

The Pharaoh's Sun-Disc: The Religious Reforms of Akhenaten and the Cult of the Aten

The 18th Dynasty Pharaoh Akhenaten, known to many as the “Heretic King,” made significant changes to the religious institutions of Ancient Egypt during his reign in the 14th century BCE. The traditional view long maintained that these reforms, focused on the promotion of a single solar god known as the Aten, constituted an early form of monotheism foreshadowing the rise of Western Biblical tradition. However, this simplification ignores the earlier henotheistic tendency of Egyptian polytheism and the role of Atenism in strengthening the Pharaoh's authority in the face of the powerful Amun-Ra priesthood, as well as distinctions between Mosaic monotheism and Akhenaten's cult. Instead, the religion of Akhenaten, which developed from earlier ideas surrounding the solar deity motif, can be seen as an instance of monotheistic practice in form but not in function, characterized by a lack of conviction outside the new capital of Akhetaten as well as an ultimate goal of establishing not one god but one ruling power in Egypt: the Pharaoh. This will become clear through an analysis of the background to Akhenaten's reign, the nature of his reforms and possible motivations, and the reality of Atenism vis-à-vis later Mosaic tradition.

The “revolution” of Akhenaten, born Amenhotep IV,¹ evidently had significant implications both during and after his reign. The radical nature of his reforms is clearly visible in the later elimination of his name and those of his immediate successors from the official list of rulers.² However, it is possible to see the roots of these changes, and perhaps of the Pharaoh's motivations, in earlier developments in the importance and form of the solar deity. For one, the prominence of the sun in Egyptian religion was not a new feature of Akhenaten's time, instead having been associated with kingship since the Old Kingdom period.³ Several scholars have also noted the emergence of a “New Solar Theology” in the years preceding his rule, described as a growing emphasis on the sun and its daily cycle as a driving force in the universe.⁴ In addition, we have clear evidence that the conception of the Aten as “sun-disc” already existed in some form before Akhenaten, seeming at its earliest as an aspect of Ra in the Twelfth Dynasty and increasingly mentioned throughout the reigns of Thutmose IV

¹ In Greek *Amennophis IV*. For convenience, this paper will refer to “Akhenaten” before and after the name change in the fifth year of his reign.

² C.N. Reeves, *Akhenaten, Egypt's False Prophet* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2001), 193. Akhenaten's probable tomb and coffin also show signs of deliberate vandalism.

³ Cyril Aldred, *Akhenaten, King of Egypt* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1988), 238-239. The pharaoh generally came to be viewed as the progeny of the sun god Ra.

⁴ Erik Hornung, “The Rediscovery of Akhenaten and His Place in Religion,” *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* vol. 29 (1992), 47.

and Amenhotep III.⁵ Certainly, it acquired the status of a unique, anthropomorphic deity in the latter. From this progression it is clear that Akhenaten was not solely responsible for the “discovery” of the Aten as divinity, or even the first ruler to show interest in its symbolism, although his positioning of the god would be entirely unique.

This general rise in popularity of the solar image may help to explain the increase in prestige of the sun god Amun-Ra throughout the 18th Dynasty, a trend accompanied by a loss of pharaonic power to the god's increasingly wealthy, united, and ambitious priesthood.⁶ Amun-Ra eventually developed beyond the limits of a singular sun god into the deity of highest import in Egypt, with earlier gods becoming mere extensions of his divine essence; this has been cited as evidence of the henotheistic tendency of many polytheistic religious systems.⁷ From this we might understand the trend of the 18th Dynasty as already moving towards the consolidation of power and worship in a single solar god who brought increasing power and influence to his priests, despite apparent attempts by Amenhotep III and others to restrict their power and elevate the status of the pharaoh.⁸

It is probable that these developments in the religious and political spheres had a significant influence on Akhenaten's own thinking. In fact, upon ascending to the throne, one of his earliest acts was to commission a temple to the Aten in Thebes, the principle center of the Amun-Ra priesthood.⁹ This would be followed by a “considered and gradual” series of reforms that established the Aten as the only official deity in Egypt by the sixth year of Akhenaten's reign and the icon of the royal family, making the majority of the state's institutions subservient to this new god.¹⁰ The general timeline of this development is relatively constant among scholarly narratives, beginning with the elaborate building projects at Thebes; followed by a shift in depiction of the Aten to a hieroglyphic disc-icon and the enclosure of its name in royal cartouches. Soon after came the pharaoh's name change to Akhenaten and his move to the newly constructed capital of *Akhetaten*, meaning the “Horizon of the Aten.” This was followed by the increasing persecution of Amun-Ra

⁵ Aldred 1988, 239. Thutmose's palace was proclaimed “Mansion of the Aten,” and Amenhotep's royal barge “Radiance of the Aten,” among other references.

⁶ Reeves 2001, 44-45. Amun's rise began in the Middle Kingdom period, later merging with Ra to form a unifying deity of Upper and Lower Egypt.

⁷ Aldred 1988, 239-240. Amun-Ra gained the additional names of other gods including Atum, Geb and Nut, as well as the epithet, “The sole god who made himself for eternity.”

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Erik Hornung, *Akhenaten and the Religion of Light*, translated by David Lorton (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1999), 34. The Aten continued to be represented as an anthropomorphic, falcon-headed deity in these initial depictions.

¹⁰ Hornung 1992, 49. These constituted a restructuring of Egyptian life in religion, art, language, literature and probably administration, potentially with the aid of the military.

and other deities, including the chiseling out of their names and images from inscriptions, and finally even the erasure of the plural form of “gods” wherever it was found.¹¹ Few modern accounts accept this process as reflective of true revelation or belief on the part of Akhenaten, but the extent to which it may have been pre-meditated or self-serving is debated; while it seems unlikely that Akhenaten was the sole architect of all the developments of his seventeen-year reign, the pragmatism of many of his acts seems clear, and it is possible to see Atenism largely as an instrument of political control.¹² For example, the persecution of other divine cults may have provided an opportunity to seize the economic resources of their temples, and the opening up of Atenist temples to the sky and the installation of the “living” sun image reduced the need for cult statues and much of the traditional religious routine, thus limiting the size and influence of the Aten’s priesthood.¹³ Some have argued for Akhenaten’s sincere belief based on the devotional language of “The Great Hymn to the Aten,” probably of his authorship, but here the imitation of form and motif of earlier works has been well documented and provides evidence against this theory.¹⁴

Likely, then, the Pharaoh sought to create a new deity and priesthood that he could control, largely by establishing himself as the sole human intermediary between the Aten and the people, and demanding loyalty from his subjects in this regard. In fact, his new name translates to “He who is effective on the Aten’s behalf.”¹⁵ This notion of privilege was probably abetted by the lack of devotional statuary and the oral nature of Atenist doctrine, with its teachings coming exclusively from the mouth of the Pharaoh himself. But while Akhenaten has been likened to a “high priest” in this role, he was probably imagined in discourse as closer to a divine figure himself.¹⁶ This is implied by the new iconography of worship that emerged in the period, which depicted a “triad” of the Aten, Akhenaten and his queen Nefertiti in official art that reflects, consciously or not, the ancient Egyptian inclination to arrange deities to arrange in groups of three, often along familial lines.¹⁷ It appears, then, that while Akhenaten held the exclusive right to communicate with the Aten,

¹¹ Reeves 2001, 100. “Amun” was even erased from the name of Akhenaten’s father, Amunhotep III, possibly while he was still alive.

¹² *Ibid.*, 29. Reeves sees the Pharaoh as a “false prophet,” with all of his actions as pre-meditated and politically-motivated.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 95. See below for the elevated role of Akhenaten in the new religion.

¹⁴ Aldred 1988, 243. This includes parallels with earlier coffin texts and other hymns.

¹⁵ Hornung 1999, 56.

¹⁶ Donald B. Redford, “Akhenaten: New Theories and Old Facts,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* no. 369 (May 2013), 28.

¹⁷ Aldred 1988, 241. For example, Osiris, Isis and Horus. There is also evidence of prayers addressed to the Aten, the pharaoh and the queen collectively.

his family held the right of its worship: the object of personal devotion for the common person thus became this icon of the royal-divine household that apparently dominated life in the new capital.¹⁸ In this way, Atenism may have attempted to establish a new divinity not only in the form of the sun-disc, but also in the form of the ruling power of the Pharaoh and his exclusive relationship with god.

When considering the question of monotheism, the gradual, rather than immediate, increase in the status of the Aten should be emphasized: for example, Amun-Ra seems to have remained dominant in the divine hierarchy before the move to the new capital of Akhetaten, and Akhenaten is initially depicted worshipping other gods at Thebes.¹⁹ Here there are at least some parallels to the earlier henotheistic development of Amun-Ra, as inscriptions over time began to equate these other deities more and more with the Aten, a trend eventually escalating to the outright suppression of their cults.²⁰ This process is evident in the contrast between early inscriptions of the Aten's epithet, "No other like him," and later, "No other but him."²¹ While some scholars have advanced the more radical idea that we should not even consider Akhenaten's program a religion at all, from the above it is generally accepted that Atenism developed into a form of monotheism in stages, from what was early on a kind of henotheism or perhaps monolatry.²² It seems we can safely speak of the religion as "monotheistic," at least following the move to Akhetaten and the elimination of the plural "gods" from monuments.²³

However, we must still consider the reality of worship in Akhetaten in contrast to the rest of Egypt, as well as the true extent of Akhenaten's "faith" and its relationship to the later Biblical monotheism with which it has so often been associated? As we have seen, Akhenaten's motivations in establishing the new religion appear far from being purely devotional in nature, and Atenism's adoption by court officials may have been equally pragmatic, a combination of yielding to the Pharaoh's authority and seeking his favour. It is also likely that the worship of the Aten was not well enforced beyond the new capital, with many commoners perhaps retaining their traditional gods in some form, since

¹⁸ Reeves 2001, 146-147. This included frequent public processions as well as sculptural images of the family found in domestic settings.

¹⁹ Redford 2013, 12-14. This includes Amun-Ra, Atum, Osiris and others.

²⁰ Aldred 1998, 243-4. As an example, Ra is equated with the Aten in, "The Great Hymn to the Aten."

²¹ Hornung 1999, 93.

²² Redford 2013, 26. Redford suggests that, by disposing of traditional religious institutions, Akhenaten's cult abandoned humankind's bond with the divine and rejected elements vital to the definition of a "religion." It is within such a view that Akhenaten is occasionally framed as a "literal atheist."

²³ Jan Assman, *The Price of Monotheism* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2010), 32. Here the differentiation between a single "true" god and other "false" ones is indicative of monotheistic belief.

images of “illicit” deities were even discovered within Akhetaten itself.²⁴ This absence of “monotheistic conviction” supports the idea that the goal of Atenism was not to produce a religion for the people, so much as one for the Pharaoh. This likely contributed to the lack of popular appreciation for the austere sun-disc, with its predictable daily cycle far from satisfying the spiritual needs of the masses.²⁵ This suggests that while Akhenaten may have established a model of monotheistic practice, it did not necessarily function as such throughout all of Egypt at any given moment during his reign.

Lastly, Atenism’s form of monotheism differed significantly from that of Mosaic tradition. Akhenaten’s religion can be viewed as a “monotheism of knowledge,” based on a worldview that made all of existence dependent on the new sun god and, by its final stages, denied other deities any role in the universe at all, since here belief in another god constituted a mistaken understanding of the nature of reality.²⁶ In contrast, Moses, as lawgiver-figure in the Judeo-Christian tradition, promoted a “legalistic monotheism,” which did not claim that there were no other gods but rather that there should be no other god for believers but Yahweh. This *forbade* rather than *denied* other deities as a method of binding people together, and as such was also different from the supremely “political” nature of Akhenaten’s motivations, which had the goal of strengthening pharaonic power.²⁷ In this way, Atenism can in fact be viewed as an even stricter form of monotheism than early Judaism, which initially did not deny the existence of other gods. This knowledge-based form of Atenism, with only Akhenaten holding access to the divine, has also been largely credited for the rapid decline of the religion following the Pharaoh’s death, as he established no real successors or disciples, no program of outreach, and no official scriptures by which to disseminate his ideas, and thus greatly restricted a movement that perhaps could have been more greatly popularized, or even used as a tool for unification.²⁸ Instead, the worship of the Aten fell into decline, the capital Akhetaten was abandoned, and the earlier temples, priests, and gods were restored. This near complete reversal seems the final proof of the shallow rooting of the Pharaoh’s religion.²⁹

²⁴ Reeves 2001, 139. Archaeological evidence.

²⁵ Hornung 1999, 93. Hornung suggests that by elevating the Aten, Akhenaten committed himself spiritually to what was “visible” in the light of the sun, losing the more mystical aspects of darkness, the afterlife and deities such as Amun, the “Hidden One.”

²⁶ Assmann 2010, 37.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Hornung, 1992, 49. Hornung notes the “universal” nature of the Aten in contrast to limited national deities such as Amun-Ra, even suggesting that Atenism constitutes the first “world religion” in its vision, if not its dissemination.

²⁹ Aldred 1998, 244.

Thus, closer examination of the nature of Akhenaten's reforms appears to refute the thesis of the Pharaoh as an early reformer figure along Biblical lines, both in his likely motivations and particularly in the structure of the new religion itself. The picture that begins to emerge in place of this view is of a king attempting, more or less consciously, to combat the growing influence of a priesthood that threatened his own position through the centralization his power as the all-knowing representative of the silent Aten, the only true god. This process constituted a significant break from Egyptian religious tradition, but was not immediately realized upon Akhenaten's ascension, developing only gradually into what we can call "monotheism," from what began as an accelerated example of the earlier henotheistic model. Yet despite the apparently universal nature of this ideology, it was not shared by many (or even the majority) of the people of Egypt, and its superficial nature was markedly evident in the decline of Atenism before the posthumous reaction against Akhenaten even began. With this, we may in fact be forced to return to the question of definition: for if a system of belief is without the belief, can we call it a religion after all?

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