

## HEGEL AND THE EGYPTIAN RELIGION AS A MYSTERY OR ENIGMA: THE INNER AND THE OUTER

JON STEWART, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, USA

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Hegel designates the Egyptian religion “the religion of mystery”. This designation involves a hiddenness, which is the opposite of revealedness, i.e., revelation. Similarly, he frequently refers to this religion as a “riddle” or an “enigma” (*Rätsel*). According to his interpretation, one feature of the Egyptian religion is dualism between the inner and the outer, i.e., an inward hidden sphere, and an outward revealed one. This article explores this characterization and the meaning behind it. What elements of the Egyptian religion did Hegel consider mysterious or enigmatic and what role did this play in his placement of this religion as a transitional one between the religions of nature and those of spirit?

**Keywords:** Hegel – Philosophy of religion – Egyptian religion – Sphinx – Oedipus – Inner/outer

Hegel designates the Egyptian religion “the religion of mystery”. This designation involves a hiddenness, which is the opposite of revealedness, i.e., revelation. Similarly, Hegel frequently refers to this religion as a “riddle” or an “enigma” (*Rätsel*).<sup>1</sup> According

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<sup>1</sup> Hegel, *PhS*, p. 424; *Jub.*, vol. 2, p. 534. *Phil. of Hist.*, p. 199; *Jub.*, vol. 11, p. 265. *Phil. of Hist.*, p. 207; *Jub.*, vol. 11, p. 275. *Phil. of Hist.*, p. 213; *Jub.*, vol. 11, p. 283. *LPR*, vol. 2, p. 638; *VPR*, Part 2, p. 531. *Phil. of Religion*, vol. 2, p. 114; *Jub.*, vol. 15, p. 464: “The Spirit of the Egyptian nation is, in fact, an enigma.” *LPWH*, vol. 1, p. 344; *VPWG*, vol. 1, p. 280: “There is still an iron band around the eyes of spirit, where the free apprehending of spirit is not yet set forth; instead spirit is still encircled by an iron band, so that the only thing to which spirit gives birth is what we called the enigma. And thus the enigma, namely Egypt, is a concrete individuality that holds multiplicity fast within itself and unifies it, although in such a way that the unity does not advance to the free self-consciousness of spirit within itself.” (*PhS* = *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. by A.V. Miller, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1977. *Jub.* = *Sämtliche Werke. Jubiläumsausgabe*, vols. 1-20, ed. by Hermann Glockner, Stuttgart: Friedrich Frommann Verlag 1928-41. *Phil. of Hist.* = *The Philosophy of History*, trans. by J. Sibree, New York: Willey Book Co. 1944. *LPR* = *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, vols. 1-3, ed. by Peter C. Hodgson, trans. by Robert F. Brown, P.C. Hodgson and J.M. Stewart with the assistance of H.S. Harris, Berkeley et al.: University of California Press 1984-87. *VPR* = *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion*, Parts 1-3, ed. by Walter Jaeschke, Hamburg: Felix Meiner 1983-85, 1993-95. *Phil. of Religion* = *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, vols. 1-3, trans. by E.B. Speirs and J. Burdon Sanderson, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul; New York: The Humanities Press 1962, 1968, 1972. *LPWH* = *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, vols. 1-3, ed. and trans. by Robert F. Brown and Peter C.

to his interpretation, one feature of the Egyptian religion is dualism between the inner and the outer, that is, an inward hidden sphere, and an outward revealed one. In the present paper I wish to explore this characterization and the meaning behind it. What elements of the Egyptian religion did Hegel consider mysterious or enigmatic and what role did this play in his placement of this religion as a transitional one between the religions of nature and those of spirit?

**I. The Historical Background.** There can be little doubt that the new wave of interest in Egypt during Hegel's time was fueled by the profound sense of exotic mystery that this country and its history presented to the European mind. The mystique surrounding the deciphering of a lost language and form of writing captured the imagination of many. The puzzle of the location of the entrances to the pyramids and the tombs posed an exciting challenge to European explorers and adventurers. The discovery of mummies and buried royal treasures clearly added to the sense that there were great mysteries still waiting to be unlocked. In short, there is nothing *prima facie* counterintuitive about Hegel's characterization of the Egyptian religion in this way since this was widely representative of the general European *Zeitgeist* of the day.

One of Hegel's sources for this view, if one were needed, might be Herder, who begins his chapter on the Egyptians in his *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* as follows: "We now come to a country, which, on account of its antiquity, its arts, and its political institutions, stands like an enigma [*Rätzel*] of the primeval world, and has copiously exercised the conjectural skill of the inquirer."<sup>2</sup> Herder goes on to outline the different aspects of Egyptian culture, which display this aspect: their architecture, their religion, their politics, etc. He writes: "What an immense population, what arts and government, but more especially what a singular way of thinking, must have been requisite, to excavate these rocks, or pile them upon one another; not only to delineate and carve statues of animals, but to inter them as sacred; to form a wilderness of rocks as an abode for the dead; and to eternize in stone the spirit of an Egyptian priesthood in such multifarious ways! There stand, there lie, all those relics, which, like a sacred sphinx, like a grand problem, demand an explanation."<sup>3</sup>

This is astonishingly close to Hegel's consistent characterization of the Egyptians as posing a problem but lacking the conceptual tools to solve it. Herder, like Hegel later, especially points to the image of the sphinx as the perfect example of this feature of the Egyptian spirit. Herder notes that some of the Egyptians' engineering works can be under-

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Hodgson, with the assistance of William G. Geuss, Oxford: Clarendon Press 2011ff. *VPWG* = *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte: Berlin 1822-1823*, ed. by Karl Heinz Ilting, Karl Brehmer and Hoo Nam Seelmann, Hamburg: Felix Meiner 1996.)

<sup>2</sup> Johann Gottfried Herder, *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, vols. 1-4, Riga and Leipzig: Johann Friedrich Hartknoch 1784-91, vol. 3, p. 109. (English translation: *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man*, vols. 1-2, trans. by T. Churchill, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., London: J. Johnson 1803, vol. 2, p. 96.)

<sup>3</sup> Herder, *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, vol. 3, pp. 109f. (*Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man*, vol. 2, pp. 96f.)

stood as serving certain practical purposes in the specific geographical area that they occupied. For example, their attempts to tame the Nile with irrigation systems, canals and dikes, were clearly aimed at producing a larger habitable area with viable agriculture. However, this practical motivation does not explain everything since there are many other works of the Egyptians, where it is difficult to see any obvious practical benefit that accrues from them, despite the enormous amount of manpower and resources involved in creating them: “But to what purpose the enormity of these tombs? Whence, and why, the labyrinth, the obelisks, the pyramids?”<sup>4</sup> These things remain a mystery.

But the regarding of ancient Egypt as something exotic and mysterious was not something that was born with the rise of Orientalism in the nineteenth century. On the contrary, it already existed in antiquity. While the Greeks also had their own secret religious rites, they put special emphasis on this dimension of the Egyptian religion. Given that some of Hegel’s main sources for Egyptian religion and culture were the Greek authors, it stands to reason that he was also inspired by them on this point. In Plutarch’s description of the Egyptian religion in *Isis and Osiris*, this element is explicitly emphasized. Plutarch states that Egyptian philosophy “is veiled in myths and in words containing dim reflections and adumbrations of the truth, as they themselves intimate beyond question by appropriately placing sphinxes before their shrines to indicate that their religious teaching has in it an enigmatical sort of wisdom.”<sup>5</sup> Plutarch also describes the Egyptian god Amun (or Amoun) as concealed and hidden: “Moreover, most people believe that Amoun is the name given to Zeus in the land of the Egyptians, a name which we, with a slight alteration, pronounce Ammon. But Manetho of Sebennytus thinks that the meaning ‘concealed’ or ‘concealment’ lies in this word. Hecataeus of Abdera, however, says that the Egyptians use this expression one to another whenever they call to anyone, for the word is a form of address. When they, therefore, address the supreme god, whom they believe to be the same as the Universe, as if he were invisible and concealed, and implore him to make himself visible and manifest to them, they use the word ‘Amoun’...”<sup>6</sup>

Amun or “the Hidden One” was, in a sense, the major god for the Egyptians since they regarded the other gods as being manifestations of him. (For this reason he is associated with the Greek Zeus and the Roman Jupiter.)<sup>7</sup> The creator god, Amun was one of the earliest of Egyptian deities. Although often portrayed as a human being, Amun also appears in the form of a ram or a ram-headed sphinx, and for this reason the ram was regarded as a sacred animal. Hegel mentions the fact that Amun is a mixed deity with human form but the head or horns of a ram.<sup>8</sup> The Egyptian pharaohs claimed Amun as their

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<sup>4</sup> Herder, *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, vol. 3, p. 110. (*Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man*, vol. 2, p. 97.)

<sup>5</sup> *Isis and Osiris* in *Plutarch’s Moralia*, vols. 1-16, trans. by Frank Cole Babbitt, London: William Heinemann Ltd., Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press 1936 (*Loeb Classical Library*), vol. 5, Chapter 9, pp. 24f.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 5, Chapter 9, p. 25.

<sup>7</sup> Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. by Aubrey de Sélincourt, Harmondsworth: Penguin 1954, p. 146.

<sup>8</sup> Hegel, *Aesthetics*, vol. 1, p. 357; *Jub.*, vol. 12, p. 476. *Aesthetics*, vol. 1, p. 451; *Jub.*, vol. 13,

father and built for him a huge temple at Karnak. The important aspect here is that his real nature is a secret. Hegel would presumably see great importance in the idea of the Egyptians praying to Amun to reveal himself and to make himself known.<sup>9</sup>

**II. The Inner and the Outer.** One way that Hegel characterizes the mysterious or enigmatic nature of the Egyptian religion is in terms of an incongruence or split between the inner and the outer. What is seen from the outside covers or veils what is on the inside.<sup>10</sup> In the Egyptian religion there is “an independent inner element which has an external mode of existence, and these two are distinct from one another.”<sup>11</sup> Hegel explains further, “We have all these elements together in the tremendous conflict of the inner with the outer; there is a tremendous impulse on the part of what is inner to work itself free, and what is outer exhibits to us this struggle of Spirit.”<sup>12</sup> There is something that remains obscure to the human mind.

This inner-outer split is found in many aspects in the Egyptian religion. For example, the procedures and ceremonies surrounding mummification were regarded as secret, known only to the priests themselves who performed them. Similarly, the mummies are hidden from view. The bodies are first meticulously wrapped in cloth and then enclosed in a series of sarcophagi, which are then placed in elaborate tombs. Further, the great tombs were carefully hidden and contained numerous hidden chambers in order to discourage thieves. Everything is hidden and secret. Nothing lies immediately open to view. Among the Egyptians writing was only known by the scribes and priests and remained an inaccessible mystery to the common believer.

Another dimension of the inner-outer split in the Egyptian religion is the worship of animals or “zoolatry”.<sup>13</sup> By this Hegel makes reference to the different incarnations of the Egyptian deities in animal form, with the result being a host of sacred animals (for example,

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p. 34. (*Aesthetics = Hegel's Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art*, vols. 1-2, trans. by T.M. Knox, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1975, 1998.)

<sup>9</sup> Surprisingly, Hegel only refers to this god on a couple of occasions. See Hegel, *Phil. of Hist.*, p. 210; *Jub.*, vol. 11, p. 278: “Ammun is regarded as a great divinity, with whom is associated the determination of the equinox.” *Phil. of Religion*, vol. 2, p. 105; *Jub.*, vol. 15, p. 455: “To Osiris the other deities attach themselves; he is the uniting point, and they are only single moments of the totality which he represents. Thus Ammon is the moment of the sun, which characteristic also pertains to Osiris.” See also *Phil. of Religion*, vol. 2, pp. 111f.; *Jub.*, vol. 15, p. 462.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Hegel, *Phil. of Religion*, vol. 2, p. 122; *Jub.*, vol. 15, pp. 471f. *LPR*, vol. 2, pp. 631f.; *VPR*, Part 2, p. 524.

<sup>11</sup> Hegel, *Phil. of Religion*, vol. 2, p. 108; *Jub.*, vol. 15, p. 458.

<sup>12</sup> Hegel, *Phil. of Religion*, vol. 2, p. 121; *Jub.*, vol. 15, p. 471.

<sup>13</sup> See *Phil. of Religion*, vol. 2, p. 112; *Jub.*, vol. 15, p. 462: “Astonishing certainly, yet considering the mixture of the conception of substantiality with that of subjectivity, no longer inexplicable, is that zoolatry the practice of which was carried out by the Egyptians in the most rigid manner. In various districts of Egypt special animals were worshipped, such as cats, dogs, monkeys, and so forth.” See also *Phil. of Religion*, vol. 2, p. 94; *Jub.*, vol. 15, p. 445. *Phil. of Hist.*, p. 211; *Jub.*, vol. 11, p. 280. *Aesthetics*, vol. 1, p. 357; *Jub.*, vol. 12, pp. 475f.

the ram for Amun). This is closely connected to the conception of this religion as mysterious or enigmatic since animals are mysterious and impenetrable. Hegel explains the psychology of this way of thinking by noting that there is something fascinating in animals that we cannot understand, and this leads to them being elevated to being incarnations of deities in some cultures: "In the animal world the Egyptians contemplate a hidden and incomprehensible principle. We also, when we contemplate the life and actions of animals, are astonished at their instinct – the adaptation of their movements to the object intended – their restlessness, excitability, and liveliness; for they are exceedingly quick and discerning in pursuing the ends of their existence, while they are at the same time silent and shut up within themselves."<sup>14</sup>

Humans can vaguely sense some principle or animus in animals, but they cannot penetrate it. Hegel continues, "We cannot make out what it is that 'possesses' these creatures, and cannot rely on them... The lower animals are the truly incomprehensible. A *man* cannot by imagination or conception enter into the nature of a dog, whatever resemblance he himself might have to it; it remains something altogether alien to him."<sup>15</sup> The conception of a deity in the form of an animal is therefore a very low level of revelation. One cannot clearly discern the principle of spirit in an animal. In this regard Hegel is critical of the Egyptian religion in the same way that he was critical of the Hindu and Buddhist reverence of animals previously: "But it has already been shown in connection with the religion of the Hindus how man could arrive at the stage in which he worships an animal. If God be not known as Spirit, but rather as power in general, then this power is unconscious activity – universal life, it may be. This unconscious power then appears under an outward form, and first of all in that of an animal."<sup>16</sup>

For Hegel, the worship of animals is higher than the worship of stars, rivers and forces of nature. Animals are living creatures and closer to humans than such forces. Nonetheless they do not possess the aspect of self-conscious spirit. The understanding of the divine as represented in the form of animals thus reflects a limited conception of human freedom.<sup>17</sup> The goal of the development of religious consciousness is to recognize spirit as spirit, and this means that the divine must ultimately reach the form of full revelation as spirit. The worship of animals is clearly an example of the alienation that humans feel from their gods. One cannot understand or identify with an animal in the same way one can with another human being. One cannot gain true recognition from an animal, and thus one cannot develop subjectivity vis-à-vis an animal.

With respect to the dichotomy of the inner and the outer, Hegel often thinks of the great structures and monuments of the Egyptians, which hide something valuable within.

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<sup>14</sup> Hegel, *Phil. of Hist.*, p. 211; *Jub.*, vol. 11, p. 280.

<sup>15</sup> Hegel, *Phil. of Hist.*, pp. 211f.; *Jub.*, vol. 11, pp. 280f.

<sup>16</sup> Hegel, *Phil. of Religion*, vol. 2, pp. 112f.; *Jub.*, vol. 15, p. 463.

<sup>17</sup> Hegel, *Phil. of Hist.*, p. 212; *Jub.*, vol. 11, p. 281: "The obtuse self-consciousness of the Egyptians, therefore, to which the thought of human freedom is not yet revealed, worships the soul as still shut up within and dulled by the physical organization, and sympathizes with brute life."

When looking at these structures one cannot help but regard them as riddles or enigmas since one naturally wonders what they contain. According to Hegel's interpretation, while these structures lock these great secrets within themselves, there is a general striving of the Egyptian spirit to break free and to reveal its secrets. There is something inward that strives to be expressed outwardly.<sup>18</sup>

The motif of the inner and the outer is useful for an understanding of Hegel's hierarchy of the different religions. As is well known, his metaphysics, as outlined in the *Science of Logic* and the *Encyclopedia Logic*, is organized into three large parts which are thought to develop the one from the other: being, essence and the Concept. Hegel's economy of the world religions is also characterized by this scheme. At first the religions of nature operate with the category of being. They worship objects of nature, which are immediately accessible: "Formerly we had visibility, immediacy in a natural unmediated mode, where Brahma has his existence, the mode of his immediacy in thought, in the immersion or sinking down of man into himself. Such as the case too where the Good is light [sc. in Zoroastrianism], and therefore in the form of an immediacy which exists in an immediate mode."<sup>19</sup>

Now, with the Egyptian religion, we move away from the category of being to the category of essence, which is characterized by its dual nature: thing-in-itself vs. representation, noumena vs. phenomena, essence vs. appearance. As we have seen, the Egyptian religion is characterized by precisely this kind of split. The stage of symbolism corresponds to the stage of essence. It is regarded as something mysterious since the inner essence remains unrevealed, a mystery. By contrast, the Christian religion overcomes this dualism and represents the Concept, which has a threefold structure. In this way, one can see the general scheme of Hegel's metaphysics reflected in his understanding of the development of world religion. The development of thought as such can be seen reflected in the development of the conception of the divine.

**III. The Egyptian Religion as a Transitional Religion.** Hegel states repeatedly that the Egyptian religion represents a transitional stage between the religions of nature and the religions of spirit. He formulates this in a number of different ways, for example, "Here spirit as regards its manifestation is only the half way of spirit."<sup>20</sup> Similarly, he claims, "the Egyptian unity – combining contradictory elements – occupies a middle place."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Hegel, *Phil. of Hist.*, p. 214; *Jub.*, vol. 11, pp. 283f.: "...we saw the Egyptian spirit working itself free from natural forms. This urging, powerful spirit, however, was not able to rest in the subjective conception of that view of things which we have now been considering, but was impelled to present it to external consciousness and outward vision by means of art."

<sup>19</sup> Hegel, *Phil. of Religion*, vol. 2, p. 108; *Jub.*, vol. 15, p. 459. See also *LPR*, vol. 2, p. 632; *VPR*, Part 2, p. 525.

<sup>20</sup> Hegel, *Phil. of Religion*, vol. 2, p. 117; *Jub.*, vol. 15, p. 467. See also *Phil. of Religion*, vol. 2, p. 118; *Jub.*, vol. 15, p. 468: "Here Spirit has stopped short half way." See also *LPR*, vol. 2, p. 378; *VPR*, Part 2, p. 279.

<sup>21</sup> Hegel, *Phil. of Hist.*, p. 218; *Jub.*, vol. 11, p. 289. See also *Phil. of Religion*, vol. 2, pp. 87f.;

While the Egyptian religion is one of mystery, the great term of contrast is, for Hegel, the Greek religion, where everything is out in the open and transparent: “The spirit of the Egyptian nation is, in fact, an enigma. In Greek works of art everything is clear, everything is evident; in Egyptian art a problem is everywhere presented; it is an external sign, by means of which something which has not been yet openly expressed is indicated.”<sup>22</sup> The Egyptians are stuck in a transitional phase. They have managed to pose the problem of the inner and the outer to themselves but have failed to resolve it. They have begun to attempt to reveal the hidden and the mysterious aspect of their religion but have not yet achieved this.

Since the Egyptian religion is a transitional one, its forms are always mixed ones, neither wholly what came before nor wholly what comes after. Their architecture is a mixture of particular forms of nature and the universal forms of the mind.<sup>23</sup> Their alphabet, the hieroglyphs, although a product of the mind, consists of symbols of natural entities. Hegel points out that the hieroglyphs are not abstract symbols such as are employed in the Greek and Latin alphabets. Rather they are depictions of plants and animals and objects of nature. This represents a development of writing that has only stopped halfway and has failed to reach full development. The Egyptians have not yet attained the level of pure symbols, but rather they have stopped short with the use of images of birds and other animals to represent both things and sounds. Hieroglyphs are not just pictures but by the same token are not yet genuine writing either. They are something mixed and intermediate: “Written language is still a hieroglyphic; and its basis is only the sensuous image, not the letter itself.”<sup>24</sup> Animals are thus appropriated by thought and used symbolically in writing: “the animal shape at the same time becomes superseded and the hieroglyph of another meaning, of a thought.”<sup>25</sup>

Most importantly the transitional aspect of the Egyptian spirit is reflected in their divinities. One of the most important characteristic features of the gods in the Egyptian religion is that they are represented as entities which constitute a mixture of human and animal: “The artificer therefore unites the two by blending the natural and the self-

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*Jub.*, vol. 15, p. 439: “Here we have reached the ultimate determination of natural religion in this sphere, and in fact the stage which constitutes the transition to the religion of free subjectivity.”

<sup>22</sup> Hegel, *Phil. of Religion*, vol. 2, p. 114; *Jub.*, vol. 15, p. 464. See also *Phil. of Religion*, vol. 2, pp. 257f.; *Jub.*, vol. 16, p. 127: “In this religion [sc. the Greek religion] there is nothing incomprehensible, nothing which cannot be understood; there is no kind of content in the god which is not known to man, or which he does not find and know in himself.”

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Hegel, *PhS*, p. 422; *Jub.*, vol. 2, p. 532.

<sup>24</sup> Hegel, *Phil. of Hist.*, p. 199; *Jub.*, vol. 11, p. 265. See also *Aesthetics*, vol. 1, p. 357; *Jub.*, vol. 12, p. 476: “Similarly the hieroglyphic script of the Egyptians is also largely symbolic, since *either* it tries to make us acquainted with the meanings by sketching actual objects which display not themselves but a universal related to them, *or*, more commonly still, in its so-called phonetic element this script indicates the individual letters by illustrating an object the initial letter of which has in speech the same sound as that which is to be expressed.”

<sup>25</sup> Hegel, *PhS*, p. 423; *Jub.*, vol. 2, p. 533.

conscious shape.”<sup>26</sup> The Egyptian divinities are not purely gods of nature, such as the sacred cow of the Hindus or light of the Persians. An element of the animal is still present, but now for the first time a human element is also introduced, mixed together with it. Hegel explains, in the Egyptian religion “the animal form is used intermingled with the human; we find human figures with lions’ heads, and these are taken for shapes of Minerva [sc. Neith]; hawks’ heads occur too, and horns are left on the heads of Ammon.”<sup>27</sup>

It is not difficult to find examples of the kind of thing that Hegel is referring to. His favorite example of a mixed figure is the image of the sphinx. The sphinx, of course, has the body of an animal and the head of a human being. But most of the Egyptian deities reverse this and have a human body and the head of some kind of animal. For example, Ra (the sun god) is represented with the head of a hawk, Sobek, the head of a crocodile, and Khnum, the head of a ram. The same holds true of the female deities. Sekhmet has the head of a lion, Bastet, the head of a cat and Taweret the head of a hippopotamus.

In Egypt for the first time, it begins to dawn on the human mind that the divine is spirit: “The solution and liberation of that Oriental Spirit, which in Egypt had advanced so far as to propose the problem, is certainly this: that the inner being of nature is thought, which has its existence only in the human consciousness.”<sup>28</sup> It thus paves the way for the further development of the concept of the divine.

**IV. The Myth of Oedipus and the Sphinx.** Hegel appeals to yet another image that he believes captures symbolically the transition from Egypt to Greece, namely, the Greek myth of Oedipus and the sphinx.<sup>29</sup> According to the legend, the sphinx, the symbolic representation of Egypt, came to the Greek town of Thebes and terrorized its citizens by posing a riddle and devouring everyone who could not answer it correctly. The riddle was the following: What kind of a creature walks on four legs in the morning, two at noon and three at night? The sphinx was a great bane for the Thebans since no one could solve the conundrum. Oedipus was famed for his knowledge (and thus his tragic downfall is caused by his pride about his intelligence coupled with his ignorance of his acts: unknowingly killing his father and marrying his mother). Before these well-known events, however, Oedipus, with his wisdom, managed to find the solution to the riddle. The creature in question is a human being, who, as a child, crawls on all fours, and then as an adult walks

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<sup>26</sup> Hegel, *PhS*, p. 424; *Jub.*, vol. 2, p. 534. See also *Phil. of Religion*, vol. 2, p. 95; *Jub.*, vol. 15, p. 445: “It is at this point, too, that the outward form is determined as human, and thus there is a transition of the god from the animal to human form.”

<sup>27</sup> Hegel, *Aesthetics*, vol. 1, p. 357; *Jub.*, vol. 12, p. 476. See also *PhS*, p. 423; *Jub.*, vol. 2, p. 533: “the shape, too, is no longer solely and entirely used by the artificer, but is blended with the shape of thought, with a human form. But the work still lacks the shape and outer reality in which the self exists as self.”

<sup>28</sup> Hegel, *Phil. of Hist.*, p. 220; *Jub.*, vol. 11, p. 292.

<sup>29</sup> There were numerous ancient sources for this myth. See, for example, Apollodorus, *Library*, Book 3, 5, 8; Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, Book 9, 26, 2; Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, Book 4, 64, 3-4. Pseudo-Hyginus, *Fabulae*, 67.



on two legs, and then finally in old age walks, so to speak, on three legs with the help of a cane or crutch. The ages of life thus represent figuratively the times of the day, morning, noon and night. Oedipus thus solved the riddle, and with this the Sphinx threw itself down a precipice, and Thebes was finally liberated.

Hegel finds great symbolic meaning in this story. The idea of an Egyptian sphinx posing riddles is perfectly in character since it is typical of the Egyptian spirit that it is dominated by mysteries: "Egypt is the country of symbols, the country which sets itself the spiritual task of the self-deciphering of the spirit, without actually attaining to the decipherment. The problems remain unsolved, and the solution which *we* can provide consists therefore only in interpreting the riddles of Egyptian art and its symbolic works as a problem remaining undeciphered by the Egyptians themselves."<sup>30</sup>

The Egyptians pose the problem but have no solution to it themselves. Another principle or mind-set is required. Hegel recounts the story as follows: "Wonderfully, then, must the Greek legend surprise us, which relates, that the Sphinx – the great Egyptian symbol – appeared in Thebes, uttering the words: 'What is that which in the morning goes on four legs, at midday on two, and in the evening on three?' Oedipus, giving the solution, *man*, precipitated the Sphinx from the rock. The solution and liberation of that Oriental Spirit, which in Egypt had advanced so far as to propose the problem, is certainly this: that the inner being [the essence] of nature is thought, which has its existence only in the human consciousness."<sup>31</sup>

The wise Greek Oedipus solves what was a problem for the Egyptians. Oedipus defeats the Sphinx not by physical strength but by his intellect, the human mind. He can be seen to represent Western science or reason. He is unwavering in his search for the truth. He has knowledge, which is forbidden by the Egyptians. Still tied down by nature, the Egyptians were seeking the solution but were unable to find it.

The content of the solution to the riddle – a human being – is of cardinal importance to Hegel: "The enigma is solved: the Egyptian Sphinx, according to a deeply significant and admirable myth, was slain by a Greek, and thus the enigma has been solved. This means that the content is man, free, self-knowing Spirit."<sup>32</sup> This is the truth that the Egyptians have not yet realized. Only in Greece are the shackles of nature thrown off and spirit sees itself as spirit.<sup>33</sup> The frightening gods with both human and animal parts are replaced by the purely human form of the Greek gods. The liberation of the human spirit in general

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<sup>30</sup> Hegel, *Aesthetics*, vol. 1, p. 354; *Jub.*, vol. 12, p. 472.

<sup>31</sup> Hegel, *Phil. of Hist.*, p. 220; *Jub.*, vol. 11, pp. 291f. See also *Aesthetics*, vol. 1, p. 361; *Jub.*, vol. 12, p. 481. *LPR*, vol. 2, p. 639; *VPR*, Part 2, p. 532. *LPR*, vol. 2, p. 747; *VPR*, Part 2, p. 631.

<sup>32</sup> Hegel, *Phil. of Religion*, vol. 2, p. 122; *Jub.*, vol. 15, p. 472.

<sup>33</sup> Hegel, *PhS*, p. 424; *Jub.*, vol. 2, pp. 534f.: The Egyptian "has worked himself up to the point where his consciousness is divided against itself, where Spirit meets spirit. In this unity of self-conscious Spirit with itself, in so far as it is the shape and the object of its consciousness, its blendings with the unconscious shapes are purged of the immediate shapes of nature. These monsters in shape, word, and deed are dissolved into spiritual shape."

is self-consciousness: the human mind coming to know itself. It knows itself as human when it recognizes itself in gods which are also humanlike or spirit.

The notion of the Egyptian religion as an enigma or mystery is important since one of the key criteria for classification in Hegel's hierarchy of religion is that of revelation and intelligibility. One aspect of the story of the different world religions that he is tracing is concerned with the degree to which and the way in which the individual deities reveal themselves. If the deity reveals itself only partially or in a foreign form, then it is placed at a low level in the hierarchy. If, by contrast, it reveals itself to a large extent and in the form of spirit, then it is placed at a higher stage. Thus the teleology of Hegel's account leads to Christianity, the "revealed" religion, which represents the stage of religious development where God is completely revealed as a human being. While the Egyptian religion has made some important steps along the way, it still belongs to the oriental religions with respect to the question of revelation. According to Hegel, for the Egyptians there is still much that remains hidden and secret; this gives rise to an unresolved split between the inner and the outer.

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Jon Stewart  
Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study  
Harvard University  
Byerly Hall  
8 Garden Street  
Cambridge, MA 02138  
USA  
e-mail: [js@jonstewart.dk](mailto:js@jonstewart.dk)