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AKHENATEN'S RELIGIOUS REFORMS

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Abstract: Akhenaten, king of Egypt ca. 1349–1332 BCE, fundamentally changed the face of religion within his kingdom. Central to these changes was the worship of the single deity Aten (manifested as the sun disc). Abruptly after the end of his reign, we see a return in Egyptian art to the full pantheon of gods and the erasure of Akhenaten from Egyptian records. This essay explores what is known about Akhenaten's reforms today and argues that more research needs to be done to understand his contributions to Egyptian religion.

The reign of King Akhenaten played a pivotal role in Egyptian history, but it was quickly obscured by his successors. His reign from ca. 1349 to 1332 BCE drastically changed many aspects of Egyptian culture, especially concerning religion.¹ After his death, Akhenaten's religious reformation came to an end. Succeeding kings, including Tutankhamun, undid much of his work and even erased him from the records of the kings.² However, the legacy of Akhenaten's changes quietly lived on.

Akhenaten was born during the Eighteenth Dynasty in the New Kingdom Period (ca. 1550–1292 BCE). His progenitors had fought off the Hyksos, non-Egyptians, who had ruled Egypt for about a century. By the time Akhenaten's father,

1. Throughout this paper the term *religion* will be used. It will not be used in the modern sense of dogma and orthodoxy, but to describe the mythology and rituals that were part of Egyptian life. *Religion* will be used in conjunction with the cult of Aten and Atenism to describe Akhenaten's reforms.

2. Krystal V.L. Pierce, "Egypt's New Kingdom," in *A Bible Reader's History of the Ancient World*, ed. Kent P. Jackson (Provo, UT: Jerusalem Center for Near Eastern Studies, Brigham Young University, 2016), 108–10.

Amenhotep III, was in power the dynasty had reunited Upper and Lower Egypt.³ Akhenaten was born Amenhotep IV, but as part of his reforms, he changed his name to reflect the deity he worshiped, Aten. With the introduction of Aten, Akhenaten deemphasized the worship of the other gods; however, it is unclear whether he was a true monotheist or whether he practiced a form of henotheism (the emphasis of one god above all others) like the worshippers of Amun-Ra.⁴ After his death, Akhenaten's reforms were quickly reversed by the kings Tutankhamun and Seti I, who were especially responsible for the counter-revolution. Tutankhamun was most likely a son of Akhenaten and was born Tutankhaten, however, following his father's example, he changed his name as part of a restoration of traditional Egyptian religion. Following Tutankhamun's short reign, Seti I took the extreme step of removing Akhenaten's name from lists of Eighteenth Dynasty kings.⁵

Akhenaten's religious reforms can be categorized under the umbrellas of innovations upon earlier Egyptian religion and new, theretofore unseen religious elements. These areas indicate that Akhenaten's reforms were not created entirely *ex nihilo*, but rather through influences around him. This paper will explore the nature of Akhenaten's reforms and use them to argue that more research must be conducted concerning religion after his reign to understand how he influenced Egyptian religion after his lifetime.

PRE-ATENISM INFLUENCES

First, portions of Atenism show similarities with the worship of sun gods in earlier Egyptian religion. Over time, religious beliefs are bound to change according to the needs of the society around them. Egyptologist Donald Redford described this as a sort of "mystical magma" that was constantly changing how the gods interacted with humanity.⁶ In this way, the worship of Aten evolved from the veneration of sun gods among many gods to the sole worship of the Aten sun disk. Before Akhenaten's rule, the sun disk often symbolized the vehicle of the deity rather than the sun god himself.⁷ Over time the disc became more important and it evolved to the point that Akhenaten declared that the sun was the deity itself rather than its vehicle or symbol.⁸ Historian Ronald Ridley explains the change stating, "The Egyptians were used to anthropomorphic deities: human forms, although often with animal heads. Even in this case, they shared eyes and mouth

3. Pierce, "Egypt's New Kingdom," 103–7.

4. Donald Redford, "Akhenaten: New Theories and Old Facts," *BASOR*, 369 (2013): 26.

5. Pierce, "Egypt's New Kingdom," 110.

6. Redford, "New Theories," 11.

7. Donald Redford, "The Sun-disc in Akhenaten's Program: Its Worship and Antecedents," *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt*, 13 (1976): 51.

8. Redford, "New Theories," 27.

with humans. The Aten, in contrast, was simply a disk (or orb).⁹ Aten's image as the sun disk deified was quite different from the traditional gods' human-like personages, but it is apparent that his form came from the increasing attention that the disc received over the human form of the sun god.¹⁰ Additionally, this change from an anthropomorphic sun god to the sun disk meant that the god was no longer represented three-dimensionally as a statue but was rather produced two-dimensionally as a disc.

In addition to the visual changes to the sun god, *The Great Hymn to Aten* is often cited as an example of both Akhenaten's sun disk theology and his monotheism. Hymns praising the gods were not unusual in ancient Egypt and many hymns have been found dedicated to a number of gods.¹¹ In contrast to these hymns, *The Great Hymn* boldly declares Akhenaten's reforms,

Beautifully you appear from the horizon of heaven, O living Aten
who initiates life—
For you are risen from the eastern horizon and have filled every land
with your beauty...
For although you are far away, your rays are upon the earth and you
are perceived....
O sole god, without another beside him!
You create the earth according to your wish, being alone...¹²

Akhenaten's belief in a single god is quite apparent in these lines from the hymn. Aten is not just one of the gods but the sole god. Interestingly, he does not appear as just the god of Egypt, but the god of the entire world, which idea had been introduced with the worship of Amun.¹³ The hymn also emphasizes the power of Aten's light upon the world as well as Akhenaten's role in revealing the god.¹⁴ The sun disk is no longer the symbol or vehicle of a god but is the divinity itself. It is Aten, the sun disk, who created the world and who maintains it through the power of his rays each day. Scholars Molefi Asante and Shaza Ismail argue that in making these changes, "The originality of Akhenaten must be found in the turning of the rays of the sun into a physical reality. He gave the world a creator who had

9. Robert Ridley, *Akhenaten: A Historian's View* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2019), 137.

10. Redford, "Sun-disc," 48–9.

11. Jan Assmann, "Theological Responses to Amarna," in *Egypt, Israel, and the Ancient Mediterranean World: Studies in Honor of Donald B. Redford*, ed. Donald B. Redford, Gary N. Knoppers, Antoine Hirsch (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 180.

12. Translation of *The Great Hymn* found in Ridley, "The Cult of the Aten," 125–6.

13. Eric Hornung, "The Rediscovery of Akhenaten and His Place in Religion," *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt*, 29 (1992): 49.

14. Ridley, "The Cult of the Aten," 127–8.

physical hands that reached within the range of humanity.”¹⁵ Aten was a simple, physically observable god that all of Egypt could recognize as ruler of the earth. Even if Akhenaten had not declared Aten the only god he would have surely ruled over any others as Re and Amun had done before.

As is clear in the excerpt from *The Great Hymn* above, Akhenaten’s religion was light-oriented. Thus, Eric Hornung concludes,

It has always been evident that Akhenaten suppressed all the richness and complexity of the Osirian netherworld, of the nocturnal journey of the sun so elaborately presented in the *Amduat* and the *Litany of Re* (to mention only compositions probably known to Akhenaten) ... When the sun rises in the morning, all the living in their houses and all the dead in their tombs are awakened from out of their deep sleep. All the world is thus oriented to the East, while the West, the realm of the dead since time immemorial, has fallen into oblivion.¹⁶

This was a massive change in a society that bore many visible reminders of the afterlife. Pyramids, funerary temples, and coffin texts all directed the Egyptians’ minds toward death and the experience that followed it. This change in religion was probably disconcerting to elements within Egyptian society that were associated with traditional religion—especially the priesthoods of gods who were now condemned by the monarchy.

RELIGIOUS INNOVATION

Another facet of Akhenaten’s religious reforms was changes made to ritual acts. Artwork from his reign shows him and his queen performing a ritual welcoming of the sun (Aten) in the east. They are depicted holding scepters in a traditional gesture towards Aten, yet the rituals and symbols in the art have changed. No longer is a god the focus of the image but it is Akhenaten himself.¹⁷ Homes within Amarna have been found with religious stela depicting the royal family as their focus. As Aidan Dodson observes, this shows that in Atenism it was only the royal family which worshipped Aten while the rest of Egypt worshipped the family. This is in stark contrast to religion before Akhenaten’s reforms when all people were free to worship the gods in temples and at personal shrines as they pleased.¹⁸

15. Molefi Asante and Shaza Ismail, “Akhenaten to Origen: Characteristics of Philosophical Thought in Ancient Africa,” *Journal of Black Studies*, 40, no. 2 (2009): 302.

16. Hornung, “Rediscovery,” 48.

17. Arlette David, “Akhenaten as The Early Morning Light: Revisiting the ‘Consecration’ ritual in Amarna,” *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt*, 52 no. 1 (2016): 93–5.

18. Aidan Dodson, “The Horizon of the Aten,” in *Amarna Sunrise: Egypt from Golden Age to Age of Heresy*, (Cairo, NY: The American University in Cairo Press, 2014), 116–7.

Arlette David states, “Remarkable is the way Aten’s rays strike through buildings, furniture, offerings, and people, only to stop in front of the royal couple. Instead of placing Aten above the king, the scene is organized to emphasize the eastern origin of the rising sun and the beams of light cutting through all toward the royal couple.”¹⁹ In this way, the king’s connection to Aten as his revelator to the world is emphasized. Thus, Arlette David asserts, “Akhenaten modified the particularities of an ancient ritual gesture in order to adapt it to the new Atenist cult and its radiant focus...”²⁰ Similarly, within Akhenaten’s temple architecture, the balustrades and stairs joined to altars show differences from those under previous rulers. For example, Akhenaten’s temple was decorated with ritual scenes while most others were not. The depictions on the balustrades show the royal family performing rituals within the temple while Aten shines upon them.²¹ Stairs and balustrades had taken on new importance as Atenism’s focus on light called for new architecture. In general, temples and altars were much more open, allowing the rays of the sun, Aten’s power, to envelop the cult rituals.²²

Depictions of the king with the queen sitting upon his lap have been found, which image does not appear in Egyptian art until Akhenaten’s reforms. Like many things from Akhenaten’s reign these carvings are an anomaly—similar artwork is not found during the reign of other Egyptian kings.²³ Similar designs have been found in other parts of the Near East, but these depictions often represent sexual intercourse while Akhenaten’s do not.²⁴ It is theorized that the carvings symbolize the transmission of kingship from king to child with the queen acting as the child, or that it symbolizes a god-queen paradigm (i.e., divine power passing from a god to the royal family as symbolized by the queen).²⁵ Whatever the meaning may be, the image of the queen sitting on the king’s lap is an example of the ideas that influenced Akhenaten’s reforms.

Changes in ritual acts, temple architecture, and artwork are all examples of changes made by Akhenaten and his cult of Aten; however, the impact of his reforms continued after his death. Jan Assmann observes that after Akhenaten, a new idea is seen within traditional Egyptian worship: that of the *Ba*. Assmann describes this as the essence of the gods that permeated all that came from them.

19. David, “Early Morning Light,” 96.

20. David, “Early Morning Light,” 99.

21. Ian Shaw, “Balustrades, Stairs and Altars in the Cult of the Aten at el-Amarna,” *JEA*, 80 (1994): 116.

22. Shaw, “Balustrades,” 116–17.

23. Arlette David, “A Throne for Two: Image of the Divine Couple during Akhenaten’s Reign,” *Journal of Ancient Egyptian Interconnections*, 14 (2017): 1.

24. David, “Throne for Two,” 4.

25. David, “Throne for Two,” 5–6.

Ba was not a being itself, but its influence is felt by all, much like Aten's rays.²⁶ Just as Akhenaten was influenced by traditional hymns, sun worship, and even foreign artwork, so too did Akhenaten leave his fingerprints upon the reinstated Egyptian religion in the form of *Ba*.

ANALYSIS

Detailed analysis of the cult of Aten's influence is limited to the Amarna period because no evidence of Aten worship has been found before or after that time. As mentioned above, scholars agree that Tutankhamun restored the worship of the gods that Akhenaten had neglected, but beyond Assmann's exploration of the *Ba* as an evolution of Aten,²⁷ no scholarly research regarding the connection between Atenism and the *Ba* was evident. As mentioned above, Tutankhamun and Seti I are credited with sweeping Akhenaten's reign under the rug, but that is the extent to which they are spoken of in conjunction with Akhenaten. It has been made clear that the cult of Aten was influenced by older, more traditional elements of Egyptian religion,²⁸ and it seems farfetched to conclude that the *Ba* of the gods is the only clear remnant. It is important that more research be done to understand the nature of Tutankhamun and Seti I's religious restorations. Even if these kings were successful in overturning almost every bit of Atenism, what they chose to emphasize can explain what they considered most dangerous about Akhenaten's reforms. This knowledge will help deepen the understanding of how Akhenaten, directly and indirectly, influenced religion in Egypt.

This call for additional research is logical when made with the assumption that Akhenaten was motivated by sincere religious devotion because this idea requires more evidence than what is currently available; however, not all scholars agree that that was the basis for his actions. A conservative example of this is Egyptologist Donald Redford's conclusions in "Akhenaten: New Theories and Old Facts." He argues that rays seen emanating from Aten in artwork are not examples of blessings from the sun disk rather they are pointers intended to highlight "rhetorical figures, not tenets or beliefs."²⁹ Akhenaten stripped away everything that had made Egyptian religion a religion.³⁰ He ended the worship of the traditional gods and closed their temples. Redford does not go so far as to say that Akhenaten was not

26. Assmann, "Theological Responses," 185–86.

27. Assmann, "Theological Responses," 185–86.

28. Redford, "Sun-disc," 51; Assmann, "Theological Responses," 180; David, "Early Morning Light," 99.

29. Redford, "New Theories," 28.

30. Redford, "New Theories," 26.

acting out of religious conviction but is clear that he does not consider the cult of Aten a full-fledged religion.³¹

Other skeptics of Akhenaten's religiosity have gone further with their arguments. Egyptologist Cyril Aldred considered the king's reforms to be motivated by more profane than sacred concerns. He argues that Akhenaten was looking to capitalize on the income that the various temples brought to their respective gods and priesthoods, and the best way to do that was to introduce a monotheistic religion with the king at its head.³² Aldred also does not consider the changes to hymns and art to be original.³³ Scholar Robert North³⁴ recognizes Aldred's contributions to the study of Akhenaten but does not agree with his conclusions. In his view, Akhenaten did act primarily out of religious devotion.³⁵

Despite Aldred and North's arguments, Atenism should be considered a full-fledged religion rather than the skeleton of one, and Akhenaten's religious devotion should be accepted. Akhenaten's reforms were a radical departure from traditional Egyptian religion, but all the forms of religion were still present. A god was still worshipped and its attendant cult performed rituals just as before.³⁶ True, there was a loss of myths,³⁷ but hymns to Aten carried teachings about the god in a way similar to the myths. It is also unlikely that Akhenaten was motivated by the desire to create a royal monopoly. As Robert North states, "The decline of polytheistic cult was not merely an incidental result of his decision to get financial control into his own hands. He was not an economic manipulator, but at most was guilty of neglecting the way in which his officials exploited financially a reform which he himself had intended to be religious."³⁸ While this paper has not delved outside the realm of religion during Akhenaten's reign it has explored the great lengths that were taken to bring about religious changes in Egypt. Would such an effort have been expended if it was not sincere?

In conclusion, Akhenaten's religious reforms did not develop within a vacuum. The cult of Aten is a fusion of traditional Egyptian religion and new, unique beliefs introduced by Akhenaten. The worship of the sun had gained particular importance throughout the Eighteenth Dynasty and Akhenaten furthered this movement with the introduction of the cult of Aten. He proclaimed Aten the universal god that overshadowed all creation, just as the sun did. He introduced

31. Redford, "New Theories," 26–9.

32. Robert North, "Akhenaten Secularized?," *Bib*, 58, no. 2 (1977): 247.

33. North, "Secularized," 253.

34. I learned Aldred's argument from Robert North's paper, "Akhenaten Secularized?"

35. North, "Secularized," 257–58.

36. David, "Early Morning," 93–6.

37. Redford, "New Theories," 29.

38. North, "Secularized," 257.

innovations in rituals and religious art that had no forerunners in Egyptian society, and that died with him. While much has been done to research and understand Akhenaten's reforms and the influences that led to those reforms there is no similar information regarding the influence that Akhenaten had on Egyptian religion after his reign. Tutankhamun and Seti I both actively undid many of his reforms and sought to restore traditional Egyptian religion, but as Assmann argued there were elements of Atenism that survived.³⁹ It is improbable that the only surviving remnant was the *Ba*, and it is important to recognize these other beliefs or rituals that continued after the return to traditional religion. Doing so will enhance our understanding of Egyptian values and beliefs and how even unpopular ideas can influence the culture around them. In this way, Akhenaten's legacy will continue to live on throughout the ages to come.

39. Assmann, "Theological Responses," 179–91.