrating a variety of approaches to comprehending and coping with problems of normal existence that centre around the individual or the social group. These approaches can extend into different contexts: oracles into the official cult; letters to the dead into mortuary practices and in some cases into ancestor cults; other forms of divination into religious action in local communities; dreams relate to individual actions and to any other of these possibilities. In another sense, all of these modes of action may overlap with 'official' and secular ones such as recourse to courts of law. What seems to have changed over the centuries is the nexus of everyday religious action in local, non-official, individual concerns (see below).

Early piety?

I now turn briefly to the 'piety' side of my title. Whereas so far I have asked what the range of religious action might have been, the background to considering piety is the problem of understanding the significance of the large numbers of Egyptian deities for society as a whole and for its individual members, in periods from which there is very little evidence for interaction with them. Only recently have scholars produced evidence for pre-Amarna period piety.[77] Can their arguments be extended or complemented? Purists may say that oracles, and even much use of intermediaries, are manipulative, but for the user they involve active response by the deity and positive engagement by the supplicant. The deity plays a direct part in people's lives, at least at moments of decision, affliction, and change. If the possibility that there were oracles in earlier times is admitted, this may provide an additional stimulus to searching for traces of piety.

Before considering the sparse evidence from outside the élite and participants in the main cults, the implications of the latter should be reviewed. For much of the time, the regular cult may be 'performative' and almost mechanistic,[78] and there is no access to the officiants' attitudes, which need not include personal involvement. Such an orientation suits especially the function of propitiating potentially hostile and capricious deities. Votive offerings tend to be evaluated in the opposite sense, as witnesses of positive personal involvement.[79] But this contrast is probably too sharp. The strong social buttressing of regular cults does not exclude personal involvement. Such evidence as accompanies New Kingdom votive offerings,[80] however, could be thought to show that they too were mechanistic and manipulative, for the record reveals almost nothing of accompanying attitudes. Here, decorum may constrain the material so that it is virtually mute. Neither regular cult nor irregular

[77] G. Posener, *RdE* 27 (1975), 185–210; P. Vernus, *RdE* 34 (1982–3), 115–17.

[78] See Assmann, *Re und Amun*, 33–53; for a general interpretation, including public aspects, see S. J. Tambiah, *A Performative Approach to Ritual* (London, 1979), (= *Proceedings of the British Academy* 65 (1979), 113–69).

[79] For example, S. Morenz's discussion of animal burials: *Religion und Geschichte des alten Ägypten* (Weimar, 1975), 304–12 (= *ZÄS* 88 (1963), 42–7).

[80] This material is gathered and analysed by Geraldine Pinch in her study mentioned in n. 1.

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votive evidence displays the attitudes of the participants. They are likely to have been diverse and not necessarily very different in the two contexts; it is best to allow for the possibility that personal relationships with deities might occur in both. The late New Kingdom change to displaying such relationships—which is confined to relatively few contexts—may be to a considerable extent a change in decorum.

There is ample evidence from all periods that the most fundamental transition of all, birth, was related to deities by the parents, who named the majority of children for gods.[81] Names of the gods themselves are not common as personal names; instead, names record a relevant aspect or action of the deity, or state that the holder belongs to a deity or to one of his or her manifestations. One must be cautious in assessing this material and bear in mind the story of a Zande child whose name meant 'God has sealed my lips' because, the father explained, he couldn't think what to call him.[82] On the other hand, anyone who called a child Djeddjehutyiufankh, 'Thoth said he would live', would hardly do so just because he liked the sound of the name;[83] the fundamental seriousness of naming and of Egyptian attitudes to names need not be doubted. In default of appropriate studies, my comments here are impressionistic.[84] The frequency of names that assert that a god is gracious, great, and so forth, is significant here. The obvious explanation of such a pattern is that in the birth of a child the originator of a name saw a token of the god's graciousness, greatness, etc.; most later users of the name may have chosen it to commemorate elder or deceased kin, but they would probably have rejected it if its content was distasteful. Apart from prophylactic names directed at capricious deities, mostly goddesses, almost all theophoric names show the gods in a favourable light. If one was dissatisfied with the gods, it was probably because the child died or was crippled or deformed; one might then choose a non-theophoric name, an option that was always available in any case. Apart from its inauspiciousness, the choice of a 'deviant' name might be rendered impossible by social pressures or by decorum.

Few names express or recount interaction between the namer and a deity; rather, birth is a signal of divine presence and involvement. Because so many infants and mothers died, the gods were not simply beneficent in birth, which was an occasion of potential tension, affliction, and divine caprice as much as, or more than, others. Mediated contact with the gods before birth, for example through votive offerings or indirect temple involvement, is poorly attested before the New Kingdom,[85] and seems to be separate from the experiences evoked in names, which should thus show

[81] Cf. P. Vernus, *LÄ* IV, 334–6; H. Brunner, *LÄ* IV, 951 with n. 2; J. Assmann, in E. Hornung and O. Keel (eds.), *Studien zu altägyptischen Lebenslehren* (Freiburg/Göttingen, 1979), 15 with n. 9 (I have not seen the work of R. Albertz referred to there).

[82] E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Essays in Social Anthropology* (London, 1969), 175–7.

[83] Note the comment of Edwards, *Oracular Amuletic Decrees*, xx with n. 1 (citing Černý), that oracular names like this one are especially common in the period of the oracular amuletic decrees, in which a wide range of forces acting on human destinies is named.

[84] Ranke, *PN*, is not organized around thematic concerns, and probably includes no more than half the accessible names. For a valuable analysis of Early Dynastic names see Hornung, *Conceptions of God*, 44–9 (= *Der Eine und die Vielen*, 32–8). H. Junker, *Pyramidenzeit* (Einsiedeln etc., 1949), 26–40, collected valuable material, but his discussion is not very illuminating.

[85] For New Kingdom material see Pinch (n. 1 above).

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piety, as I have defined it, in a non-official context.[86] It is therefore significant that most theophoric names refer to major deities, not to the liminal figures like Bes and Taweret. If names focused exclusively on birth itself, these figures should be more prominent. None the less, the involvement of major deities in birth could be an experience and affirmation of centripetal religious concerns that left the rest of life relatively untouched, or it could have a broader reference. Here, the sparse evidence for religious practices, such as festivals, that might reach out to many people, is relevant, but hardly decisive. It is easier to assume that divine involvement could be felt at least at times of elation and of crisis and affliction—not just in birth and death—than to believe in a separation of the different domains; after all, the name one received at birth was mostly kept for life. Some important transitions in life, such as marriage, were secular, but others certainly were not. If in transitions major deities were invoked, their involvement may have been felt to some degree at other times.

Two points remain. First, how far do hints of concern for or involvement with central religion imply an aspiration to personal experience—an orientation toward piety? In pre-New Kingdom times, rules of decorum probably make it impossible to answer this, but if names and other hints suggest that it may have existed, I see no persuasive argument against its occurrence, and religious material from the élite implies it could have been favourably evaluated. Second, the plurality of deities argues against any simple or unitary understanding of their roles. Unlike the few gods in some societies in which practices like the ones discussed earlier in this paper are dominant, whose presence is almost irrelevant to human concerns, Egyptian gods are attested in names—our only evidence—at all social levels and in all periods.[87] Major deities appear to have a distribution that encompasses both the higher reaches of religion and its middle and lower ground, where they vie with, or provide valid alternatives for, other non-material forces.

This argument for early piety competes with that of Assmann,[88] who maintains that the content and phraseology of New Kingdom pious texts points to an origin in instruction texts and in the 'loyalist' texts of the Middle Kingdom. If this literary derivation reflected accurately the extent of the phenomenon, it would be necessary to exclude other possible manifestations of piety from consideration and to assume that piety arose in the core élite and was a diversification of their religious orientation. In presenting his case, however, Assmann minimizes the significance of

[86] Earlier naming patterns are notably different from those of the Third Intermediate and Late Periods which refer to oracular consultation during pregnancy, the evil eye, etc. The attitudes of the two groups are not, however, incompatible. Changes in patterns do not have to reflect changes in religious belief in any straightforward way, but could be complicated by fashion, decorum, and other factors. In particular, the earlier absence of oracular names is not necessarily evidence for an absence of oracles, because the context of use of oracles could have changed, and in any case the new name types did not appear until some centuries after oracles become frequent in the New Kingdom record.

[87] Valuable material in B. L. Begelsbacher-Fischer, *Untersuchungen zur Götterwelt des Alten Reichs im Spiegel der Privatgräber der IV. und V. Dynastie* (Freiburg/Göttingen, 1981); Hornung, *Conceptions of God*, 66–74 (= *Der Eine und die Vielen*, 56–65).

[88] In Hornung and Keel (eds.), *Studien zu altägyptischen Lebenslehren*, 11–72.

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evidence from personal names and does not seek to broaden his enquiry in other directions (which would be irrelevant to his purpose). The difficulty with his approach is that it does not provide a clear point of departure for religious diversification. His literary arguments are, however, persuasive. I would prefer to interpret his material as showing the use of specific literary models for a new genre of literary formulation. Any literary novelty is a departure that will either seek to be a nearly 'pure' innovation or look to a model from which it may depart; these texts could use loyalism as such a model. Among the further constraints on the creation of new literary forms is decorum, which might well affect the presentation of personal religious matter in public. If considerations of genre and of decorum affect the development of personal piety texts, their literary antecedents may tell us little about the origin of the attitudes to which they give an artistic form, and I suggest that this is the case here.[89]

Conclusion: change and diversity

Why should the general image projected by religion change so much in different periods? All the practices and beliefs I have reviewed are pushed to the margin of the preserved record of early periods. In the New Kingdom, and much more in the Late and Graeco-Roman periods, from which analogous practices are altogether better known, they are fairly well integrated into the major cults, so that, for example, letters to gods may replace letters to the dead.[90] This change can be seen occurring in the New Kingdom; it could be apparent or substantive, or more probably both. If it is apparent, the record must be distorted. Distorting factors are the system of decorum, the slowly increasing spread of writing and probably of wealth, and specific archaeological anomalies, such as the preservation of major temples but not minor ones. If decorum is invoked here, it implies that most people were deprived of the official mode of expression, as is evidently the case; but were they deprived by poverty or by deliberate exclusion? The rigid hierarchies of official presentation—which ignores humanity or, where humanity is shown, ignores most of religion—were surely oppressive in some measure,[91] but alienation, I suggest, breeds aspiration to belong with the élite rather than rejection of them. The élite and the rest may be united by everyday religious practices that are not part of official ideology and are concerned with problems of comprehending, accepting, and

[89] It would even be possible to turn Assmann's argument round and propose that the loyalist phraseology of Middle Kingdom texts derived from spoken conventions in statements about the gods.

[90] This has been suggested by several writers on demotic letters to gods, cf. Grieshammer, *LÄ* I, 868–9; R. A. Caminos, *LÄ* I, 860 nn. 5–6. The earliest letters to gods, which date to the late New Kingdom, overlap with the latest letters to the dead, of which the last includes an address to gods (n. 33 above). The neat transfer of practices that could be deduced from this transition is, however, complicated by other factors such as the New Kingdom prominence of intermediary statues (nn. 64–5 above), which appear to have come into their own after the deaths of their owners, whose mortuary interests and continuing status among the living were enhanced by the approaches they received from the faithful.

[91] Cf. Baines, 'Literacy, Social Organisation and the Archaeological Record: the Case of Early Egypt', in B. Bender *et al.* (eds.), *State and Society: The Emergence and Development of Social Hierarchy and Political Centralization* (London, in press).

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responding to the world, to loss, and to suffering that are treated in religious terms by very many cultures. The whole people is also united by the general absence of explicitly religious material on the monuments. The official cult and ideology are refined aspects of religion's role in comprehension and presentation, and serve more than simply religious ends. They are short on general appeal, for which they are not designed; they are hardly concerned at all with loss and suffering. In participating in them, the élite may satisfy only one side of their religious needs and aspirations, while sharing the remainder with the rest of society.

In the New Kingdom, and especially later, this picture is more homogeneous. The reasons for this levelling may be in part social. New Kingdom and Late Period Egypt was probably more urban and sophisticated than the Old and Middle Kingdoms. The small-scale, strongly group-oriented character of material like letters to the dead might be less appropriate to this society than something at once more individual and more anonymous. Here, the analogy with small-scale societies I proposed at the beginning is most relevant: earlier Egyptian religion seems to encompass, but only weakly to integrate, practices typical both of smaller and of larger societies, while later religion belongs more clearly to a large society. A social analysis along these lines implies that some changes in religion may not be as great as is often thought—a theme of much of what I have said. Later religion is better known, as well as perhaps more religious, just as the later wisdom texts are more overtly, but not necessarily more fundamentally, religious.[92] Apart from possible continuities I have emphasized, there was substantial change, for which areas that I have not considered—like discussion in the core élite or the proliferation of practices relating to animals—provide ample evidence. For earlier times we must allow not just for polytheism and its variety of official observances and contradictions, but also for many other practices, analogous with later ones but different in focus. For the actors, this diversity was not bewildering because they encountered each element in its place and exploited the potential it offered, but it may still bewilder us.

[92] Cf. Assmann, in Hornung and Keel (eds.), *Studien zu altägyptischen Lebenslehren*, 11–72. For my arguments, which tend in the opposite direction, see Baines, *GM* 76 (1984), 47–50.

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