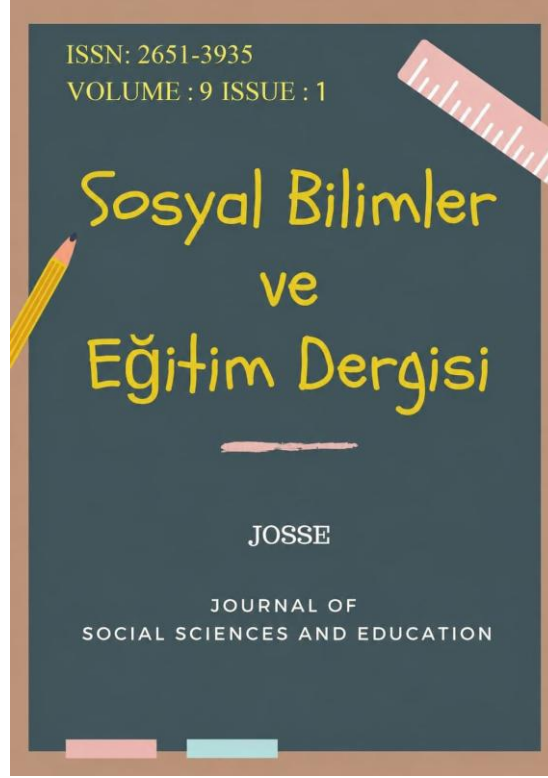


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Religious Revolution or Political Strategy? An Evaluation of Akhenaten's Reform

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Abstract

Research Article

This study examines Akhenaten's reform, considered a major turning point in ancient Egyptian history, within the framework of whether it should be interpreted as a religious revolution or a political strategy. Implemented during the 19th Dynasty, the reform sought to establish an Aten-centered monotheistic system in opposition to the traditional polytheistic order. Drawing upon archaeological evidence and epigraphic materials, and modern scholarship, the study analyzes the origins, implementation, and consequences of this transformation. It argues that the reform was not solely theological in nature but also operated as a political strategy designed to curtail the economic and political authority of the Amun priesthood. In this context, the relocation of the capital to Amarna, the closure of traditional temples, and the construction of a new religious discourse are interpreted as components of a broader effort to restructure central authority. However, the limited social basis of Atenism and its close dependence on the royal authority weakened the long-term sustainability of the reform. The rapid restoration of traditional beliefs following Akhenaten's death further indicates that the movement failed to establish a lasting religious paradigm. The study concludes that Akhenaten's reform should be understood as a complex process that combined ideological, theological, and political dimensions.

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Introduction

The earliest phases of ancient Egyptian religion are difficult to define with precision, as the available evidence for this period relies largely on indirect sources. Nevertheless, the emergence and increasing prominence of certain belief systems and ritual practices, such as the cult of Amun, can be traced to some extent. Representations from Memphis and Heliopolis, examples of the veneration of sacred animals, and epigraphic materials, frescoes, and monuments-particularly those centered in Thebes-point to the cults of Osiris and Ra. Together, these sources provide significant insights into both the chronology and the nature of early Egyptian religious beliefs. These deities, along with the pantheons and associated cult practices that developed around them, constitute the foundation of ancient Egyptian religion (Tiele, 1882, pp. 35-37). One of the defining features of ancient Egyptian religion was its predominantly polytheistic structure, described as “a religious system that acknowledges the existence of multiple deities” (Bowker, 1997, p. 756). In contrast, the religion of Aten, often evaluated within the framework of monotheism, defined as “a metaphysical system shaped by belief in a single supreme and transcendent deity” (Gündüz, 1998, p. 266) emerged during Akhenaten’s reign as one of the earliest historically attested examples of such a belief system.

Originally named Amenhotep, Akhenaten is believed to have adopted his new name, meaning “one who serves Aten,” following his religious reforms; this renaming is generally associated with the reform process itself (Devi, 1946, p. 19). Although his name appears in various forms in different sources, a clay seal discovered at Tell Mišrife (Qatna) provides material evidence confirming his historical existence (Ahrens et al., 2012, p. 34). Born around 1394 BCE as the son of Amenhotep III and Queen Tiye, he ascended the throne circa 1375 BCE and ruled for approximately seventeen years (Aldred, 1973, p. 16; Redford, 1987, p. 57; Weigall, 1911, p. 1). This period coincided with the height of Egypt’s political and economic power (Aldred, 1973, p. 16). Owing to his religious reforms, Akhenaten has been characterized in the scholarship as either the “first monotheist” or the “heretic pharaoh” (Bunson, 2002, p. 18). Although information regarding his early life remains limited, and despite being married to Queen Nefertiti, his reign represents a profound and far-reaching transformation in both religious and cultural terms (İnan, 1987, p. 108; Williamson, 2015, p. 7). Debates concerning the nature of Akhenaten’s reform largely revolve around whether it should be understood as a genuine religious revolution or as a political strategy aimed at consolidating royal authority. A religious revolution implies a process that transforms the fundamental elements of an existing belief system, producing a radical rupture in cosmology,

ritual practices, and conceptions of the divine authority, whereas a political strategy refers to deliberate interventions intended to redistribute power and weaken competing institutional structures. Although the social conflict theory emerged in nineteenth-century sociology does not directly correspond to categories derived from ancient societies, it nevertheless provides a useful analytical framework for examining tensions among competing interest groups (Mitchell, 2017). Within this perspective, conflict is understood as a structural process shaped by the control of economic resources, institutional authority, and ideological dominance. When applied with due attention to historical context, this framework offers valuable insights into power relations in the ancient world.

From this standpoint, Akhenaten's reform can be interpreted not merely as a theological innovation but as a struggle for power aimed at weakening the economic and political authority of the Amun priesthood. The confiscation of temple properties and the reorganization of worship around the royal center generated a clear tension between the religious elite and the central authority. This tension may be considered one of the key factors explaining why the reform ultimately failed to achieve lasting permanence.

The present study addresses this movement for two main reasons. First, in light of evidence derived from archaeology, philology, and historical research, it seeks to determine the place of Akhenaten's reform, characterized by monotheistic tendencies and a lack of continuity, within the history of ancient Egyptian religious beliefs. Second, the ostensibly monotheistic character of the religious system Akhenaten sought to institutionalize has led some scholars, as well as adherents of monotheistic traditions, to regard him as a prophet or as the founder of a revelation-based religion. At the same time, interpretations that frame this reform as a heretical movement also occupy a significant place in the scholarly literature. Accordingly, this study aims to contribute to the existing body of scholarship on Akhenaten and his reform.

Method

This study adopts an analytical approach grounded in qualitative research, employing a historical and interdisciplinary methodology. This study primarily relies on written and archaeological evidence from the Amarna period of ancient Egypt, examined through secondary sources. In this context, the Amarna letters, temple remains, iconographic

materials, and artistic productions of the period are treated as key data sources for understanding both the religious and political dimensions of the reform.

In addition, a historical-analytical method is employed to examine Akhenaten's reform in a comparative framework, considering both earlier Egyptian religious traditions and the subsequent restoration period. This approach enables a discussion of whether the reform represents a rupture or a form of continuity. Furthermore, a historiographical analysis is conducted to evaluate the diverse interpretations of Akhenaten in modern scholarship, highlighting disagreements over whether the reform should be understood as a transformation of religious belief or as a strategy aimed at consolidating central authority.

The study further adopts an interdisciplinary perspective, integrating approaches from the history of religions, political science, and art history. Within this framework, the relationship between the theological structure of the Aten cult and the political authority of the pharaoh is examined, and the role of religious discourse in the production of political legitimacy is critically assessed. The data are evaluated through critical reading and interpretive analysis, with comparisons drawn across different sources in order to reach a more comprehensive understanding. This methodological approach aims to demonstrate that Akhenaten's reform is too complex to be adequately explained through a single-dimensional interpretation.

Sources on Ancient Egyptian Religion and Akhenaten

The beginnings of archaeological research in Egypt are generally associated with Napoleon's Egyptian campaign, during which the findings were later published in the *Description de l'Égypte* between 1808 and 1822. The work of the Egypt Exploration Fund, established in 1882, together with Flinders Petrie's excavations at Amarna in 1893, significantly expanded the body of evidence related to the period of Akhenaten. Subsequently, the studies of J. H. Breasted, along with discoveries made in the Valley of the Kings at Thebes, brought to light tombs belonging to Akhenaten and members of his family. Inscriptions on a coffin even record that he bore the title "the beautiful child of the sun" (Weigall, 1911, pp. 2-4; 1913, p. 187). The most comprehensive data on Akhenaten have been obtained through the intensification of archaeological activities since the nineteenth century. In this context, Karl Richard Lepsius's work *Denkmäler aus Ägypten und Äthiopien* significantly advanced scholarly knowledge of ancient Egypt by compiling the results of research conducted in Egypt and Nubia. As a result of the expeditions led by Lepsius and his team at Giza, Abusir, Saqqara, and Dahshur, numerous pyramids and tombs were identified,

and a substantial body of archaeological material-forming the basis of the Berlin collections-was assembled. This corpus, consisting of hundreds of monument plates and copies of inscriptions, has been instrumental in illuminating Egyptian history (Peck, 2013, p. 41).

Indeed, Akhenaten's recognition in the Western world owes much to the work of Lepsius. Subsequently, the Aten belief system he developed attracted the attention of various religious traditions and became the subject of debates in the context of monotheism and prophethood (Laboury, 2020, p. 238). In the second year of his reign, Akhenaten resided in Thebes alongside his father, Amenhotep III, indicating that Amarna (Akhetaten) had not yet been established. This also suggests that the diplomatic letters preserved in the archives were initially kept at Malqata and later transferred to Amarna (Lull, 2019, p. 66).

Western scholarship has come to understand Akhenaten's reign largely through the material remains discovered at Amarna; accordingly, the Amarna Period has been interpreted as a phase closely associated with an Aten-centered belief system. The growing interest generated by local discoveries in the late nineteenth century-particularly the unearthing of the Amarna Tablets in 1887, was further deepened by Flinders Petrie's excavations, which helped establish Akhenaten and his religion as a major field of scholarly inquiry (Williamson, 2015, pp. 1-2).

Subsequent studies by Henri Frankfort and J. D. S. Pendlebury systematically elucidated the historical and cultural structure of the period. As a result of this accumulated scholarship, Akhenaten, once a relatively obscure figure, has come to be regarded as a ruler distinguished by both his religious reforms and artistic innovations (Aldred, 1973, p. 11). The sources that provide information on ancient Egyptian religion and beliefs can generally be classified as follows:

Hieroglyphic texts; depictions on the walls of temples or burial chambers symbolizing ritual practices; genealogical records; diplomatic texts from the Amarna period; accounts produced by ancient authors such as Strabo, Herodotus, and Diodorus Siculus based on their observations or reports; figurines and statues recovered through archaeological excavations; mummification techniques; hymns dedicated to the gods; and the works of modern Egyptologists (İnan, 1987, pp. 13-16).

Before the Reform: The Cult of Amun

The religious structure of ancient Egypt was founded on a polytheistic system characterized by forms of worship directed toward numerous deities, most notably Amun-Re,

as well as Osiris, Isis, and Horus. This system provided a flexible framework of belief that did not exclude multiple forms of divine veneration. However, it was significantly disrupted by the new cult centralized by Akhenaten under the name of Aten. The worship of the sun god Amun-Re exhibited continuity from the early periods of Egyptian history and maintained its influence in later eras. Obelisks at temple entrances and small votive objects found in Old Kingdom tombs constitute material reflections of this cult. During the New Kingdom, these objects were replaced by small pyramid-shaped structures-geometric stone tumuli that did not possess a pronounced symbolic depth (Wiedemann, 1897, p. 16). The sun, for the ancient Egyptians, was regarded not only as a deity but also as the first king of Egypt. In addition, the worship of the phoenix-considered an embodiment of Ra-was known to be widespread in Heliopolis (Wiedemann, 1897, p. 25). Regarding the phoenix, Herodotus records that he saw its representations in Heliopolis, although he expresses skepticism toward the accounts claiming that the bird is reborn every five hundred years (Herodotus, 1973, p. 141).

Egyptian pharaohs were believed to be the incarnations of Ra and the only beings granted immortality, destined to ascend to the heavens and unite with the gods. This anthropomorphic conception of divinity was widespread in Egypt, even among the educated classes. The king was also regarded as the son of Ra. Although physically born, earlier pharaohs were considered merely his acknowledged human predecessors. This belief is reflected in popular Egyptian texts such as *The Story of King Khufu*, in which Ra is described as the father of the first kings of the Fifth Dynasty (Wiedemann, 1897, p. 52).

Amun, whose name means “the hidden one,” was a deity known in the early periods of ancient Egypt but rose to prominence in Thebes during the New Kingdom. He is associated with the Hermopolitan cosmogonies, in which he represents the dynamic force of life. Both the god and his female counterpart, Amaunet, are mentioned in the Pyramid Texts of the Fifth Dynasty (c. 2465-2323 BCE) and the Sixth Dynasty (c. 2323-2150 BCE). The earliest evidence attesting to Amun’s position in Thebes is an inscription belonging to the governor Rehu, dated to the Sixth Dynasty, in which he claims to have served the god (Bunson, 2002, p. 35). Ra, frequently referenced in these texts, is a common designation for the sun god. Numerous attempts have been made to explain both the origin of his name and the nature of his divinity; it has been variously interpreted as meaning “to give” or “to order.” In this sense, Ra is conceived as the deity who creates and orders all things. The emergence of Aten as an object of independent worship, however, dates to the time of Akhenaten. As will be discussed in detail below, the worship of Aten became the state religion during this period of Egyptian history (Wiedemann, 1897, p. 35).

The New Religious Center of Amarna and the Cult of Aten

The city of Amarna (Akhetaten), founded by Akhenaten, was established as a capital centered on the monotheistic worship of Aten and was therefore named Akhetaten, meaning “the Horizon of Aten.” Despite being constructed within a relatively short period, Amarna emerged as a large and impressive city by the standards of its time and displayed a distinctive architectural style that departed from traditional Egyptian forms. Buildings constructed of wood and mudbrick were designed with wide, open windows to allow sunlight to penetrate interior spaces. Although the city existed for only about fifteen years, it became a significant center in historical, archaeological, and artistic terms (Frankfort, 1933, p. 47; David, 2021, p. 52). The newly established capital at Amarna extended over a wide area, marked by fourteen boundary stelae and planned to stretch approximately 9.5 km in length. The city was organized both as a royal center and as the dwelling place of Aten. It featured well-planned districts, pools, gardens, and a royal road running parallel to the Nile.

The decoration of the capital employed the distinctive “Amarna style,” reflecting a naturalistic and relatively freer integration of artistic forms (Bunson, 2002, p. 18). Houses in Amarna often contained carved or inscribed stone stelae depicting the royal family worshipping Aten. These stelae functioned as focal points of the Aten cult within domestic spaces (Bleiberg, 2004, p. 247). These developments, unprecedented in Egyptian history, are thought to have deeply unsettled more traditional segments of society that were strongly attached to established religious practices (Hornung, 2004, p. 108).

In the second year of his reign, Akhenaten began to worship Aten, the sun deity that had already appeared in the royal monuments of his grandfather Thutmose IV (r. 1401-1391 BCE) and his father Amenhotep III. Aten was conceived as a “solar disk” shining over the Nile and was regarded as a manifestation of Ra-Horakhty. With the adoption of his new religious orientation, the young pharaoh abandoned the name Amenhotep and assumed the name Akhenaten, commonly interpreted as “one who serves Aten” or “effective for Aten.” Likewise, Nefertiti’s name was rendered as Neferneferuaten Nefertiti (“Beautiful are the Beauties of Aten” or “The Beautiful One Has Come”), emphasizing her association with the Aten cult (Bunson, 2002, p. 18). This transformation may also be understood as an allusion to her connection with Hathor (Williamson, 2015, p. 9).

One line of interpretation suggests that Akhenaten's reformist ideas were influenced by Amenemhab, a figure about whom little is known but who is believed to have been an important member of the court of Amenhotep III. According to this view, Amenemhab-identified as the chief of the singers of Amun-may have shaped Akhenaten's beliefs through a hymn dedicated to the sun god Ra. Epigraphic evidence further indicates that he accompanied the king on journeys to foreign lands. In another stela, Amenemhab refers to the sun as a creator god, reinforcing the possibility of his intellectual or religious influence on the development of Akhenaten's theology (Bleiberg, 2004, p. 179). Akhenaten, during his reign, proclaimed that he had discovered the the universal deity sought by humanity through the divine force manifested through the solar disk, Aten conceived as the "energy within the disk." For this reason, he has been regarded by his followers as a saintly figure, by others as a thinker, and as an innovator in figurative art due to the stylistic transformations he introduced. He also described himself as the son of an infinite source beyond the perception of the human eye (Devi, 1946, p. 1). In this way, Akhenaten attempted to institutionalize a new religious system in Egypt. He promoted the exclusive worship of a single solar deity, embodied in the light of the sun, which he believed to be the source of life and the sustaining force of the world. Akhenaten commissioned the construction of new temples reminiscent of the sun temples of the Fifth Dynasty (c. 2500-2350 BCE). These temples consisted of a series of open courtyards oriented toward the east and organized around a central altar. The earliest examples of such structures were built in Thebes, Memphis, Heliopolis, and Amarna. In these temples, lintels were placed within the doorways to ensure that sunlight could penetrate all parts of the structure (Bleiberg, 2004, p. 247).

Aten was not an innovation of Akhenaten, as it was already known during the reigns of his predecessors, Thutmose IV and Amenhotep III (Bunson, 2002, p. 58). According to Weigall (1911), the monotheistic belief system often referred to as Atenism leads us "to a historical period in which we can observe the beginnings of certain religious movements that became more pronounced during the reign of Thutmose IV and developed further under his son Amenophis III and grandson Amenophis IV" (Weigall, 1911, p. 9). Thus, elements of the religious framework later articulated by Akhenaten were already known during the reigns of both Thutmose IV and Amenhotep III (Weigall, 1911, p. 9). A similar conclusion is drawn by Mircea Eliade (2013), who locates the origins of Egyptian monotheistic tendencies in this period. However, the expression "one god, beside whom there is no other," found in Akhenaten's hymns, had previously been applied to deities such as Amun, Ra, and Aten. Despite this, Akhenaten himself was also venerated as a divine figure, and a limited elite is

known to have invoked his name directly in their prayers. His emphasis on a unique relationship with Aten allows Atenism to be interpreted within a framework resembling a god-son relationship.

In the pre-Amarna period, Ra is referred to in the *Book of What Is in the Duat* as the “Lord of the Solar Disk” (Aten). In other texts of the Eighteenth Dynasty, while Amun is not described as the “hidden god,” Ra is portrayed as “the one whose face is veiled” and “the god who is concealed in the netherworld.” In other words, Ra’s mysterious and invisible nature is interpreted as complementary to Aten, the deity fully manifested in the solar disk (Eliade, 2013, p. 134). Accordingly, based on the assessments of Weigall and Eliade, the belief in Aten was already known in Egypt, and Akhenaten sought to construct a system grounded in this existing tradition while eliminating competing religious forms.

Although Amenhotep III appeared to remain aligned with the traditional cult of Amun, he increasingly turned toward the Aten cult, which was associated with the sun god Ra-Horakhty, and accorded it particular significance. Together with Thutmose IV, the reverence shown to Aten through the symbolism of the solar disk became more pronounced during his reign, thereby laying the groundwork for the profound transformation that would follow. Indeed, this process of change-encompassing art, governance, and religion-suggests a deliberate development and indicates that Akhenaten cannot be adequately characterized merely as a religious fanatic (Hornung, 2004, p. 106). The core of Akhenaten’s theology rested on the idea that the “sun” was the origin of life, possessing the power to create all things with care and to sustain the continuity of existence; for this reason, no other creator should be acknowledged (Eliade, 2013, p. 133). Although some scholars have argued that Atenism represents the first true monotheistic religion of the ancient world, this claim cannot be fully sustained. As noted earlier, monotheistic tendencies were already present in Egypt prior to Akhenaten. Moreover, many inhabitants of Amarna continued to maintain their devotion to traditional household deities such as Taweret and Bes, despite the pressures associated with Akhenaten’s reforms. It is therefore not possible to demonstrate that Atenism was universally adopted beyond the royal family and court circles (Williamson, 2015, p. 12). The rapid return to traditional beliefs following Akhenaten’s death, both among his successors and the wider population, further supports this conclusion.

As reported by James K. Hoffmeier (cited in Kilchör, 2016), Akhenaten’s reforms can be explained in two ways: either as an attempt to revive the solar cult of the Fifth Dynasty or as the result of a sincere religious conviction grounded in a theophanic experience. According

to Hoffmeier, such an experience may have been associated, for example, with a theophany occurring along the Nile; however, within polytheistic traditions, experiences of this kind do not typically lead to monotheism. Arthur Weigall likewise emphasizes that Akhenaten's doctrine cannot be reduced to a simple form of sun worship. Rather, he argues that it represents one of the most advanced religious conceptions of its time, directing individuals not toward the sun itself but toward the invisible and abstract power behind it. Initially associated with the divine force manifested through solar disk, Aten was later reinterpreted by Akhenaten as the invisible divine force manifested through the sun, thereby transforming it into a more abstract principle and encouraging believers to orient their attention toward a more transcendent force (Weigall, 1913, p. 196).

The Political Function of Art in the Akhenaten Period: The Ideological Reconfiguration of Ma'at

In ancient Egyptian thought, the conception of existence was structured around the duality of order (*ma'at*) and chaos (*isfet*). Ma'at was understood as a fundamental principle encompassing cosmic order, the cyclical flow of the Nile, political legitimacy, and individual morality (Bleiberg, 2004, p. 185). Within this framework, the primary duty of the king was to uphold *ma'at*, and his righteous conduct was directly associated with the balance of nature, the inundation of the Nile, and agricultural productivity. Accordingly, obedience to the king was regarded not merely as a political obligation but also as a means of sustaining cosmic order. This conception contributed to the formation of a stable political structure in ancient Egypt (Bleiberg, 2004, p. 185). Akhenaten promoted a distinctive style in figurative art known as "Amarna naturalism," while deliberately avoiding excessive display and grandeur. Notably, vernacular language entered royal inscriptions and official decrees for the first time. By abandoning the rigid formalism imposed by court protocol, the pharaoh encouraged more relaxed and informal interactions among members of the royal family and their close associates (Eliade, 2013, p. 132). The absence of statues or portraits of Akhenaten in the artistic program of the Aten temples, contrasted with the prominence of representations of Queen Nefertiti, points to the queen's significant role in the process of religious reform. This situation may be interpreted as reflecting the ruler's continuation of earlier traditions that incorporated queen-centered principles of governance, through which universal order was symbolically maintained. Furthermore, Akhenaten transformed the concept of *ma'at* into both an artistic and ideological discourse, promoting the ideal of "living in *ma'at*" as a central organizing principle (Okon, 2012, p. 420). Indeed, a relief in the tomb of the vizier Ramose

depicts Akhenaten together with the goddess Ma'at, visually reinforcing this ideological association (Lull, 2019, p. 73).

Akhenaten institutionalized the new naturalistic artistic style, compelling bureaucratic officials to conform and removing certain high-ranking figures who resisted these changes. He replaced them with lower-status or foreign-born administrators, thereby creating a governing elite loyal to himself. This restructuring is reflected in the scenes of absolute devotion frequently depicted in Amarna art (Hornung, 2004, p. 107). In this way, Akhenaten was able to consolidate the political power necessary to implement far-reaching transformations in both the state and religious structures with relatively limited resistance. The profound religious, artistic, and cultural transformations experienced in Egypt during this period were made possible largely through the king's deliberate interventions. However, following his death, the population rapidly returned to traditional beliefs, resuming long-standing rituals and magical practices that continued for centuries (İnan, 1987, p. 234). Although artistic representations from the Amarna period portray the royal family as being closer to the people, these images functioned primarily as ideological instruments aimed at promoting the Aten doctrine. In reality, the distance between the king and his subjects was maintained, and the involvement of foreign mercenary groups in social life generated discontent among the population. While Akhenaten's religious system became increasingly elaborate, the political structure of Egypt began to weaken (Hornung, 2004, p. 109).

Reactions to the Reform and Akhenaten's Struggle with the Priesthood

With Akhenaten's accession to the throne, the religious reform in Egypt initially targeted the priestly establishment, effectively removing its institutional role and curtailing its authority over the state. In this process, the distinction between the royal family and ordinary mortals was transformed into a broader dichotomy between good and evil, valuable and worthless, just and unjust. According to one interpretation, this new framework—often referred to as Atenism—positioned the Aten religion as a precursor to later salvation religions (Assmann, 2014, p. 20). The Aten religion has also been characterized as a non-national, universal system grounded in a broader conception of humanity, yet one that emerged before the historical conditions were fully ripe for its acceptance. For this reason, Akhenaten's reform was perceived as an attempt to dismantle deeply rooted traditional beliefs that had shaped everyday life for centuries and to impose a new doctrinal system upon the population (Erman, 1907, p. 67).

Akhenaten and Nefertiti introduced unprecedented innovations in Egypt by integrating religion and politics through religious reform, as well as through developments in art and urban design, exemplified by Amarna. However, their religious policies stood in clear tension with Egypt's historical traditions and established belief systems. In this respect, "one of the most controversial aspects of Akhenaten's reign was his iconoclastic religious policy." One manifestation of this was his dispatching of agents throughout the country to locate and erase the names and representations of the gods, especially that of Amun, from both major and minor monuments (Aldred, 1973, p. 26). What Akhenaten effectively attempted was to replace Egypt's traditional religious framework with an abstract, monotheistic system. This new religious system centered on the worship of Aten as the supreme solar deity and in promoting this doctrine, Akhenaten sought to promote and institutionalize this doctrine throughout Egypt while eliminating many of the images and esoteric symbols associated with the former religion. His supporters, in turn, have tended to regard him as the world's first idealist and as one of the most remarkable figures of the ancient world, even prior to the Hebrews (Aldred, 1973, p. 11).

Although the name Aten was familiar as that of an Egyptian deity, the exclusion of other gods was not a customary or easily accepted development among the population. Aten was conceived as the radiant energy of the universe, linked to the physical manifestation of the sun (Williamson, 2015, p. 8). As such, Aten was understood as the sun that revealed itself daily in the sky and generated life on earth. In contrast to this conception, Egyptians were expected to reject all other deities and ritual practices (İnan, 1987, p. 232).

At the outset, Akhenaten appears to have attempted to position his new religion alongside the cult of Amun and its associated pantheon in Thebes. In this context, he is known to have constructed a temple for Aten in Thebes. Moreover, another temple dedicated to Aten was established far to the south, near Jebel Barkal in Sudan, not far from Napata, the capital of Nubia (King, 2012, p. 344). As is evident, Akhenaten's religious reforms-often described as iconoclastic-encountered strong opposition. His condemnation and attempted elimination of polytheism constituted a direct threat to Egyptians, who placed their trust in their traditional, eternal deities. The underlying concern was that if Akhenaten were permitted to undermine belief in the gods, the entire structure of the established religion, including the priesthood, would collapse. For many, resistance to Akhenaten's reform was perceived as a patriotic duty and a justified response. It was widely believed that Egypt's social and economic stability depended on the preservation of traditional religion. Allowing Akhenaten to reject the old gods and adopt a dismissive stance toward established beliefs was seen as

risking the disruption and eventual disintegration of the ontological order that sustained Egyptian society (Okon, 2012, p. 420).

On the other hand, the struggle between Akhenaten and the priesthood may be understood less as a conflict of ideas than as a clash of values. There was little possibility of reconciliation between the values represented by Akhenaten and those upheld by the state's religious establishment. Ultimately, what distanced the king from both his people and his own time were the practical consequences of his teachings (Devi, 1946, p. 60). In particular, concerns and objections arose regarding funerary practices, which were seen as the product of centuries of tradition and therefore deserving of continued observance (Erman, 1907, p. 67). The king rejected what he regarded as obsolete traditions and artistic conventions, advocating instead for the abandonment of millennia-old customs. In his view, individuals should perceive the world through their own experience, take delight in a universal sense of humanity, and assign greater value to this perspective than to inherited modes of life (Erman, 1907, p. 69).

According to Akhenaten, the priests of Thebes and other major cities represented a mass that was intellectually superficial, prejudiced in matters of belief, and marked by irresponsibility and indifference (Devi, 1946, p. 65). Nevertheless, the opposition of the Theban priesthood was formidable. Recognizing that he could not successfully confront them, Akhenaten abandoned the old capital in anger and withdrew to what is now Amarna, where he could live in relative peace and pursue a more contemplative, almost philosophical life. There, together with his wife Nefertiti-his closest ally in matters of belief-he established his influence over an elite court composed of Aten-worshipping nobles, priests, and artists. The artists in his entourage, in particular, gained a unique opportunity to develop their work in accordance with the principles of the new religion (King, 2012, p. 345). His supporters came to believe that no power existed capable of challenging the king's absolute authority (Aldred, 1973, p. 14). In reality, however, the persistent resistance of the priestly class and other opponents to the king's projects cannot be explained solely by religious motives. Monotheistic tendencies were already known in earlier periods of Egyptian religious thought. This is evident, for example, in the famous Hymn to Amun inscribed by the brothers Hor and Suti on a stela (Devi, 1946, p. 57).

The new order that Akhenaten sought to establish was fundamentally grounded in intertwined religious and political motivations. When he ascended the throne in Thebes, the priestly class had already reached a position in which it rivaled state authority and, at times,

posed a potential threat to the social order. This group frequently intervened in political affairs under the pretext of divination (İnan, 1987, p. 232). Occupying the highest rank within the sevenfold social structure of Egyptian society (Herodotus, 1973, p. 179), the priesthood controlled the doctrines and practices of ancient Egyptian religion. Their influence extended deeply into social life, as access to the gods in the polytheistic system-through prayers and supplications-was mediated by this privileged class. Sustained by offerings, gifts, and other revenues dedicated to the deities, the priesthood enjoyed considerable material wealth. They were exempt from taxation and military service and gradually accumulated both economic power and political authority (İnan, 1987, p. 231). Furthermore, the revenues of the temples-particularly those allocated to the priests of Amun-grew steadily through taxes and royal donations, granting those within this status group substantial material power (İnan, 1987, p. 180).

According to Eliade (2013), the belief system established during Akhenaten's reign can be explained, in part, by the pharaoh's desire to free himself from the influence of the High Priest. Indeed, shortly after ascending the throne, the young ruler curtailed the power of the High Priest of Amun by revoking his authority over the administration of the god's estates, thereby undermining the economic basis of his influence. Immediately upon consolidating his rule, Akhenaten proclaimed-through an inscription at the Temple of Karnak-that the existence of all gods other than Aten had come to an end (Williamson, 2015, p. 10). His subsequent actions included commissioning a temple for Aten in Thebes (Devi, 1946, p. 47) and eliminating the political authority of the High Priest of Amun. Recognizing that remaining in Thebes would jeopardize his reform, Akhenaten relocated the capital in the fourth year of his reign, seeking to distance himself from the influence of the Amun priesthood (İnan, 1987, p. 108). In the fourth year of Akhenaten's reign, the High Priest of Amun-whose political power had already been curtailed-was sent to the eastern desert, thereby removing him from the events unfolding in the capital for a time. It is possible that the king used this period to translate his reformist ideas into the decorative program of the temple he had commissioned for Aten at Karnak. As noted, "the statues and reliefs of this temple, displaying a harsh and even unsettling expressionism, seem to have challenged the aesthetic sensibilities of the Egyptians up to that point" (Hornung, 2004, p. 106). An edict issued by the king suggests that news of his intention to establish a new capital triggered internal unrest in Thebes; this uprising was subsequently suppressed through military intervention (İnan, 1987, pp. 232-233). Amarna appears to have functioned primarily as the residential domain of the king's closest court members and as the cult center of Aten, while a

significant portion of the administrative apparatus remained in the traditional centers of Memphis and Thebes (Hornung, 2004, p. 108).

Norman de Garis Davies, who conducted extensive studies on Old Kingdom structures at Saqqara, Sheikh Said, and Deir el-Gebrawi, argued that the new doctrine-contrary to traditional Egyptian beliefs-constituted a form of monotheism. According to this interpretation, Akhenaten did not merely worship the solar disk itself but venerated it as the visible manifestation of a divine force that animated the disk and, through it, distributed warmth and life to all living beings. For this reason, he promoted artistic representations in which each ray of the sun is depicted as extending a hand that conveys the sign of life to the world (King, 2012, p. 343). At its core, his doctrine emphasized the pursuit of truth through the rejection of falsehood, corruption, and superstition. Those who embraced the new religion were believed to attain a blessed existence in the afterlife (İnan, 1987, p. 233).

The Outcomes of Akhenaten's Reform and Its Evaluation

Akhenaten spent much of his reign in relative seclusion at Amarna and appears to have devoted increasing attention to his religious reforms at the expense of broader political and diplomatic concerns. During this period, the balance of power in northern Syria shifted considerably as the conflict between Mitanni and the Hittites weakened Egyptian influence over its regional vassals. While Akhenaten remained focused on the Aten reform, several of these dependent states increasingly aligned themselves with the Hittite king Suppiluliuma, thereby diminishing Egypt's authority in the region. This weakening of Egyptian control later compelled subsequent pharaohs to undertake efforts to restore imperial influence and contributed to the prolonged Egyptian-Hittite conflicts of the Nineteenth Dynasty. Archaeological evidence from Amarna further suggests that Akhenaten died before the following year's harvest and may not have been buried in the royal tomb prepared at Amarna (Aldred, 1973, p. 27).

In such a context, the introduction of a religious reform that remained incomprehensible to much of the Egyptian population, together with the appointment of lower-ranking individuals to positions of authority and the resulting misuse of power, plunged Egypt into a period of instability and drove the long-established bureaucratic system that had guided the state for centuries into disarray (Bunson, 2002, p. 19). Akhenaten's policies, which provoked hostility among the priesthood and failed to secure broad acceptance among the population, were ultimately dismantled after his death by his successor, Tutankhamun. The

extent of the damage inflicted upon the traditional religious system is vividly expressed in an inscription at the Karnak Temple:

The temples of the gods and goddesses had fallen into ruin. Sanctuaries lay desolate, overgrown with weeds. The temples seemed as though they had never existed, and their courtyards were used as thoroughfares ... the gods had turned their backs on this land ... the prayers of the people went unanswered by the gods and goddesses. The hearts of the people were in pain, and this suffering spread throughout their bodies” (Hart, 2017, p. 73).

The statement in Akhenaten’s hymn, “you are known only by your son,” helps explain why the new belief system failed to spread among the broader population. As Eliade (2013, p. 134) notes, Atenism remained largely confined to the royal family and its immediate circle. While traditional deities continued to be venerated outside Amarna, Akhenaten closed certain temples and confiscated priestly lands. His declaration of himself as the sole intermediary of Aten weakened the bureaucratic structure of the state. The collapse of the temple economy and the disruption of established systems of redistribution led to economic difficulties and administrative abuses, even in the early years of his reign (Bunson, 2002, pp. 18-19). During this period, Akhenaten’s family life also appears to have been unsettled. Although he may have had children with the Mitannian princess Kiya, she seems to have fallen out of favor over time. Nefertiti, while remaining in the capital, was no longer consistently depicted alongside the king, and her position appears to have been assumed by their daughter Merytaten. It has also been suggested that Nefertiti, whose date of death remains uncertain, may have served as an advisor to Tutankhamun after his accession in 1333 BCE (Bunson, 2002, p. 19).

Akhenaten died in the eighteenth year of his reign, around 1335 BCE, and was buried at Amarna. However, following the closure of Tutankhamun’s tomb, his remains were reportedly relocated by priests and reinterred somewhere in Thebes. After the abandonment of the capital, later rulers such as Horemheb (r. 1319-1307 BCE) dismantled the limestone blocks of Amarna’s structures for reuse in other building projects. Approximately 12,000 blocks were collected by Horemheb for a monumental construction at Karnak (Bunson, 2002, p. 19). Following the widespread destruction at Amarna, these small and easily reusable blocks were removed from the dismantled walls of the sun temples and subsequently repurposed as fill or foundational material in later constructions, particularly during the Nineteenth Dynasty (Redford, 2005, p. 470).

Akhenaten's support base was limited, and the loyalty he inspired appears to have been relatively superficial. This contributed to the rapid collapse of his reform following his death. His devout disposition led him to avoid warfare even in the face of rebellion and external threats, resulting in a reluctance to employ military force. Akhenaten died at the age of thirty-six, and his reform ultimately failed, with the traditional order being swiftly restored (Okon, 2012, p. 421). At the same time, he has been described as a ruler largely inattentive to the practical needs of the empire (Bunson, 2002, p. 19). His religious objections to warfare have led some scholars to portray him as an idealist to the extent of allowing imperial territories to slip from Egyptian control. In contrast, after his death, Tutankhamun led Egyptian military campaigns into Asia (Weigall, 1913, p. 41). Following Akhenaten's death, a series of short-lived rulers ascended the throne and quickly reconciled with the Amun cult, relocating the capital back to Thebes. The new administration, which included Horemheb, reestablished the traditional religious system. In this way, the Aten reform came to an end, and the conventional belief system once again became dominant (Erman, 1907, p. 69). The signs of this restoration can be observed in the monumental temples dedicated to Amun that were constructed over the following decade. The state reconciled with Amun, restoring his privileges, while also supporting with renewed vigor the ancient deities of major cities-Ptah of Memphis, Ra-Horakhty of Heliopolis, and Osiris of Abydos (Erman, 1907, p. 70). Thus, an era came to a close. The political vacuum and the effort to dismantle Akhenaten's reform led to the revival of the old gods, and consequently, pre-Akhenaten religious practices-often characterized as traditional or even superstitious-along with the priestly system, gradually reemerged. At the same time, elements of Akhenaten's teachings and the ethical system constructed around Aten were, to some extent, absorbed into the cult of Amun-Re. Despite the failure of the reform, the traditional Egyptian religion later incorporated aspects of Atenism, giving rise to a form of religious syncretism (Okon, 2012, p. 421). The solar disk temples were dismantled, the older cults were reinstated, and Akhenaten himself was declared accursed (Redford, 2005, p. 60). Little remained of these temples apart from a few sandstone blocks that were reused in later constructions. An inscription reflecting this period records: "To provide sandstone for the construction of this temple, new quarries were opened at Silsila in the south. High officials of the court were appointed to supervise this work" (Devi, 1946, p. 47).

The failure of his doctrine-lacking continuity-to survive as an established religion is often regarded as one of the tragedies of history (Devi, 1946, p. 2). The religious dimension of

the reform is most clearly reflected in the elevation of Aten as the sole and supreme deity. The statement found in Akhenaten's hymns "one god, beside whom there is no other" constitutes a direct challenge to the traditional Egyptian pantheon (Eliade, 2013, p. 134). However, the fact that similar expressions had been applied to other deities prior to Akhenaten indicates that such monotheistic tendencies did not represent an entirely new theological rupture (Eliade, 2013, p. 134). Indeed, the existence of Aten as a known cult during the reigns of Thutmose IV and Amenhotep III (Weigall, 1911, p. 9) suggests that the reform developed less as a radical innovation and more as a reconfiguration of preexisting elements. This consideration may be regarded as an important factor limiting the extent to which the reform can be characterized as a fully developed religious revolution.

On the other hand, the political dimension of the reform can be observed in a far more concrete and systematic manner. The restriction of the economic and institutional power of the Amun priesthood emerged as one of the principal objectives of Akhenaten's policies. The control of temple properties, the limitation of priestly authority, and the relocation of the capital from Thebes to Amarna may all be interpreted as direct interventions aimed at reestablishing central authority and constructing a new sphere of power under royal control (İnan, 1987, pp. 180–232; Hornung, 2004, p. 108). In this respect, the reform represented not merely a theological transformation but also an attempt to restructure existing political and institutional relations. At the same time, the fact that Atenism remained largely confined to the king, the royal court, and the bureaucratic elite demonstrates that the reform failed to achieve broad social acceptance (Williamson, 2015, p. 12). As Eliade (2013, p. 134) likewise notes, adherence to this belief system was essentially restricted to the royal family and its immediate circle. This situation suggests that Atenism remained dependent upon the institutional and symbolic authority of the king rather than developing into an autonomous religious tradition. Akhenaten's positioning of himself as the sole intermediary between Aten and humanity further reinforced the personalization of religious authority and prevented the emergence of an independent institutional religious structure. Consequently, the rapid collapse of the reform following Akhenaten's death indicates that its continuity depended largely upon the preservation of royal political power rather than upon durable societal or theological foundations.

When considered in light of the available evidence, Akhenaten's reform cannot be adequately explained as either a purely religious revolution or merely a political strategy. Rather, it should be understood as a comprehensive project of transformation in which religious discourse and political objectives were closely interconnected. Although the reform

promoted a claim to theological innovation through the elevation of Aten as the supreme deity, it simultaneously functioned as a mechanism for strengthening central authority and limiting the influence of the traditional priesthood. In this respect, Akhenaten's initiative is best interpreted within the framework of a "hybrid" model in which religious and political dimensions operated in a mutually reinforcing manner. At the same time, while Akhenaten's rejection of the traditional gods and elevation of Aten suggest a monotheistic tendency, the sacralization of both the king and the royal family indicates that the reform also retained significant henotheistic elements.

One of the most significant aspects of Akhenaten's reform lies in the relationship it established between religion and political authority. Religious discourse appears to have functioned as an important instrument in the production of political legitimacy. In this context, the Aten reform may be regarded not merely as a transformation within the sphere of belief, but also as an ideological initiative aimed at redefining royal authority. It becomes evident that propaganda was not exclusive to the modern era; rather, it also operated in ancient societies through symbols, rituals, and sacred discourse. Akhenaten's new religious language centered on Aten can therefore be interpreted as an early mechanism for the production of political legitimacy. Discussions surrounding power and historiography further explain why Akhenaten has been interpreted in markedly different ways throughout history. While some scholars have portrayed him as the "first monotheistic reformer," others have viewed him as a ruler seeking to strengthen centralized authority, thereby revealing the ideological dimension of historical interpretation. Moreover, the processes related to the reconstruction of central authority during the New Kingdom are essential for understanding the historical context of Akhenaten's reform. In particular, the limitation of the economic and political influence of the Amun priesthood demonstrates that the reform produced not only theological but also institutional and administrative consequences. This perspective also offers an explanation for why Atenism failed to achieve lasting acceptance among broader segments of society. The fact that the reform largely functioned as a palace-centered project of power made it difficult for it to generate a profound and enduring religious transformation at the societal level. For this reason, although Akhenaten's Aten reform carried the rhetoric of religious transformation, it may ultimately be understood as an ideological and political restructuring initiative aimed primarily at centralizing royal authority.

In the final phase of Atenism, royal representation adopted a fully anthropomorphic form, although these depictions were not intended as naturalistic portraits but rather as

symbolic and conventional visual constructs. By abandoning the hybrid and zoomorphic features associated with the traditional Egyptian pantheon, Akhenaten promoted a conception of kingship centered on human-shaped divinity and presented himself as the radiant and divinely favored child of Aten (David, 2021, p. 58).

Results and Discussion

Among the rulers of ancient Egypt, from the Early Dynastic Period beginning around 3200 BCE to the Thirtieth Dynasty, Akhenaten has been regarded by scholars as an exceptionally unconventional pharaoh. It is well established that the religious system he sought to institutionalize had antecedents in earlier periods and, like other cults, was considered sacred. What distinguished his approach was the isolation of elements specific to the Aten cult from long-standing religious traditions and their reconfiguration into a system with monotheistic characteristics. In this sense, the movement known as Atenism is generally understood as a reform initiative. Nevertheless, Akhenaten's interventions in Egypt's long-established religious, political, and military order ultimately proved unsuccessful. During his reign, Akhenaten's efforts to transform the religious landscape-particularly by reshaping the Amun cult and other popular beliefs into a monotheistic framework-along with his attempts to dismantle the bureaucratic class led by the priesthood and his reluctance to engage in warfare due to religious convictions, are generally regarded as the principal factors limiting his success. The governing approach he adopted in order to implement these initiatives has been interpreted by some modern historians as an early form of totalitarian rule. In light of the available evidence, his reform remained at the level of a cult, failing to develop into an established religion and never extending beyond the boundaries of Egypt. Despite the fact that his reign has often been distorted or reinterpreted for political, social, artistic, and religious reasons, Akhenaten has nonetheless become one of the most widely recognized pharaohs in modern scholarship. Scholarly interpretations of his reforms vary considerably. Some historians argue that they were motivated by a desire to consolidate power by weakening traditional centers of authority within the state. Others interpret his religious innovations as a sincere attempt to introduce a new moral and spiritual dimension to Egyptian society. Meanwhile, scholars inclined toward monotheistic frameworks have tended to view him as a prophetic figure. Akhenaten's legacy continues to be a subject of enduring debate and fascination in the study of ancient Egypt.

Recommendations

A more comprehensive reassessment of the archaeological and epigraphic evidence from the Amarna period through interdisciplinary approaches would contribute to a clearer understanding of the scope and impact of the reforms. In particular, a comparative analysis of diplomatic correspondence -especially the Amarna Letters- and internal political arrangements is of considerable importance. In addition, the Aten belief system should be examined not only as a theological transformation but also as a process of economic and institutional restructuring. In this context, it is recommended that the relationships among the temple economy, the priesthood, and central authority be supported by both quantitative and qualitative data. Finally, expanding comparative studies that focus on the causes of the failure of Akhenaten's reform would enable broader insights into both ancient Egyptian religion and the general nature of religious reform movements. Such studies would also make significant contributions to theoretical discussions concerning the relationship between religion and politics in the ancient world.

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