

An Analysis of the Pharaoh Akhenaten's Religious and Philosophical Revolution

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## PREFACE

When conducting an anthropological study it is often useful to narrow one's focus and to concentrate on one particular aspect of a culture. In this sense, religion has frequently been used as an element of culture that functions as a reflection for that society on a larger scale. The acclaimed scholar of religion Ninian Smart states that the modern study of religion is most essentially about belief and that in the broadest sense religions are "the systems of belief which through symbols and actions, mobilize the feelings and wills of human beings."<sup>1</sup> Smart further states that the modern study of religion is essentially the examination of ways in which various peoples view the world. These outlooks can even be secular in nature since such philosophies are centered on belief. I strongly agree with Smart in that religion should be understood as an expansive and diverse category. Contemporary religious studies address religion as a facet of life and therefore employs many different fields, such as psychology, anthropology, and linguistics, in order to attempt to understand religious thought and its effects on the surrounding world.<sup>2</sup> Here I seek to take a largely sociological approach to religious study as it is the field in which I have received the most training and experience. I take my queues from theorists such as Emil Durkheim and Max Weber, who have asserted that by studying the form of religion that a society or its rulers espoused one is able to better understand that aspects of culture that the group in question holds to the greatest degree of importance.<sup>3</sup> The components that make up the theological base of a society's chosen religion often serve as symbols for the values and modes of action that are the most commendable within that culture. In addition, the unifying nature of a shared religious doctrine also acts as a means for greater societal cohesion. Throughout human

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<sup>1</sup> Ninian Smart. *Worldviews: Crosscultural Explorations of Human Beliefs*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1983. Pg. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Smart, pg. 3.

<sup>3</sup> *Eight Theories of Religion*. Ed. Daniel L. Pals. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006. Pgs 85, 149.

history religion has also been a driving force of cultural change. This principle is especially apparent within the case study that this thesis will address: the creation of a new spiritual philosophy by the pharaoh Akhenaten during ancient Egypt's 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty.

Akhenaten came to power as the pharaoh of Egypt in either the year 1353 or 1351 BCE and reigned for roughly seventeen years. He ascended to the throne under his birth name, Amenhotep IV, but in year five of his rule the king chose to change his name to one that better reflected his philosophical ideas for which he is now best known. Shortly after this first bold step Akhenaten initiated a series of unprecedented changes in the spheres of Egyptian religion, art, writing, and architecture. Each of these groundbreaking innovations was closely tied to the new natural philosophy that the king espoused and was intended to replace traditional Egyptian religion. Akhenaten centered his new philosophy on the minor sun god, the Aten, whose existence was first recorded during the 12<sup>th</sup> Dynasty (1991-1778 BCE). The Aten's origins are unknown and it has been surmised that it may have been a provincial god of one of the villages near Heliopolis.

As a result of the radical innovations that he enacted, Akhenaten's reign is often referred to as the Amarna revolution, named after the modern day town that exists on the site of the capital city that Akhenaten founded. Akhenaten's series of abrupt and enormous changes to Egyptian society led those who came after Akhenaten to brand him as a heretic. In fact, upon Akhenaten's death his presumed son, Tutankhaten, went on to restore Egyptian religion to its traditional form, move its capital back to Thebes, and change his own name to Tutankhamun as a reflection of his return to orthodoxy.

It is the aim of this thesis to understand the nature of Akhenaten's innovations within Egyptian religion, to characterize the specific belief structure of Atenism, and to recognize the pharaoh's motivation for enacting such upheaval.

## **BACKGROUND**

In order to understand the innovations that took place during Akhenaten's reign it is paramount to be familiar with the religious ideas that existed at the point that this so-called heretic ascended the throne of Egypt. Before Akhenaten came to power one of the most popular variations of Egyptian religion during the New Kingdom was what is known today as the "New Solar Theology."<sup>4</sup> This religious philosophy centered around the daily movement of the sun which ensured the continuance of the universe and all life. Every morning the sun god was believed to renew his creation of the cosmos and every night he was thought to travel into the underworld in order to bring the dead to life with his luminous light. The light of the sun god was the force that allowed life to exist and had to be recreated every night while triumphing over various foes and dangers. Naturally, the sun god always succeeded in defeating these evil forces and was believed to be the principle creator who had brought the other gods into being. According to this belief system the motion of the sun was thought of as a metaphor for the exercise of rule and justice and this theology therefore represented a deep trust in the invariable nature of the sun.<sup>5</sup>

The sun was worshipped under different names and as different deities, but was always mysterious and hidden in essence. The most popular form of the sun god was the deity, Amun,

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<sup>4</sup> Erik Hornung. *Akhenaten and the Religion of Light*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999. Pg. 19.

<sup>5</sup> Jan Assmann. *Moses the Egyptian*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997. Pg. 178.

whose name means “Hidden One.”<sup>6</sup> Amun assumed many forms throughout the history of his existence in the Egyptian pantheon including as a form of solar deity, in which form Amun was associated with the traditional sun god, Re, and was thus often referred to as Amun-Re. During the New Kingdom (c. 1550 BC–c. 1069 BC), Amun became the national god of Egypt and rose to such a degree of popularity among the royalty and public alike that Egyptian religion even neared becoming monotheism. Amun was even appointed as king of the other gods and according to Egyptian mythology he was believed to be completely unknown in form and in name.

The inaccessibility of the sun god, as embodied by Amun, can clearly be seen as a precursor to the abstraction that comes to so heavily characterize the Aten in Akhenaten’s religious innovations. A number of these principles are highly important in the conception and understanding of the changes that Akhenaten imposed on the religious sphere in order to transform it into a natural philosophy. The New Solar Theology can be viewed as a step towards the elevation of the solar deity or principle above all other aspects of Egyptian religion and philosophy.

In their study, *Tutankhamun’s Armies: Battle and Conquest during Ancient Egypt’s Late 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty*, Colleen Manassa and John Coleman Darnell assert that the Ogdoad theology is another important facet of Egyptian religion that served in some respect as inspiration for Atenism. The Ogdoad was a group of four female and four male deities who embodied four basic aspects of creation consisting of darkness, primordial waters, infinite space and hiddenness.<sup>7</sup> These gods were the first gendered pairs made from the oneness that existed at the

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<sup>6</sup> Hornung, *Religion of Light*, pg. 19-20.

<sup>7</sup> John Coleman Darnell and Colleen Manassa. *Tutankhamun’s Armies: Battle and Conquest during Ancient Egypt’s Late 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2007. Pg. 37.

beginning of time. The actual process of creation varies within a number of Egyptian texts, but each version of the story always includes the original division of the primordial oneness into the four deity pairs. The male members of the Ogdoad most often appear in human form except with the head of a frog, while the females possess serpent heads. The amphibian and reptile aspects of these deities' physical manifestations were used to symbolize the primordial waters from which the gods emerged during creation and then once again descended into. The Ogdoad was closely associated with the city of Hermopolis, which was believed to be the site of these deities' birth, but they were worshipped throughout the entire Egyptian kingdom. Sometime during the Middle Kingdom, the Ogdoad also became tightly linked with the sun deity Amun as they all became the official focuses of Theban religion. Later on, the Ogdoad found its cult center at Thebes on the site of Medinet Habu, which was thus known as the "Mound of the Mothers and the Fathers."<sup>8</sup> During the Amarna period, several of the members of the Ogdoad would find a place within various aspects of Akhenaten's religious and artistic innovations.

The religious and political circumstances that existed during the reign of Akhenaten's father, Amenhotep III, probably served as some sort of inspiration for Atenism. A number of scholars have put forth the idea that Amenhotep III made a number of important steps towards removing power from the influential and wealthy cult that existed around the deity Amun, whose basic characteristics have been addressed above. In order to do this Amenhotep III made an effort to stress the multiplicity of the deities in Egypt to prevent power from amassing around a singular god. In this sense Amenhotep III's tactics were counter to the hierarchical nature of the New Solar Theology in that they attempted to keep all deities on the same level of power and importance. Amenhotep III also took the rather bold step of deifying himself during his own

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<sup>8</sup> Darnell and Manassa, pg. 38.

lifetime, something that had never been done before in Egyptian history.<sup>9</sup> He even went so far as to have statues of himself as a god commissioned and worshipped while he was still alive. Most significantly, it was during Amenhotep III's reign that the Aten began to be thought of as being divine.<sup>10</sup> This is evidenced in the "Hymn of Suty and Hor," in which the Aten appears as an equal of Amun and a god rather than simply being thought of as the physical solar disc. In addition, a number of other deities who were often spoken of in the traditional sun hymns are pictured as facets of the Aten. In this hymn the Aten appears to be taking on many of the characteristics of Ra, one of the most important Egyptian gods.<sup>11</sup> Amenhotep III also chose to identify himself rather closely with the sun disc, preeminently with the sun god Re, and used the phrase "Nebmare is the Dazzling Sun Disc" to describe himself.<sup>12</sup> Amenhotep III would also often describe himself as being "the Dazzling Aten" and even possessed a royal barge called "the Aten is Dazzling."<sup>13</sup> A number of these ideas which Amenhotep III enforced during his reign would come to be even more greatly emphasized during the Amarna period.

It is next most important to understand the context in which Akhenaten's religious innovations took place and their relation to the changes that the pharaoh imposed within other spheres of Egyptian culture. The beginning years of Akhenaten's reign were relatively uneventful in relation to the revolution he was to enact in later years. Akhenaten first worshipped the sun god in its traditional form of Re-Harakhty, who was depicted as a man with a

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<sup>9</sup> *Pharaohs of the Sun: Akhenaten, Nefertiti, Tutankhamen*. Ed. Rita E. Freed, Yvonne J. Markowitz and Sue H. D'Auria. Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1999. Pg. 45.

<sup>10</sup> *Pharaohs of the Sun*, pg. 49.

<sup>11</sup> *Pharaohs of the Sun*, pg. 99.

<sup>12</sup> Donald B. Redford. "The Sun-disc in Akhenaten's Program: Its Worship and Antecedents I." *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt*. Vol. 13, (1976), pp. 47-61. American Research Center in Egypt. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40001118>>

<sup>13</sup> William J. Murnane. *Texts from the Amarna Period in Egypt*. Ed. Edmund S. Meltzer. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995. Pg. 20-21.

falcon's head.<sup>14</sup> The first steps towards religious transformation appear when Akhenaten granted his principle deity a new didactic name: "Re-Harakhty, who rejoices in the horizon in his name Shu, who is Aten."<sup>15</sup> During Akhenaten's third year on the throne the Aten's name was placed within cartouches, a step that demonstrated the Aten's connection with royalty. The Aten was at first worshipped in conjunction with the other traditional Egyptian gods and was therefore "unique but not exclusive."<sup>16</sup> In the fifth year of his reign the king officially changed his name from Amenhotep IV to the name he is much more commonly known, Akhenaten, and founded a new administrative capital of Egypt known as Akhetaten.<sup>17</sup> Today Akhetaten is called el-Amarna.

From this time onwards, the Aten was only depicted in the form of a solar disc with hands at the tips of his rays of light that were often shown extending the ankh symbol towards the pharaoh.<sup>18</sup> The Aten was in fact not conceived of as the sun disc itself, but as the actual light that it produced; by emphasizing the light, this focus asserts that the Aten is the life giving force of the world. It was at this time that the persecution of Amun and all deities associated with him was initiated. Following in his father's footsteps, Akhenaten appears to have attempted to more vigorously draw power away from the influential and wealthy religious cults that could have been perceived as a threat to the authority of the pharaoh. Images and hieroglyphs that depicted Amun were systematically hacked out and plastered over.<sup>19</sup> In addition, the king also attacked the idea of there being multiple gods and the hieroglyph for the plural word "gods" is never

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<sup>14</sup> Stephen Quirke. *The Cult of Ra: Sun-worship in Ancient Egypt*. London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 2001. Pg. 155.

<sup>15</sup> Hornung, *Religion of Light*, pg. 34.

<sup>16</sup> Hornung, *Religion of Light*, pg. 48.

<sup>17</sup> Quirke, pg. 157.

<sup>18</sup> Hornung. *Religion of Light*, pg. 34.

<sup>19</sup> Redford, "Sun-Disc," pg. 141.

attested after year five of Akhenaten's kingship.<sup>20</sup> However, not all of the gods were persecuted. For example, the primeval sun god Re, the creator god Atum, and, Thoth, the scribe of the gods with an ibis head were allowed to continue on in existence.<sup>21</sup> Further, the cult surrounding the Mnevis Bull was even allowed to be brought to the capital city Akhetaten.<sup>22</sup> Akhenaten must have been heavily influenced by the policies enacted by his father, because he too placed a great deal of emphasis on the divine nature of the pharaoh and even went so far as to say that he was the only one that could understand the ways of the Aten. In this one move, Akhenaten effectively eliminated the need for a clergy to center on the teachings that surrounded the Aten and placed all the power associated with the religious realm firmly within the control of the pharaoh.

Akhenaten's new approach to Egyptian religion also manifested itself in other facets of Egyptian culture, most notably in the artistic sphere. The artistic depictions of Akhenaten's first few works appeared in the traditional Theban style that had been employed by nearly every pharaoh preceding him. This can be accounted for by the fact that Akhenaten had not yet begun his campaign of religious reforms so early in his reign. However, as he began to implement his new philosophical ideas into the realm of religion, the style of royal art began to change in a way that reflected the message of Akhenaten's new religion.

The most striking change that came about early on was the alteration of the proportions of the human body, creating a shocking and hideous change in the appearance of the king and his followers. The head became much larger than in traditional art styles and was supported by an elongated and slender neck. The face had become tired-looking and wrinkled and possessed a receding forehead and too large jaw. The cheeks had been made hollow and were framed with

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<sup>20</sup> Redford, "Sun-Disc," pg. 176.

<sup>21</sup> Murnane, pg. 8.

<sup>22</sup> Murnane, pg. 13.

lush lips, a long nose, and squinting eyes.<sup>23</sup> The body itself took on a much more feminine appearance that resulted from the narrowing of the shoulders and waist and the relatively high placement of the scapulae of the back, therefore creating a shrunken and somewhat concave torso. In contrast, the lower body is much more voluptuous with swelling thighs and buttocks that are supplemented with a bulging belly. The calves and arms are extremely thin and add a womanly appearance to the figures, and the combination of these aspects of human form creates an almost unhealthy look.<sup>24</sup> These changes must have come as a shock to the Egyptian population, as their king had previously been the epitome of youthful and masculine health.

Akhenaten's new philosophy placed great emphasis on the importance of the king and because there could not be any true image of the ideology's principle force of life-giving light (how can one depict light?), the king became the only symbolic image for the divine.<sup>25</sup> The sun disc was merely a symbol for how the Aten could actually be viewed in reality. Therefore, images of the king and the royal family took enormous precedence within Amarna art. In tomb and temple art the traditional scenes depicting the sun god travelling through the netherworld or the king making offerings to funerary deities were replaced with images of the royal family offering only to the Aten.<sup>26</sup> Gone were images of the deceased participating in everyday life activities and were replaced by depictions of the royal family enjoying the bounty of the Aten.<sup>27</sup> The fact that the king and his family were shown in places of worship and took the place of former deities suggests that this was an attempt to illustrate the divine character that they had acquired within the Aten philosophy. In certain scenes, the royal family takes precedence even

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<sup>23</sup> Cyril Aldred. *Akhenaten and Nefertiti*. New York: Viking Press, Inc., 1973. Pg. 52.

<sup>24</sup> Gay Robins. "The Great Heresy." *The Art of Ancient Egypt*. London: British Museum Press, 1997. Pg. 150.

<sup>25</sup> Robins, *Representations*, pg. 153.

<sup>26</sup> Robins, *Representations*, pg. 151.

<sup>27</sup> Rita Freed. "Art in the Service of Religion and the State." *Pharaohs of the Sun: Akhenaten, Nefertiti, Tutankhamen*. Ed. Rita Free, Yvonne J. Markowitz and Sue H. D'Auria. Boston: Bulfinch Press, 1999. Pg. 115.

over the Aten. A scene in one of the rock tombs of Akhetaten depicts the royal family making a visit to the Aten temple, but portrays them so prominently that the temple itself is omitted.<sup>28</sup> In other scenes, the king takes the center of the image while the Aten hovers above him in a much less apparent manner. These images reflect the idea that the king may have instated his religious reforms in order to increase his own power and to wrest influence from affluent priesthods. The newly influential cult of Amun had gained a great deal of power and could have been viewed as a threat to the authority of the king, thus Akhenaten's desire to nullify Amun's power.

It therefore makes sense for Akhenaten to want to draw increased attention and power towards himself and away from all other cults and deities. This desire for a more powerful kingship is also apparent in the fact that so much attention was paid to the importance of loyalty to the king in the Aten philosophy. The king was proclaimed to be strongly influential in deciding whether or not one would be able to enter the netherworld after death. These concepts are also apparent in the art of the Amarna period, which often portrayed the king presenting worthy citizens with rewards for their good behavior. In the tomb of Meryra II the king is shown standing in his window of appearance and dropping rewards down to the tomb owner.<sup>29</sup> As these examples demonstrate, the art of the Amarna period was used to further convey the ideas about the king's divinity and the importance of loyalty to him that were a part of Akhenaten's religious and political agendas.

The artistic sphere was not the only one to be strongly influenced by Akhenaten's cultural revolution. One of the most radical changes that the pharaoh chose to enact was the construction of a new capital city in the Egyptian desert. In year five of Akhenaten's reign he contended that he "discovered" the place where his new royal city would be built. The king proclaimed that the

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<sup>28</sup> N. de G. Davies. *The Rock Tombs of El-Amarna II*. London: Egypt Exploration Society, 1905. Pg. 20.

<sup>29</sup> Davies II, pg. 36-37.

Aten had manifested itself for the very first time on the site of his new capital and that “the Aten vouchsafed this holy ground to the king alone.”<sup>30</sup> This place was probably chosen because the cliffs that frame the bay of the new city resemble the hieroglyphic symbol for the word ‘horizon’ (*akhet* in Egyptian). As a result, the capital city was granted the name Akhetaten, meaning “the horizon of the Aten.”<sup>31</sup> In order to quickly construct the new capital city, smaller more manageable building blocks, called *talatat*, were used. These blocks were made to be much easier for unskilled laborers to use as a great deal of the construction projects seem to have been completed by the Egyptian army.<sup>32</sup> The *talatat* blocks were yet another one of Akhenaten’s innovations as they had not been used in Egyptian construction projects prior to Akhenaten’s reign. The creation of these new building materials apparently paid off as the majority of the township and central administration buildings were completed roughly three years later.<sup>33</sup>

Akhenaten also enacted reform within the sphere of Egyptian language. Akhenaten was responsible for the elevation of the New Kingdom’s spoken language into a new written language. This new form of writing, which we now call Late Egyptian, was one of Akhenaten’s most successful and longest lasting reforms in that it spawned a robust field of literature written in the new style, which would continue even after the end of his reign.<sup>34</sup>

This was not to be the case with most other elements of the Amarna revolution. As time went on it seems that Akhenaten desired to expand his own power by having himself nearly deified in the natural philosophy of his own creation. However, Akhenaten’s new philosophy was not destined to last. Shortly after his own death, the old gods were restored to their former

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<sup>30</sup> Cyril Aldred. *Akhenaten: King of Egypt*. London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1988., pg. 268.

<sup>31</sup> Aldred, *King of Egypt*, pg. 269.

<sup>32</sup> Aldred, *King of Egypt*, pg. 273.

<sup>33</sup> Aldred, *King of Egypt*, pg. 273.

<sup>34</sup> Hornung, *Religion of Light*, pg. 38.

prominence and Akhenaten's reforms to Egyptian religion were completely undone. Perhaps the elimination of all of the familiar gods was too radical for the majority of the Egyptian populous. It seems that the major shortcoming of Akhenaten's philosophy was the fact that it was so closely linked with Akhenaten himself. By making himself effectively the closest thing to a god, he had not allowed for the continuation of his philosophy after his own death. Even though Akhenaten's ideology died with him, the changes that he implemented in art were longer lasting. A number of elements of the Amarna artistic style continued to be used during the reigns of later pharaohs including some of the new body proportions. As stated earlier, the new written language that Akhenaten implemented also continued for many years following the end of the Akhenaten's reign. It seems that Akhenaten may have achieved his most lasting legacy in two mediums that were not the primary target of his reform.

## **THE GREAT HYMN TO THE ATEN**

In order to understand the principles of Akhenaten's new religion, it is paramount to analyze the Great Hymn to the Aten, which was found intact in the tomb of Ay. Ay was the brother of Akhenaten's mother, Tiye, and was most likely Akhenaten's personal tutor as he grew up. The Great Hymn is presented as being the actual words of the pharaoh and as a result Akhenaten is often credited as being the sole author of the Hymn. However, there exists no archaeological evidence that can definitively prove if this is the case or not. Regardless of the person who composed it, the Great Hymn still provides valuable insight into the primary teachings of Atenism and outlines all of its main principles. Further the lyrical verses of the Hymn outline the differences between Akhenaten's philosophy and the predominant Egyptian religion that existed before his reign.

The very first few lines of the Great Hymn portray the sun as being a transitive-active life giver whose journey across the sky enforces justice.<sup>35</sup> This, at first, appears to be quite similar to the religion in place prior to Akhenaten's reign, the New Solar Theology, which was discussed previously, in that the sun is the primary force behind the existence of life on earth. However, in the New Solar Theology the existence of the world is a cyclical process in which "every moment life triumphs over the counteracting forces of death, dissolution and cessation."<sup>36</sup> In Akhenaten's conception, the Aten does not behave as a traditional Egyptian deity and exists somewhat removed from the life that it sustains. The Aten is treated as being an extremely abstract concept and it is not directly involved in the process of maintaining life on earth: "Though you are far, your rays are on earth. Though one sees you, your strides are unseen."<sup>37</sup>

In addition, according to the Great Hymn, the Aten does enforce justice and stability, but in the form of bending all life to the submission of the pharaoh. However, this is not to be understood in a politicized sense because in Akhenaten's conception of the world, the Aten does not see boundaries, and in fact the Aten presides "high over every land."<sup>38</sup> This is the first time that other lands are acknowledged as experiencing the benefits and care that once only Egyptians could receive from the divine. Akhenaten's depoliticization of human society is also mirrored in his elimination of the traditional cosmic foe that the sun once had to continually triumph over to ensure the continuation of life on earth. By removing the cosmic foe from his solar-based philosophy Akhenaten effectively eliminates politics from the religious realm and replaces it

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<sup>35</sup> M. Lichtheim. "The Hymn of the Aten." *Ancient Egyptian Literature*. Volume II. Berkeley: University of California Press. Pg. 96, 100.

<sup>36</sup> Assmann, *Moses*, pg. 177.

<sup>37</sup> Lichtheim, pg. 97.

<sup>38</sup> Lichtheim, pg. 96.

with a message of tolerance. There is no longer an evil force that endangers the sun, therefore transforming this philosophy into a monistic world-view.

The third stanza of the Great Hymn discusses the nature of the world during the nighttime. In this passage, the darkness of night is strongly equated with death and in this sense the absence of the Aten means the absence of life on earth. According to traditional solar theology the sun god would descend into the underworld at night in order to care for the deceased. This is in stark contrast with Akhenaten's vision of the night, in which the Aten is completely absent and the dead are completely overlooked. The Aten does not visit the realm of the dead, but instead it simply rests. Therefore, this stanza of the Great Hymn demonstrates that there is no conception of the netherworld in the traditional sense within Atenism. It is not clear from the Hymn if there exists an underworld at all and if it is a normal element of death. This segment of the Hymn also introduces the idea that the world is structured around what can be viewed with the human eye. At night when the citizens of the world are asleep they possess no cares or desires and "were they robbed of their goods, that from under their heads, people would not remark it."<sup>39</sup> In this example, Akhenaten is suggesting that because the eye does not see the event, it is not something that should worry the individual.

The fourth stanza discusses the events that occur once the Aten has arisen in the daytime. As the Aten once again bathes the earth with its rays, all of its creatures awaken and are filled with joy upon seeing their creator. With the reappearance of the Aten the world reawakens with happiness and therefore inextricably links life and the worship of the Aten. Simply being alive is to be seen as a form of adoration for the Aten. This section of the Hymn illustrates that worship of the Aten is not simply relegated to humans, but is a privilege that all living things share.

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<sup>39</sup> Lichtheim, pg. 97.

Indeed, beasts, birds, fish, trees, and herbs are all shown as flourishing under the care of the Aten.<sup>40</sup> This passage also demonstrates that understanding the world based solely on what is visible to the eye is not meant to be viewed as a constraint. The world is intended to be seen as something of utmost beauty as all the elements of the Aten's creation spring forth with an exuberant energy. Here nature is conceived of as being extraordinarily resplendent and life is to be viewed with absolute joy.

The next section of the Hymn addresses creation, but it once again takes a novel approach to a conventional topic. Traditional forms of Egyptian religion most often addressed the idea of primordial creation and how the first deities came into being. Akhenaten does not altogether ignore the aspect of creation as he does with ideas of the netherworld, but his new philosophy approaches creation from an angle that makes sense within its focus on the here and now. There is no longer interest in the original creation of life, which is not explained in these hymns, but instead the emphasis is now placed on embryology which celebrates creation in the present.<sup>41</sup> In the Great Hymn creation is first addressed in the form of human pregnancy and procreation. The Aten is credited with making human reproduction possible by creating the conditions for human sperm and egg to exist and for the two to come together as a fetus that will flourish in its mother's womb. Upon the child's birth, the Aten provides the child with breath and will "supply all of his needs."<sup>42</sup> The Hymn then takes a slightly different approach to creation in its next example; here Akhenaten's philosophy discusses a chick maturing within an egg, for whom the Aten provides the breath of life. When the time comes for the chick to emerge from its shell, it comes forth with the strength and joy that has come to be characteristic of the world that the

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<sup>40</sup> Lichtheim, pg. 97.

<sup>41</sup> Assmann, *Moses*, pg. 182.

<sup>42</sup> Lichtheim, pg. 98.

Aten presides over. Here creation is viewed as a triumph, which fits in well with the positive world view that the previous portions of the Hymn has thus far espoused.

In the following section of the Hymn, the intelligibility of the Aten is discussed further. The first two lines of this stanza perfectly summarize this concept within Atenism: “How many are your deeds, though hidden from sight.”<sup>43</sup> According to this stanza the Aten has done so much in the process of creating and perpetuating life on earth, but the ways that the Aten has gone about doing this is completely disguised from the world’s population. This section of the Hymn goes on to praise the diversity and the cosmopolitan nature of the world that the Aten presides over. The peoples of the world vary in language and skin color, but the Aten loves and cares for them all. Here, once again, the fact that the Aten does not only aid and protect humans is obvious. This stanza expounds upon the perfection that the Aten supplies to humans, birds, and beasts alike. All have been brought to life by the Aten and all of their needs are continually and lovingly supplied by the Aten.

The next segment of the Great Hymn continues along the same theme as the previous stanza. With the phrase “you made Hapy in *dat*, you bring him when you will,”<sup>44</sup> the Aten is praised for creating and enforcing the annual inundation of the Nile. In traditional Egyptian theology, Hapy was the deity associated with the flooding of the Nile that allowed for crops to grow and the Egyptian economy to function. The Hymn asserts that the Aten provides peoples of foreign lands with a similar form of sustenance to the Egyptian’s Hapy. The Aten is responsible for the creation of the rain clouds that will descend and shower upon the crop fields of the world and with this action the Aten supplies all humans with nourishment and care. The truly benevolent nature of the Aten stands out very clearly in this portion of the Great Hymn with

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<sup>43</sup> Lichtheim, pg. 98.

<sup>44</sup> Lichtheim, pg. 98.

its continued assertions about how the Aten provides for all of the needs of all of the world's peoples without any sort of discrimination.

The stanza that follows elaborates on the importance of the visual world. This portion of the Hymn focuses on beautiful aspects of the Aten's creation including the seasons, the sky, and rivers. The inclusion of these specific elements of nature illustrates the emphasis that Akhenaten seems to want to place on the beauty of the natural world, which is a result of the protection and devotion of the Aten. In this stanza it is made especially clear that Akhenaten's philosophy focuses on the here and now where "it is not just the visible, but the intelligible world that counts in reality."<sup>45</sup> This is in complete contrast to the previous Egyptian religions where there was an understood aspect of the divine in the unexplainable. The Aten is said to have made millions of forms, but there is no indication as to how the Aten has gone about doing this. Further, the visible world is believed to be a manifestation of the continuous self-transformation of the sun as evidenced in the line "all eyes observe you upon them."<sup>46</sup> The hymns convey that everything in the world is a manifestation of solar energy and that everything is therefore related to and maintained by the sun god.<sup>47</sup>

In the final stanza of the Great Hymn the king is mentioned as being the only one who truly understands the Aten and therefore the only source of stability within the Egyptian sphere. This is in sharp contrast to previous forms of religious belief in which all citizens were able to know their god, but only the king was allowed to specifically see the deities. Akhenaten further emphasizes his special relationship with the Aten by stating in the Hymn that the Aten has taught

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<sup>45</sup> Assmann. *Moses.*, pg. 179.

<sup>46</sup> Lichtheim, pg 98.

<sup>47</sup> Assmann,, *Moses* pg. 188.

the king its “ways” and its “mind.”<sup>48</sup> The idea that the absence of the Aten is the same as the absence of life is further discussed in this passage. According to this section of the Great Hymn, creatures only live when the Aten is in the daytime sky and once the Aten has set, they die. When the Aten sets, there can be no activity on earth. Here the Aten is also associated with the measure of time and is said to be a lifetime in itself. This provides yet another example of how Akhenaten’s philosophy deals only with the present. The Great Hymn then concludes with the assertion that the Aten awakens the world specifically for the king, who is the Aten’s son “who came from your [the Aten’s] body.”<sup>49</sup> By ending the Hymn in this manner Akhenaten has succeeded in drawing our attention to himself as the king in a conclusion that hints at the unchallenged power that he appears to have been amassing around himself.

### **THE SHORT HYMN TO THE ATEN**

Another, shorter, version of praise to the Aten appears in a number of tombs from Akhetaten. This hymn follows along the same structure as the Great Hymn and addresses similar themes, but is still useful for study in that there are far greater instances of its occurrence than the Great Hymn and because of the different examples that it contains. In three out of the five tombs in which the Short Hymn appears the words are said to have been recited by the king.<sup>50</sup> The opening section of the Short Hymn discusses the many things that the Aten has created and how it cares for all of them. The closing line of the first stanza asserts that the Aten is the “mother and father of all that you made,”<sup>51</sup> a principle of androgyny that Akhenaten applied to almost all representations of himself due to the fact that he was made to be like the Aten. The Short Hymn

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<sup>48</sup> Lichtheim, pg. 99.

<sup>49</sup> Lichtheim, pg. 99.

<sup>50</sup> Lichtheim, pg. 90.

<sup>51</sup> Lichtheim, pg. 90.

also emphasizes the importance of vision in understanding the world and the beauty of nature that can be observed in this manner. Once again, the absence of the Aten is equated with the absence of life and when the people of the world go to sleep they can no longer see and can therefore no longer interpret the world around them. The importance of equality between humans and all creatures alike in the teachings of the Aten is also further espoused in the Short Hymn. The Short Hymn is significant once it reaches its concluding stanza in which the actual ways in which the Aten is worshipped are discussed. As one would expect based on the mood of the two Hymns, the worship of the Aten is a truly joyous occasion. Singers and musicians are present and people “shout with joy”<sup>52</sup> while the king performs the actual offering ceremony to the Aten within the sun temple. This example demonstrates that the Aten was indeed ‘hidden’ to the common people as only the king could make offerings before the Aten within its temple. This sort of ceremony seems to create even more distance between the Egyptian population and the Aten, while bolstering the king’s position as the intermediary for the most important figure in his new philosophy. In this sense it is, in fact, the king himself who is the paramount figure on earth according to Atenism.

## **TWO HYMNS AND A PRAYER IN THE TOMB OF AY**

There are several examples of Amarna era prayers in addition to the Great Hymn to the Aten. Once again, the tomb of Ay proves to be especially useful in learning about the nature of Atenism as it contains two hymns addressed to the Aten and the king and one prayer addressed solely to Akhenaten himself. These three examples are particularly helpful in understanding the unique relationship that the pharaoh claimed to possess with the Aten.

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<sup>52</sup> Lichtheim, pg. 91.

The first hymn addressed to Akhenaten and the Aten occurs on the east wall of the tomb and begins in a manner reminiscent of the Great Hymn. This hymn begins by expounding the virtues of the Aten in the same joyful tone that dominates the Great Hymn. There is a pointed emphasis on the nature of time in association with the Aten, as the Aten is declared the “lord of eternity.”<sup>53</sup> Ay goes on to discuss how the Aten is responsible for the long life of the king stating that the Aten’s “hands hold millions of jubilees.”<sup>54</sup> This is most likely a reference to the traditional *heb-sed* festival, a ceremony that was supposed to occur every thirty years of a king’s reign in order to reestablish his right to rule. Akhenaten is once again notable for deviating from tradition by celebrating his first *heb-sed* during his third regnal year. By providing the king with many jubilees it is implied that the Aten will provide him with the care and vitality necessary in order to achieve a long life. This first hymn further elaborates on the ways in which the Aten goes about caring for the king. Ay asserts that the Aten “hearkens to the wish of his [Akhenaten’s] heart” and the Aten rises specifically to “grant him [Akhenaten] eternity.”<sup>55</sup> Akhenaten is able to enjoy this special relationship with the Aten because he is its son and has been made to be like the Aten.

The second hymn in the tomb of Ay occurs just below the first one and follows a similar structure and content. However, the second hymn is much more explicit in its praise and adoration of Akhenaten. The following lines from the second hymn demonstrate this very clearly: “*Neferkheperure, Sole-one-of-Re*, my god, who made me, who fosters my *ka*. Grant me to be sated with seeing you always.”<sup>56</sup> In this segment of the second hymn Ay declares that Akhenaten (*Neferkheperure* was one of Akhenaten’s throne names) is a god and is to be

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<sup>53</sup> Lichtheim, pg. 93.

<sup>54</sup> Lichtheim, pg. 93.

<sup>55</sup> Lichtheim, pg. 93.

<sup>56</sup> Lichtheim, pg. 94.

worshipped as such. According to Ay, in his role of a deity the pharaoh is responsible for sustaining Ay's *ka* or life force. This second hymn also asserts that the peoples of the world awaken in order to adore Akhenaten and to ensure his well-being.

The prayer that accompanies the previous two hymns in Ay's tomb is addressed solely to the king. This prayer deals with the positions and achievements that Ay had attained during his lifetime, all of which are deeply entwined with the king. Ay begins by stating that he has always maintained loyalty to the king and asserts that he has seen the king's "beauty" whenever he is in the royal palace. This language is reminiscent of the wording in the Great Hymn that is used in order to espouse the wonders of the Aten, therefore further equating Akhenaten with the principle figure in his philosophy. Ay further states that he has learned about the ways of the world from Akhenaten and espouses the king's teachings. It appears that Ay's efforts were appreciated by the pharaoh since Ay asserts that he was rewarded by the king with silver and gold. Such rewards from the pharaoh were commonplace during Akhenaten's reign as evidenced by the many tombs that contain images of the deceased receiving gifts from the king. During such occasions the king would stand in the 'Window of Appearances' in his palace and throw down various rewards, such as necklaces, to the attendants and followers who had particularly pleased him.

As these three inscriptions illustrate Akhenaten was portrayed as enjoying a truly unique relationship with the Aten. He was to serve as the intermediate between the Aten and his people and was in this sense the personal god to the ordinary Egyptian citizens. The language with which Ay describes the king makes it perfectly clear that the king himself is to be adored and revered by the population of Egypt in just the same way that Akhenaten worshipped the Aten. This is in rather sharp contrast to how the pharaoh was treated prior to Akhenaten's reign. In the

times preceding the Amarna revolution the office of kingship was the element that was to receive praise from the Egyptian citizens.<sup>57</sup> However, the inscriptions that appear in Ay's tomb illustrate that once Akhenaten has ascended to the throne it was the king himself that was to be adored. In addition, these inscriptions also demonstrate the conduct of adoration and loyalty that was expected from Akhenaten's attendants and associates. In these three instances it is made plain that one must remain loyal to the king in order to maintain the favor of the Aten, who is so closely linked to his son, the pharaoh.

## **ANALYSIS**

As the hymns to the Aten and the king demonstrate, there are considerable differences that existed between previous Egyptian religions and the new world view that Akhenaten imposed. The most striking change that is illustrated in these examples of worship is the nature of the Aten itself. If the Aten was intended to be the principle deity of Akhenaten's new philosophy, it is a rather hollow and inactive god. The Aten never speaks for itself in the hymns analyzed above; instead it is only ever spoken for by the king. In fact, there is no instance dating from the Amarna period in which the Aten actually talks at all. Further the Aten does not physically undertake any form of action and does not show any true compassion for the subjects of the earth it maintains.<sup>58</sup> We are only told by the king what the Aten supposedly believes or has done in the past. But there exists no true evidence that the Aten possesses thoughts and motives for itself as its actions are only ever given meaning through the voice of the pharaoh.

The Aten does not fit the traditional conception of what a god was and did in ancient Egypt prior to Akhenaten's reign. Egyptian religious and literary texts that preceded

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<sup>57</sup> Darnell and Manassa, pg. 42.

<sup>58</sup> Redford. "Sun-Disc," pg. 178.

Akhenaten's reign portray the gods as "possessing human characteristics: they thought; they spoke; they dined; they had emotions."<sup>59</sup> In this respect, the Aten is not equipped with the traits that had defined all other Egyptian gods up until the Amarna period and is therefore most likely meant to be understood as something other than a deity. In the hymns analyzed above the Aten does not demonstrate that it possesses anything more than the natural qualities of the sun. None of the inscriptions of worship to the Aten endow it with any sort of supernatural powers and everything that the Aten is credited with doing is nothing more than the perpetuation of life that modern science attributes to solar energy. It seems that the king made a conscious effort to distance the Aten from the population in what appears to be an attempt from preventing the people from forming some sort of personal attachment to the sun and thus making it into a deified figure. Atenism does not contain any sort of legends including interactions between the gods and humans as many of the previous Egyptian religions had.<sup>60</sup> In addition, the Aten was further distanced from the divine by stripping it of any of the usual relationships with other gods. The Aten had no consort and was not placed within a triad, both of which were common elements in the worship of the traditional Egyptian gods. The Aten may not have fit the time honored definition of what a god was understood to be in ancient Egypt, but I believe that it can be classed as an impersonal deity according to more modern standards. In *An Encyclopedia of Religion* Vergilius Ferm asserts that "a 'personal God' suggests one that can respond to prayer... Since a person is a conscious individual, an impersonal deity must lack either consciousness or individuality (or both)."<sup>61</sup> According to Ferm's definitions the Aten fits very neatly within the

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<sup>59</sup> David P. Silverman. "Divinity and Deities in Ancient Egypt." *Religion in Ancient Egypt: Gods, Myths, and Personal Practice*. Byron E. Shafer, Ed. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991. Pg. 15.

<sup>60</sup> Silverman, "Divinity and Deities," pg. 85.

<sup>61</sup> *An Encyclopedia of Religion*. Ed. Vergilius Ferm. NY: Philosophical Library, Inc., 1945. Pg. 302.

category of an impersonal god in that it is an object endowed with some sort of power to create and sustain life, but it is unable to directly interact with any of the beings for which it cares.

The Aten is credited with providing the creatures of the earth with all the sustenance necessary for their survival. This does not have to be understood in a supernatural sense, but rather as the fact that no life could exist without the light and warmth of the sun. This idea is common knowledge in the realm of natural science as once the sun dies, all life on earth will die with it. Further, the Aten is never credited with the creation of life or the earth, but rather it is only asserted that the Aten sustains the conditions that allow procreation to take place. The Aten seems only to be a name and symbol for the light of the sun. It is not a living, thinking entity but only the solar energy that allows life to exist on earth. Therefore Aten cannot be described as a god in the truest sense as it is nothing more than an abstraction. Even the Aten's full didactic name is an abstraction: "The living one, Sun Horus of the akht, who becomes aroused in the akht in his identity as the light that is the sun disc."<sup>62</sup> This name only describes the functions that the Aten fulfills and nothing more about its character. The Aten's name was eventually modified in a way that removed all connections between the sun disc and the divine: "The living one, Sun ruler of the akht, who becomes aroused in the akht in his identity as the light that comes in the sun disc." With this change to its name the Aten was further distanced from traditional conceptions of the gods. The Aten can therefore only be understood as a natural principle of light that presides over the environment, and not a deity.<sup>63</sup>

The message that lies behind Atenism appears to be that there exist no hidden meanings to life and that one should approach this being with joy and acceptance. The Great Hymn explicitly states that understanding this philosophy is only possible for the pharaoh, which

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<sup>62</sup> Allen, pg. 93.

<sup>63</sup> Murnane, pg. 14.

effectively illustrates that there is no meaning at all for the average citizen.<sup>64</sup> At first, this concept appears to be extremely negative, but upon further consideration of the examples put forth in the literature of Atenism allows one to understand the simple and blissful nature of Akhenaten's philosophy. By placing the entire burden of knowledge of the world on the pharaoh Akhenaten was in fact simplifying the world for his citizens and allowing them to view the nature around them with full acceptance and joy.

Further, all of the hymns and prayers that have been analyzed in this paper continually assert the importance of what can be viewed with the eye. This element of Atenism serves to illustrate that there is not a hidden force that controls life on earth and that there is only nature. In the past, Egyptian religions had been used as a means through which to explain the more complicated elements of nature through the creation of gods who controlled these forces. Natural occurrences, such as the annual inundation of the Nile, were personified into deities that made these processes much easier to understand for the average citizen. In sharp contrast, according to Akhenaten's philosophy the happenings of the world are no longer determined by gods, but by forces of nature such as the sun. Therefore everything that occurs on earth is explainable by what one can view in nature. Akhenaten attributed the organic processes of the seasons and the weather, including the Nile's inundation and seasonal rains, to the influence of the sun. Akhenaten's interpretation of the causes of these events is actually very accurate: it is the melting of snow due to the warmth of the sun in nearby mountains that causes the Nile to flood in the springtime. It therefore appears that a large part of the teachings of Atenism was meant to be a sort of philosophy to inform Egypt's citizens about the natural causes of the events that occurred around them and to eliminate their beliefs in the supernatural.

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<sup>64</sup> Assmann, pg. 189.

In addition to completely shifting the ways in which the world was meant to be viewed, Akhenaten's world view also provides a guide after which to model one's life. All of the literature dating from the Amarna period that discusses Atenism and its teachings are flush with a tone of joy and love for all facets of life and nature. The Great Hymn asserts that simply living is to exist in a state of ecstasy that results from the beauty and diversity that occurs in nature. During Akhenaten's reign, the importance of the visual world and the order of nature were also depicted in the period's art. Many scenes show the royal family offering the Aten floral bouquets and papyrus flowers are shown springing up from behind the royal throne.<sup>65</sup> The prominence that nature was allowed in Amarna art further reflects the beauty and bounty of the world that the Aten presides over.<sup>66</sup> According to the writings dating from Akhenaten's reign all groups, whether humans or animals, are to be treated as equal within nature and all of these life forms are proclaimed to be expressions of the bliss that exist as a result of the unbiased organic forces that control life on earth. The unprejudiced manner in which Akhenaten's conception of the world operates is clearly an outlook that Atenism intended to instill in the general population. Followers of Atenism were therefore intended to approach life with compassion and positivity.

Akhenaten's philosophy does not address how the world and the life that it supports came into being, but this concept is not important to the manner in which Akhenaten's followers were meant to live their lives. Instead the religion of the Aten was characterized by an interest in the continual rebirth of the earth over which the Aten presides. These ideas are mirrored in the praise that is allocated to procreation in the Great Hymn and by the prominence that female members of the royal family take in the art of the time. These women probably represented the regenerative forces of nature as reflected by the crown that was often worn by queen Nefertiti.

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<sup>65</sup> Geoffrey T. Martin. *The Royal Tomb at El-Amarna II*. London: The Egypt Exploration Society, 1989. pg. 19.

<sup>66</sup> Davies, pg. 17.

Her flat-topped crown closely resembled the manner in which women's hair was shown as bound up on top of their heads in birth-bower ostraca.<sup>67</sup> In addition, the royal princesses were often depicted with peculiarly egg-shaped heads. The egg was closely associated with the idea of rebirth and the Great Hymn of the Aten even contains a few lines that discuss a chick hatching from an egg and coming to life. The princesses' egg-shaped heads must have been intended to mirror this principle and to evoke the idea of recurrent rebirth.<sup>68</sup> Further, in a number of Egyptian texts the rising sun was associated with young children, who were thus thought to embody "the essence of creation."<sup>69</sup> This idea may explain why the royal princesses were accorded such a prominent place in the art of the Amarna period. Nature and its forces, including procreation, were perfect in their beauty and were to be revered and worshipped.

Life was to be approached with enthusiasm and joy and every moment was meant to be savored. The importance of the present is evidenced in art dating from Akhenaten's reign in which prevalence of movement in a number of scenes further emphasize the attention that Akhenaten placed on the here and now and the visual in his new philosophy. For instance, the tomb of Panhesy contains a scene that shows that royal family driving out in their chariots with their horses being depicted in mid stride and the ribbons of their crowns gusting in the breeze.<sup>70</sup> According to Akhenaten's belief system, observers of such a scene should allow themselves to be awed by the beauty and the temporality of the present moment, which led Amarna artists to capture and emphasize every small detail in their art. Further the omission of the existence of the netherworld serves as another reminder that one should concentrate on enjoying the life that one has at the present. This principle leads one to wonder why the citizens of Akhetaten continued to

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<sup>67</sup> Arnold, pg. 107.

<sup>68</sup> Arnold, pg. 56.

<sup>69</sup> Arnold, pg. 108.

<sup>70</sup> Davies II, pg. 17.

use tombs to enshrine their dead if there was indeed no afterlife. I believe that the most likely answer is that changing this element of Egyptian life would have been too much of a shock to the average Egyptian, perhaps even to the king himself. According to Atenism there is no guarantee that there is any form of existence following death therefore placing further emphasis on savoring the present joys of life on earth.

According to Atenism the 'how' and 'why' of creation were not important in cultivating a meaningful life. These were simply elements of life that existed and could not be explained at the time, but they were almost certainly unimportant to the average citizen. Akhenaten espoused the idea that there was no one grand meaning to life, but instead there existed simple pleasures that were to be appreciated and enjoyed in order to endow one's life with meaning. In this sense it was the love that existed between friends and family members that was the most important facet to leading a fulfilling life. This principle is blatantly evident within the artwork from the Amarna period, as for the first time in Egyptian history the pharaoh is portrayed in loving and natural situations with his family. The royal family is often shown interacting in a very intimate manner, with Akhenaten and Nefertiti kissing and caressing one another and their children. The Amarna artists would often use the long, elegant hands of the people they had represented in order to instill the pictures with great emotion.<sup>71</sup> The scenes that portrayed the royal family mourning the death of princess Meketaten demonstrate the intimacy and powerful moods of familial love that were prevalent in the art of the time.<sup>72</sup> These scenes show the grieving family members pressing their hands to their foreheads in a gesture of mourning while various attendants stand behind them flailing and falling to the floor with sadness. In one of the images,

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<sup>71</sup> Aldred, pg. 79.

<sup>72</sup> Geoffrey T. Martin. *The Royal Tomb at El-Amarna I*. London: The Egypt Exploration Society, 1974. Pg. 99-103.

Akhenaten reaches behind for Nefertiti's arm in an attempt to comfort her.<sup>73</sup> Such scenes emphasize the importance of the present and the love that the Aten's existence is intended to foster in its subjects. These scenes clearly demonstrate that the most important element of life was the intimacy and devotion that existed between friends and family members and that these moments of affection should be cherished. The teachings of Atenism seem to suggest that there is no grander aspect to life than love and that it is the only element of existence that instills life with meaning.

According to Akhenaten's world view the population of Egypt was also meant to understand their relationship to their pharaoh. The hymns and art dating from the Amarna period greatly emphasized the prevalence of the king within Atenism and his clear dominance over all forces of nature. According to the Great Hymn Akhenaten was the only one who could understand the workings of the Aten as the penultimate element of nature and was thus the only person on earth for whom there could be some sort of grander meaning to life. According to Akhenaten's worldview, the order of society could only be maintained if the population remained loyal to the pharaoh. In this sense, all citizens were meant to behave in a manner that would please the pharaoh, as noted previously in the shorter hymns in which a set of behaviors for the king's followers are clearly espoused as being favorable within Atenism. Akhenaten further emphasizes his unique position above the remainder of the world's population by proclaiming himself the son of the Aten. With this assertion Akhenaten was not saying that he was the child of a god, but simply that he was created by the most important life force, the Aten. He was the person on earth that was most like the Aten in that his unique position forced him to be the source of protection and care for his citizens. Akhenaten's close relationship with the

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<sup>73</sup> Freed, pg. 121.

Aten and his position as guide and guardian to his people are demonstrated in the artistic depictions of the king. The Aten was believed to be the “mother and father of his creation”<sup>74</sup> and in an attempt to emulate the subject of his new religion, Akhenaten may have chosen to have himself depicted in an androgynous manner to evoke this principle of the Aten. By being portrayed in such a sexually ambiguous fashion, Akhenaten emphasized his connection with the Aten and suggested that he too possessed both male and female creative elements. It is unclear if Akhenaten wanted himself to be viewed as possessing some divine quality like his father, the Aten, as he made no explicit statements on the matter. I believe that Akhenaten may have wanted to put forth the suggestion that he was in some way divine and to leave it up to the people how they interpreted this allusion for themselves. In this way he could have appealed to those who wanted the king to follow precedent where the pharaoh was understood to have divine qualities but was not himself a god, but he could also allow himself to be viewed as the most powerful being on earth according to his religion. Of course, it is possible that the king did not know exactly how he wanted to be viewed or what he truly believed since he was after all only human.

In addition, Akhenaten’s new philosophy placed great emphasis on the bounty of the earth that the Aten presides over. This principle is mirrored in the king’s new appearance, one that suggests that he could be looked on as a fecundity figure. In Egyptian philosophy the concept of abundance was associated with the fecundity figure, Hapy, to whom Akhenaten’s fleshy form bears a striking resemblance. This idea is supported by the fact that neither Akhenaten nor Egyptian fecundity figures display any visible genitalia beneath their snug kilts

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<sup>74</sup> Robins, Representations. Pg. 37.

and that both possess drooping paunches that may cover their genitals.<sup>75</sup> Further, Akhenaten may have wanted his form to be purposefully unrealistic in order to differentiate himself and his philosophy from those that had come before him and to express that his was to be a completely different sort of kingship.<sup>76</sup> He must have wanted to emphasize his special position within his religious philosophy as being the only one who could truly understand the Aten and the fact that he was its son. Therefore, Akhenaten intended for his unique position to be “expressed through a transfiguration of human forms.”<sup>77</sup>

A particular relief in the tomb of Meryra II, the superintendent to queen Nefertiti, is helpful in that it provides a sort of visual summary of the basic tenants of Atenism. This scene depicts the king relaxing in a light pavilion while the queen pours a drink into his cup and the little princesses perform various activities to please their father.<sup>78</sup> The youngest of the three princesses, Ankhesenpaaten, is shown collecting flowers for her father, who already holds a number in his hand. Meketaten is shown behind her mother holding the cap of ointment, which she no doubt plans to present to the king. The eldest, Meritaten stands dutifully by her father’s knee and seems to be holding some other gift, which is now too damaged to decipher. The many pleasures that are bestowed on the king while he relaxes in the light of the sun are meant to demonstrate the abundance of the Aten’s earth. Also, the fact that the king is being served so faithfully by his family members emphasizes the important position that the pharaoh is allotted in the new religious philosophy. In addition, the care that is depicted between the members of the royal family is demonstrative of the benevolent manner in which the Aten’s religion is presented

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<sup>75</sup> Robins, *Representations*, pg. 150.

<sup>76</sup> Dorothea Arnold. *Images of Beauty from Ancient Egypt*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1997. Pg. 19.

<sup>77</sup> Arnold, pg 17.

<sup>78</sup> Davies, pg. 34-35. Plate XXXII.

in the Great Hymn of the Aten and also evokes a mood that illustrates the joy of the here and now. The sun pavilion in which the family is shown is decorated by various flowers and vines that celebrate the beauty of the Aten's creation and the order of nature. As this relatively simple scene shows, the art of the Amarna period was rife with religious and political meaning that allows the modern viewer a greater insight into the teachings of Akhenaten's conception of religion.

Akhenaten's system of beliefs about life and the world defied the past Egyptian religions in that it eliminated the need for a god and it therefore appears that Akhenaten was creating an essentially naturalistic philosophy, but that is not to say that it should not be understood as some form of religion. The Aten was not meant to be understood as a traditional Egyptian deity and is better understood as an impersonal deity or a natural life force. In this sense, the Aten was not intended to replace the old Egyptian gods in their religious roles, but in their functions as explanations for the patterns and happenings of nature.<sup>79</sup> Akhenaten thus appears to have been the first person in history to 'discover' natural science, a concept that he integrated into his new form of religion. In his conception of the world, the pharaoh did not need the forces of nature to be personified into the form of gods in order to understand the roles that they play in sustaining life on earth. I believe that although Atenism is very strongly based in nature it is still a form of religion because it does contain moral teachings. Akhenaten's innovations can therefore be understood as a non-theistic religion, since it appears that the supernatural did not play a part in his understanding of the world. This is not to say that the king had rejected all forms of spirituality in his new philosophy. On the contrary, Atenism provides a rather positive and rich approach to life and morality despite the fact that it does not provide the people with a deity to

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<sup>79</sup> James P. Allen. "The Natural Philosophy of Akhenaten." *Religion and Philosophy in Ancient Egypt*. Yale Egyptological Studies 3. New Haven, CT. 1989. Pg. 91.

understand these teachings through. In this sense, Atenism can be most closely related to modern day religions such as Buddhism and Jainism, both of which offers adherents a guide for how to live a good and successful life, but does not impose the notion of a personal god onto its believers. Throughout the remainder of this paper I shall alternate between the terms ‘religion,’ ‘philosophy,’ and ‘world view’ when discussing Atenism because I believe that each one serves to convey the strong belief that is associated with Akhenaten’s teachings.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW: MONTHEISM**

The nature of Akhenaten’s religion has been hotly contested ever since the heretic king came to be rediscovered by modern society. Various scholars have drawn different conclusions that classify Atenism as monotheism, henotheism, atheism and almost everything in between. Easily the most popular of these interpretations is that Akhenaten had created the first monotheistic religion in human history. I believe that these explanations of Atenism are too simplistic and tend to overlook many of the important clues as to how this philosophy should be viewed. Many of the proponents of Atenism as monotheism appear to be swayed by more modern conceptions of religion as containing the worship of a single god and do not seem to take into account the fact that the ancient Egyptians perceived religion and its function as being completely differently than we do today. I believe that many of these people are largely influenced by their own personal beliefs and therefore draw conclusions about Akhenaten’s religion that are not entirely supported by the evidence. In his article “Akhenaten – Monotheist? Polytheist?” Rolf Krauss takes a similar stance:

European and North American scholars were prejudiced. They lived and thought within a monotheistic cultural and religious framework, and they seem to have been eager to

recognize the basic monotheistic idea of their Judeo-Christian heritage in Akhenaten's sun cult.<sup>80</sup>

When studying a foreign culture and the distant past it is crucial that one does not impose one's own ideas onto that society and that one views the group through its own lens, and does not examine that culture in terms of any other. This is not to say that the proponents of the monotheism argument should be criticized for their stance. In fact, when one performs a cursory examination of the Amarna period it can appear that Atenism was intended to be monotheistic in nature. The prominence afforded to the Aten in the artwork and textual records is indeed initially misleading, it is only upon close analysis of the hymns and prayers of the time that one comes to view Atenism as other than monotheistic. Without reading this type of literature, especially the Great Hymn, the truly abstract and empty nature of the Aten would not become apparent. It was only after reading the Great Hymn that I began to question the Aten's classification as a personalistic god since it never does, says, or feels anything on its own.

Some scholars, including Jan Assmann, have argued that Akhenaten's religion should be understood as monotheism because even the hieroglyph for the plural word 'gods' was attacked and defaced by Akhenaten's followers. However, those that espouse this particular argument are overlooking the fact that this bit of evidence does not necessarily point to monotheism, but can be interpreted as being a denial of the existence of any god at all and not just of the deities that are not the Aten. Therefore Akhenaten's persecution of the traditional gods cannot be viewed simply as being a declaration of his monotheism and can be understood as a disbelief in the divine in general and an attempt to draw power and resources away from false religious cults. In addition, in his book, *Texts from the Amarna Period in Egypt*, William J. Murnane asserts that

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<sup>80</sup> Krauss, pg. 99-100.

Atenism must be monotheistic in nature due to the fact that the Aten is referred to as a god (*ntr* in Egyptian) in contemporary literature.<sup>81</sup> The word *ntr* is indeed used in the Great Hymn in a line that is usually translated as “O sole god, beside whom there is none.”<sup>82</sup> I disagree with this translation because it does not allow for any sort of intermediary stage between the human and the divine. When the rest of the evidence is viewed along with this single line it seems to imply that the Aten was meant to be seen as something similar to a god in that its presence allowed for the sustainability of life on earth, but that it should not be conceived of in the same way that the past Egyptian deities were. The rest of the Great Hymn and contemporary texts imply that the Aten was intended to be a sort of abstraction and that it did not possess the humanized characteristics of the traditional gods. Therefore I believe that in reference to the Aten, the word *ntr* should be more accurately translated as ‘life force’ because the Aten allowed for life on earth to exist, but it did not do so of its own will. The Aten was simply a collection of solar energy and not a living, thinking entity as the gods of ancient Egypt and the modern world are.

Some scholars have even gone so far as to claim that Akhenaten was the Moses of Christianity and Judaism. For instance, Arthur Weigall argued for the connection between Egyptian and Biblical monotheism and between Akhenaten and Moses.<sup>83</sup> Even the famed Egyptologist James Henry Breasted espoused the idea that Akhenaten’s religious innovations had laid the groundwork for the interpretation of Biblical monotheism.<sup>84</sup> Many proponents of this argument point to Moses’ name as proof that he was indeed an Egyptian, as it is remarkably similar to the Egyptian word for child, ‘mose.’<sup>85</sup> The name Mose was also often used as a short

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<sup>81</sup> Murnane, pg. 14-15.

<sup>82</sup> Lichtheim, pg. 98.

<sup>83</sup> Assmann, *Moses*, pg. 23.

<sup>84</sup> Assmann, *Moses*, pg. 23.

<sup>85</sup> Assmann, *Moses*, pg. 150.

form for popular Egyptian names, including Thutmose and Ramose. From here, these proponents assert that if the Biblical Moses was indeed an Egyptian it would make sense that he would be an Atenist, as Atenism is certainly the Egyptian form of religion that is closest to Christianity. So if Moses was an Egyptian and an Atenist, is it possible that he was actually Akhenaten? I believe that the answer to this question is almost certainly no.

The links that have been drawn between Akhenaten and Moses in this line of thought are tenuous at best and take far too much information for granted. The events of Akhenaten's life are fairly well recorded and it is almost certain based on textual records that Akhenaten did not leave his capital city after its founding and that he eventually dies there. If this is the case, he could not have possibly led a slave revolt out of Egypt as Moses is said to have done in the Bible. There is also no recorded evidence that demonstrates that there were groups of Jews living in Egypt during Akhenaten's reign. Further, the principles of Atenism and Judaism are vastly different, with the former being a natural philosophy and negates the need for a god and the latter being a classic case of monotheism. It is possible that Akhenaten's religious revolution provided the inspiration for the founders of Judaism, but at this point there is absolutely no evidence that indicates that the any of these people are Akhenaten himself.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW: HENOTHEISM**

A second large group of scholars have espoused the argument that Akhenaten was a henotheist. Henotheism is the term used to refer to a religion consisting in the belief and worship of a single god, while simultaneously accepting the existence of other deities. For instance, in his article "Akhenaten: Monotheist? Polytheist?" Rolf Krauss argues that Akhenaten only

persecuted the gods associated with the powerful cult of Amun.<sup>86</sup> For example, a scene depicting Amun and Ptah in the memorial temple of Amenhotep III was only defaced so that Amun was no longer visible.<sup>87</sup> Krauss further states that there is little evidence to suggest that the gods Ptah and Osiris were persecuted outside of Thebes, the traditional cult city of Amun.<sup>88</sup> Such instances are sometimes taken as evidence that Akhenaten only intended to mount a wholesale attack on the cult places of Amun and those gods associated with him. This does not seem particularly likely since Akhenaten later changed the Aten's didactic name so that it no longer included the mention of any god.<sup>89</sup> In addition, as Akhenaten's reign progressed the Egyptian concept of *maat*, generally understood as universal order, was no longer written with the hieroglyphic determinative for 'god.' *Maat* was no longer intended to be understood as a god herself, but had instead had transformed simply into a concept.<sup>90</sup> Further, Osiris may not have been persecuted, but he was completely ignored in the literature dating from the Amarna period.<sup>91</sup> There is no mention of Osiris or the realm of the dead, over which he traditionally presided. Even the elaborate rituals surrounding and preparations of the dead were altogether ignored in Akhenaten's philosophy. There was no place in Atenism for the deceased to live on after death as they had been thought to do for so long before Akhenaten's reign. Instead what happened to one after death was completely unspecified within Amarna religion.

These examples suggest that Akhenaten may have originally tolerated and believed in the existence of gods, but as his reign progressed he turned exclusively towards his natural philosophy as the only explanation for the happenings of the universe. His persecution of the

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<sup>86</sup> Rolf Krauss. "Akhenaten: Monotheist? Polytheist?" *Bulletin of the Australian Centre for Egyptology*. Volume 11. 2000. Pg. 93-101.

<sup>87</sup> Krauss, pg. 95-96.

<sup>88</sup> Krauss, pg. 95-96.

<sup>89</sup> Quirke, pg. 161.

<sup>90</sup> *Pharaohs of the Sun*, pg. 102.

<sup>91</sup> *Pharaohs of the Sun*, pg. 105.

gods must have begun with Amun as a means of taking away power from this influential organization that threatened his own power and then eventually extended such persecution to all other deities. These instances where Amun is replaced by another god must have therefore taken place during the early years of Akhenaten's kingship when only the hated Amun was to be attacked. The fact that certain gods were only attacked in Thebes can also be accounted for by the fact that the ordered persecution against the traditional gods was carried out in a seemingly haphazard manner, with those assigned to the task often being unable to read what they were commissioned to destroy.<sup>92</sup>

Several other scholars have pointed towards this apparently aimless pattern of persecution as proof that Akhenaten should be regarded as a henotheist. For example, the editors of the book *Pharaohs of the Sun* point to Akhenaten's usage of familiar forms such as Shu and Tefnut in the artistic depictions of the Amarna period as proof that the king not only tolerated, but even acknowledged and associated himself with deities other than the Aten.<sup>93</sup> According to traditional Egyptian religion Shu and Tefnut were two of the primordial deities with the former being associated with the wind and the latter being associated with moisture. It is true that many artistic depictions of Akhenaten possess many of the same characteristics that were typical of Shu including the double-crown and the ostrich feather. However, I believe that this is an example of Akhenaten appropriating familiar symbols in order to emphasize a certain aspect of his philosophy. Shu was the first son of the creator god, Atum, and was also associated with light, both things that Akhenaten claimed for himself within the realm of Atenism. The idea that Akhenaten did not intend to have Shu or any other deity remain within his teachings forever is further reinforced by the fact that all associations between the Aten and Shu within the Aten's

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<sup>92</sup> Hornung, *Religion of Light*, pg. 88.

<sup>93</sup> *Pharaohs of the Sun*, pg. 46.

didactic name were eventually eliminated, as stated above. Perhaps Akhenaten simply attempted to use models and elements that were already endowed with certain connotations in order to more effectively impress the Egyptian population with the teachings of his philosophy.

There appear to be other deities that were originally used to exemplify some familiar, past meaning in Akhenaten's new philosophy. For instance, a few traditional deities appear to have been spared from Akhenaten's divine persecution including the primeval sun god Re, the creator god Atum, and Thoth, the scribe to the gods with the head of an ibis.<sup>94</sup> These gods may simply have been overlooked by the gangs of illiterate soldiers that Akhenaten assigned to deface the images of the other gods. However, I believe that these deities may have been spared due to the elements of the world that they were associated with. The Aten was a deity that had not been well known or revered until Akhenaten's reign and therefore its characteristics were probably unfamiliar to the Egyptian public. At the same time Akhenaten was reinterpreting the role and aspects of the central figure of religious thought and could almost certainly have used some familiar models to convey his new message. Re could have been a useful figure for Akhenaten to connect the Aten to since Re was one of the oldest and most popular manifestations of the sun god in Egyptian religion. As a historically less important and less popular deity, the Aten would almost certainly benefit from being likened to a prominent and beloved solar god such as Re. Further, Atum could have been used as a means of more easily conveying the Aten's role as the force that is said to have created the earth. In addition to being imagined as the scribe to the rest of the deities, Thoth was also associated closely with the moon.<sup>95</sup> In this respect, Thoth could have served as a complement to the Aten as the depiction of the celestial body that loomed over the earth during the nighttime. Wadjet was yet another god that does not appear to have been

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<sup>94</sup> Munane, pg. 8.

<sup>95</sup> Silverman, *Religion in Ancient Egypt*, pg. 37.

persecuted. Wadjet was a serpent goddess, who was believed to be the patron deity of royalty and was used as a symbol, called the uraeus, to demarcate royalty. Akhenaten even allowed the serpent to retain its position at the top of the solar disk as a way to emphasize the Aten's royal status.<sup>96</sup> It thus seems likely that Wadjet was allowed to go unmarred on monuments because of her associations with royalty and the Aten. I therefore believe that these deities may have originally been tolerated in order to better transport the message of Atenism to the Egyptian population and to put this philosophy into more familiar terms so that it was easier for the public to digest.

The influence of the deity Hapy is also apparent during the early years of the Amarna period. As stated earlier in this thesis, Hapy served as the personification of the annual inundation of the Nile and was thus also worshipped as a god of fecundity and plenty. Hapy is mentioned in the Great Hymn to the Aten and there are several depictions of the king that borrow heavily from earlier representations of Hapy. For instance, a colossal statue of the king from Karnak serves as an example that illustrates Hapy's influence on a number of pieces of Amarna art.<sup>97</sup> This statue is the absolute embodiment of the new proportions that characterized the human body during the reign of Akhenaten. The face and body are extremely androgynous with broad, fleshy hips and buttocks, which has led a number of scholars to question whether the figure depicted is actually that of Nefertiti. However, this idea appears to be mistaken as the colossus seems to depict the king in his role as a sort of fecundity figure. The figure is naked and possesses no genitals, which is very much in line with depictions of fecundity figures like Hapy. In Amarna art women were shown with an obvious pubic triangle and the fact that this

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<sup>96</sup> George Hart. *The Routledge Dictionary of Egyptian Gods and Goddesses: Second Edition*. New York, New York: Routledge, 2006. Pg. 161.

<sup>97</sup> Freed, pg. 21. Figure 5.

figure's pubic region is completely smooth leads one to believe that the figure was not intended to be a female.<sup>98</sup> Instead, this statue was meant to show Akhenaten in close connection with the Hapy and as a reflection of the abundance of nature.

As this example demonstrates, Hapy certainly played a role during the early Amarna period in conveying the king's androgynous position as mother and father of mankind and as the embodiment of the bounty that the Aten provides. However, these androgynous and extreme portrayals of the king became less and less popular as Akhenaten's reign wore on. The features of the king and the royal family gradually became less stylized and more normalized in appearance, suggesting that perhaps Hapy had served his purpose in helping Akhenaten to more easily convey his message to the public and was subsequently cast aside with the other traditional deities.

Another popular argument is that Akhenaten elevated his place to that of the divine and therefore this promotion of the king along with the divinity of the Aten are the aspects that effectively constitute Atenism as henotheistic. For instance, the hymns of devotion that appear in the tombs at Akhetaten describe the king in such a tone of admiration that certain scholars have asserted that it was Akhenaten himself and no longer of the office of pharaoh that was worthy of worship according to Atenism.<sup>99</sup> Other scholars who espouse this argument point to the fact that during his reign Akhenaten began using the phrase *ankh n maat* (living on *maat*) to refer to himself, a phrase that was traditionally only reserved for deities.<sup>100</sup> I believe that this was yet another example of Akhenaten denying the existence of any god. By using this phrase to

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<sup>98</sup> Robins, Representations, pg. 38.

<sup>99</sup> Darnell and Manassa, pg. 41-42.

<sup>100</sup> David P. Silverman, Josef W. Wegner, Jennifer Houser Wegner. Akhenaten and Tutankhamun: Revolution and Restoration. Philadelphia, PA: the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, 2006. Pg. 31.

describe himself, Akhenaten was demonstrating that there was no such thing as the divine and that elements that had once been used only for the gods could apply to humans in a world that espoused his natural philosophy.

Historically the pharaoh had always been believed to possess an element of divinity and was routinely deified after death. However, as stated previously, Akhenaten's father, Amenhotep III, boldly had himself declared a god while he was still alive. Perhaps Akhenaten was influenced by his father's attempt to amass even more power around himself, but Akhenaten never had himself formally declared as a god. I therefore do not think that Akhenaten ever intended to have himself be understood to be as a deity and I am quite confident that had he wanted to be perceived in such a manner he simply would have proclaimed it so like his father did. Akhenaten was obviously not one for subtlety, so I highly doubt he would have had any qualms about declaring himself a god if he had wanted to do so.

It is true that the vast majority of Amarna art was centered on depictions of the king and the royal family. These scenes were used in the tombs and private homes of the citizens of Akhetaten, which has led some scholars to believe that that the king intended for himself to be worshipped as a god as his image now filled the places where the traditional Egyptian deities would have been seen in the past. I believe that the prevalence of the king within the art of the Amarna period can be viewed as images that depict the ways in which the average person should conduct their lives according to the principles of Atenism. The art that portrayed the royal family was unlike any that had come before Akhenaten's reign in that it depicted the pharaoh and his queen interacting lovingly with one another and their children in a realistic manner. The royal couple were shown holding hands, kissing, and sitting on one another's laps while as parents they were depicted playing with and cuddling their children. These portrayals

demonstrate that one should strive to live a life that is full of love and joy and surrounded by nature. The predominant theme in Atenism was that love was the most powerful and meaningful element of life and this is clearly illustrated by the portrayals of the pharaoh and his family. It therefore appears more likely that Akhenaten was not aiming to be seen as a god but as a model for the correct manner in which one should live their life according to the tenets of Atenism.

In a more novel perspective Colleen Manassa and John Darnell argue in their book, *Tutankhamun's Armies: Battle and Conquest during Ancient Egypt's Late 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty*, that in Atenism "Aten is not the sole god because other deities do not exist, but because they do not *yet* exist."<sup>101</sup> Darnell and Manassa assert that with his new teachings and focus on repetition Akhenaten transformed the progression of time into a perpetually repeated daily cycle that was centered around the Aten and the royal family. For example, each morning and night Akhenaten would recreate the primordial moment in his chariot ride into and out of the city of Akhetaten. This very public display was almost certainly intended to equate Akhenaten with the Aten by mirroring its rising and setting as he rode in a gilded chariot into his city called "Horizon of Aten."<sup>102</sup> The Great Hymn to the Aten does emphasize the cyclical nature in which the Aten interacts with the earth, but that does not mean that there could be no time for the creation of the other deities as there was obviously time enough for the world and its inhabitants to come into being. Further, several other strains of Egyptian religion, including the New Solar Theology, stated that the earth functioned in a cyclical manner as well, but there were certainly more than one god within these religions. I therefore believe that Darnell and Manassa have chosen to focus too strongly on one specific aspect of Atenism instead of taking into account the entire picture.

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<sup>101</sup> Darnell and Manassa, pg. 25.

<sup>102</sup> Darnell and Manassa, pg. 39.

There does exist archaeological evidence that many Egyptian citizens went on privately worshipping the older and more traditional gods during Akhenaten's reign. For instance, there is evidence that the cult of the Mnevis Bull, which was understood as the physical embodiment of the Heliopolitan sun god, was brought to Akhetaten.<sup>103</sup> Further, small figurines of several of the more traditional gods have been found in the strata at Akhetaten, including the deity Bes who was believed to be the protector of women and children. Some scholars have taken this evidence to mean that Akhenaten was indeed a henotheist due to the fact that he allowed other gods to be present in his capital city.

I do not think that the fact that the public continued to foster their old beliefs in private should be understood as the king's embrace of henotheism. It is highly possible that Akhenaten did not know what was going on behind the closed doors on his citizens' houses as it seems rather unlikely that the public would offer up such information before the pharaoh. I, however, believe that even if Akhenaten did in fact know that his citizens still believed in and worshipped the traditional gods, he would not have cared. What were the true personal beliefs of the public to Akhenaten as long as they continued to comply with his new innovations and philosophy? Further, it must have been obvious to Akhenaten that the radical shift in beliefs that he was advocating would be hard for the population to become accustomed to so quickly and perhaps he thought it best to allow them to hold onto the comforts of the past and tradition. It seems that any sort of attempt to squash out the people's private beliefs would have been against the tenets of Atenism, which preached a message of non-violence and tolerance. The erasures and replacements of the old gods on monuments that Akhenaten advocated would not have been unusual to the ancient Egyptians as pharaohs routinely carved over parts of old inscriptions in

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<sup>103</sup> Munane, pg. 13.

order to insert their own names and agendas onto those monuments. However, it would have been extremely unusual for the pharaoh to enact any sort of persecution against the Egyptian citizens themselves, which must have been a large reason that Akhenaten allowed the public to hold onto their private beliefs.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW: ATHEISM**

By far the smallest group of scholars and historians has taken the stance that Atenism should be understood as a form of atheism. In his excellent survey of the Amarna period, titled *Akhenaten: King of Egypt*, Cyril Aldred presents Akhenaten's new religion as being extremely modern in its espousal of the preeminence of nature. Aldred discusses the novel approach that the acclaimed Egyptologist William Matthew Flinders Petrie took when studying the features of Atenism. Flinders Petrie saw the hands emanating from the Aten's rays and the manner in which they carried the ankh symbol to the royal family's noses as Akhenaten's belief in the unique power of the sun.<sup>104</sup> Aldred states that with this discovery there was no longer any place for the sun god as a personal deity along with its manifestations in human and animal form. According to Aldred the Aten was thus intended to take the place of any anthropomorphic concepts based on the idea of divine personality. It was the rays of the Aten that brought life to the creatures of the world and were therefore accorded special representation. Aldred asserts that there existed no other form of sun-worship in which the rays were so obviously emphasized as the source of life and action. As Aldred states: "The distinction this made [the emphasis on the sun's rays] shows a scientific approach not found again until the present day."<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Aldred, *King of Egypt*, pg. 111.

<sup>105</sup> Aldred, *King of Egypt*, pg. 111.

James Allen takes a similar approach in his article, “The Natural Philosophy of Akhenaten.” Like Aldred, Allen takes the perspective that Atenism should be viewed as a naturalistic philosophy and proposes that perhaps this is the very reason that the persecution of the other gods occurred in such a haphazard manner.<sup>106</sup> By classifying Atenism as a philosophy rather than a religion Allen essentially removes the idea that Akhenaten was a religious zealot from the running as the reason why he chose to take such a drastically different approach to Egyptian religion and why he appears to have attempted to remove the other gods from public worship. Thus according to Allen, Akhenaten was not nearly as emotionally invested in his religious revolution as many other scholars have surmised and his philosophical view of the world did not motivate him to attack the existence of all of the traditional gods. I am not certain to what extent I agree with Allen on this point because the same degree of emotion can be invested in a philosophy as can be in a religion as evidenced in Stalinism and Nazism. It seems apparent that Akhenaten was greatly invested in his new form of religion, but I do not think that this enthusiasm blinded him from enacting his reforms in a deliberate and rational manner.

Allen further attests that the Aten was not intended to replace the old deities in their roles as religious elements, but rather to replace them as an explanation for the occurrences of nature. Akhenaten’s innovations were therefore not a case of asserting the supremacy of one particular god, but rather they were intended to supply the Egyptian population with a new illustration of the ways in which the world was governed by nature. It was therefore not the existence of other gods that would have been counter to Akhenaten’s beliefs, but rather the possibility that those gods could represent an element or even a manifestation of the single principle embodied in the

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<sup>106</sup> Allen, pg. 91.

Aten.<sup>107</sup> Allen goes on to discuss the many ways in which the Aten is simply an abstraction and was not meant to be the personal god of any Egyptian citizen, a topic that has already been covered above.

In his book, *Moses the Egyptian*, Jan Assmann also takes on the view that Atenism was a naturalistic philosophy. In the chapter six of this work, “Conceiving the One in Ancient Egyptian Traditions,” Assmann provides an excellent overview and examination of the tenets of Atenism as evidenced from the Great Hymn to the Aten. In this analysis Assmann classifies Atenism as both anti-polytheistic and rationalistic and also declares that Akhenaten was the first person to discover the concept of nature.<sup>108</sup> Assmann takes a rather negative view of the principles of Atenism stating that since the king is the only person that can understand the ways of the Aten, there is no meaning at all in this philosophy for the remainder of the world’s population.<sup>109</sup> With this assertion Assmann concludes that Akhenaten was also the first person to find a way out of religion stating that the king “rejected not only the polytheistic pantheon but even the theistic idea of a personal god.”<sup>110</sup> According to Assmann Akhenaten’s explanation of the world as being essentially rationalistic and naturalistic negates its religious significance. Assmann further chronicles the fact that Akhenaten’s conception of the world is in complete opposition to the traditional Egyptian view of life and its occurrences. The traditional Egyptian world contained no conception of nature because it was not natural in any sense. Conventional Egyptian religions were constantly engaged in a struggle against the chaos that was thought to be embodied within nature. According to these world views the Egyptian people and gods were continually striving to achieve *maat* (order), which was considered to be a part of a fair and just

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<sup>107</sup> Allen, pg. 91.

<sup>108</sup> Assmann, *Moses*, pg. 189.

<sup>109</sup> Assmann, *Moses*, pg. 189.

<sup>110</sup> Assmann, *Moses*, pg. 189-190.

universe. In these conceptions, the moral world triumphs over the naturalistic and disordered element. Further, the conventional gods could listen and be spoken to, in complete opposition to the ways in which the people could interact with the Aten. Atenism can therefore be viewed as a nontheistic ideology that was in complete opposition to the past Egyptian religions.

Assmann's views on the nature of Atenism differ most significantly with my own in that Assmann believes Akhenaten's world view to be essentially negative. Assmann sees the world under Atenism as somewhat bleak in nature in that it ignored the existence of the netherworld and by eliminating the possibility of the average citizen being able to understand the workings of the universe and the ways of the Aten. However, Assmann does not recognize the positive aspects of Atenism in that it encourages tolerance and love as the highest ideals of human life. Further, Assmann overlooks that the absence of no larger meaning to life does not have to be viewed as being negative, but instead places greater emphasis on the simple enjoyments of life including nature and family.

## **DISCUSSION**

Regardless of what Akhenaten intended the character of his new religious beliefs to be, there is still the question as to what his motivations were for enacting such radical change within the religious sphere. Akhenaten has been routinely accused of initiating his innovations in a fit of religious fervor. I believe this to be the least likely explanation for Akhenaten's motivations because of the deliberate manner in which he carried out the many revolutionary changes within Egyptian society that characterized his reign. Upon coming to the throne, Akhenaten did not immediately enact the massive innovations that he is now famous for. It took him nearly five years before he made his first attempts at introducing his modifications into Egyptian culture.

The fact that Akhenaten delayed the onset of his societal revolution leads to believe that he came to power with the idea of enacting his reforms in a slow and calculated manner. Every change that took place during the Amarna revolution occurred in a controlled and objective way. I find it difficult to believe that if Akhenaten had truly been a religious zealot that he would not have invested any degree of emotion when introducing his reforms into Egyptian life. He appears to simply put forward his own beliefs in a very structured way and did not even attack those that did not follow his reforms perfectly, such as the citizens at Akhetaten who possessed statuettes of traditional gods. I therefore feel that the Amarna revolution should be understood as a series of innovations that were enacted in a clearly calculated manner and not because of wild religious fervor.

The Amarna revolution was a time of monumental change to the Egyptian state, more so than almost any other period in its history. These enormous alterations were not simply the work of an eccentric religious devotee, but instead of a brilliant politician with an incredible force of will. Akhenaten went to great lengths to protect the ultimate power of the pharaoh and could only have done so through a shrewd and carefully developed plan. The drastic restructuring of the Egyptian religion, government, and artistic style all served as calculated and clever means by which Akhenaten thwarted the wealthy and united groups that could have threatened his authority. Akhenaten demonstrated through the power of his thought and actions that he was able to reshape Egypt to his will.

Another popular argument for why Akhenaten chose to enact his series of radical reforms espouses the idea that he was attempting to divert power away from the powerful cult of Amun. I have made reference several times to the fact that Amun and those deities associated with him were the gods that were most viciously attacked and erased during Akhenaten's reign, but I have

yet to discuss why the king would have reason to want to eliminate Amun and his power from the public sphere. Beginning under the reign of Hatshepsut, Amun was closely linked with the king and his cult was elevated to a place of great power. As the acclaimed Egyptologist Donald B. Redford notes: “A god who combined in himself not only the kingship on a cosmic scale, but also the universal powers of a creator and sustainer, was indeed a power to be reckoned with.”<sup>111</sup> Hatshepsut commissioned various works that helped to demonstrate the legitimacy of her rule. For instance, her mortuary temple at Deir el-Bahari contains wall paintings that portray the myth of Hatshepsut’s divine birth. This tale tells how Hatshepsut’s mother was impregnated by the god Amun, therefore making Hatshepsut the daughter of one of Egypt’s principle deities. Upon her birth Amun proclaims that Hatshepsut would become king and “take possession of the diadem on the Throne of Horus of the Living, eternally.”<sup>112</sup> This is a clever political move as Hatshepsut’s promotion of Amun and his cult also serves as a means of promoting herself and celebrating her right to rule.

A seminal moment for the Amun cult occurred during the eighteenth dynasty, when king Thutmose III declared Amun to be the official god of the Egyptian state. Thutmose III was an exceedingly militaristic pharaoh, spreading Egypt’s imperialistic rule throughout the surrounding area and it was believed that Amun had conferred the king with his success in battle.<sup>113</sup> It is no wonder then that Amun became the favored god of this bellicose king and thus became closely linked with the city of Thebes, Egypt’s capital at the time. As a result, the cult of Amun began to rise in popularity among the Egyptian citizens, which thus granted property and power to those in charge of this sect. In addition to their growing wealth and power, the cults surrounding

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<sup>111</sup> Donald B. Redford. *Akhenaten: The Heretic King*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984., pg. 163.

<sup>112</sup> Tyldesley, pg. 105.

<sup>113</sup> Kathryn A. Bard. *An Introduction to the Archaeology of Ancient Egypt*. Malden, Mass. Blackwell Publishing: 2008

various temples were uniting during this time.<sup>114</sup> As acclaimed anthropologist Leslie A. White writes: “Thus we find the priesthoods becoming wealthy, powerful, and organized. They are approaching the time when they will be able to threaten the supremacy of the Pharaoh himself...”<sup>115</sup> The increasing power and unity of the Egyptian religious cults was becoming a troubling aspect to the authority of the king, one that Akhenaten was not willing to withstand.

The power that the cult of Amun possessed was checked slightly during the reign of Akhenaten’s father, Amenhotep III. A cult that had become as powerful as Amun’s must have been worrying to the king as such a group might be able to challenge his authority. It seems that Amenhotep III wanted to divert influence away from the now extremely wealthy priesthood of Amun and began to increase the importance of other gods including the deity known as the Aten, the principle figure in Akhenaten’s later philosophy.<sup>116</sup> Amenhotep III would often describe himself as being “the Dazzling Aten” and even possessed a royal barge called “the Aten is Dazzling.”<sup>117</sup> He also emphasized the multiplicity of the gods and commissioned a great number of scarabs that linked the pharaoh with a number of principle deities.<sup>118</sup> It is possible that Akhenaten could have been influenced by the policies of his father and realized that the cult of Amun posed a legitimate threat to the sovereignty of the pharaoh. This would have been more than enough motivation for Akhenaten to impose change upon Egyptian society in order to ensure that the power of the kingship was not threatened by some outside source.

Once Akhenaten had ascended the throne, he began to carefully enact his agenda to eliminate any threat to his authority as pharaoh. In this case, one of the most pressing challenges

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<sup>114</sup> Leslie A. White. “Ihknaton: The Great Man vs. The Culture Process.” *Journal of the American Oriental Society*. Vol. 68, No. 2 (Apr. - Jun., 1948). Pg. 97.

<sup>115</sup> White, pg. 97.

<sup>116</sup> Silverman. “Divinity and Deities.” Pg. 74.

<sup>117</sup> Murname. Pg. 20-21.

<sup>118</sup> Hornung, *Religion of Light*, pg. 20.

to his rule was the cult of Amun. In year four of Akhenaten's reign, the high priest of Amun was dispatched to accompany a quarrying mission into an obscure and remote area of the country. This move prevented the high priest of Amun from interfering in any affairs that went on within Thebes and can also be seen as one of the first steps towards breaking apart the cult of Amun. With such a powerful adversary as the high priest of Amun present in Thebes, it would be difficult to create great popularity for the new religion that was to be the centerpiece of Akhenaten's revolution. The removal of the leader of the Amun cult from Egypt's capital was crucial for Akhenaten to be able to set his plan in motion and demonstrates the shrewdness with which he conducted this undertaking. Erik Hornung, professor of Egyptology at the University of Basel, writes that the Amarna Revolution "...was accomplished according to a well-conceived plan...His [Akhenaten's] reforms were implemented one by one, as soon as the necessary political conditions had been created."<sup>119</sup>

A few years later the new capital city of Akhetaten was founded and conveniently located roughly between Thebes and Memphis, sparing the king and his administration any distractions that their detractors in these cities may have imposed. As mentioned in brief earlier, it was around this time that Akhenaten mandated the use of a much smaller sized building block so that construction of his new capital would be accelerated. This new technology demonstrates the careful planning that the king had employed when considering the move to a new capital city. It seems unlikely that the king would have been so concerned with the speed of Amarna's completion if the only aim of his cultural revolution was to glorify the Aten. Instead, the hurried construction of this new capital implies that the king wished to distance himself from Thebes so that he could successfully enact his political agenda without hindrance.

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<sup>119</sup>Erik Hornung. *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt: The One and the Many*. Ithaca, New York. Cornell University Press: 1996. Pg. 244.

In addition, the faithful to the Amarna religion accompanied the king to this new capital. Out of this group of followers, Akhenaten created a new administration that was mostly made up of foreigners and people of low ranking classes.<sup>120</sup> Akhenaten's new subordinates owed their positions of influence solely to the king himself and would undoubtedly felt a strong sense of loyalty towards him as a result. Any advisors that Akhenaten had inherited from his father were dismissed to make room for this new group of subserviently devoted civil servants. With this step, Akhenaten had effectively eliminated any challenge to his authority within the Egyptian government in the same shrewd and premeditated manner that seems to have colored all of his political moves.

As time went on it seems that Akhenaten desired to expand his own power by having himself nearly deified in the natural philosophy of his own creation. For instance, the absence of any image of the principle force in his natural philosophy effectively made Akhenaten himself the only image of the divine.<sup>121</sup> In his philosophy Akhenaten was charged with maintaining the care of those that lived within the realm, much like the Aten allows for life on earth. This implies that "Akhenaten is for human beings what light is for nature: animator, creator, sustainer, and determinant of recurrent life."<sup>122</sup> All of these changes could be viewed as an attempt by the king to garner more power for himself while drawing influence away from any other rival cult.

I, however, do not believe that dissipating the power that surrounded the cult of Amun was Akhenaten's only motivation in beginning his religious and cultural revolution. It seems unlikely that it would have been necessary for Akhenaten to impose reforms in spheres as diverse as language and art if his sole purpose was to subvert the authority of the Amun cult.

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<sup>120</sup> Erik Hornung. *History of Ancient Egypt: An Introduction*. Ithaca, New York. Cornell University Press: 1999. Pg. 100.

<sup>121</sup> Allen, pg. 99.

<sup>122</sup> Allen, pg. 99.

These were not areas from which any sort of Egyptian religious derived the basis of its power, so there would not have been any obvious correlation between enforcing reforms to language or art and drawing power back towards the pharaoh. The majority of Akhenaten's reforms therefore must have been enacted because they were in line with the tenets of Atenism, and not as a means of drawing authority away from the cult of Amun. Perhaps the desire to eliminate this powerful rival group posed as an incentive to the king in his cultural revolution, but I do not believe it was the sole driving force. If this were the case, there would not have been any need for Akhenaten to go as far as he did in the course of his reforms. Of course, one cannot be sure whether Akhenaten believed in his religious reforms himself, or whether it was simply a vehicle to increased power for the kingship. However, the emotion that is almost tangible in the Hymns to the Aten seem to me to be an indication of the king's enthusiasm for his new teachings. Thus I believe that Akhenaten must have subscribed to Atenism and felt that it was a legitimate form of religion.

However, Akhenaten's new philosophy was not destined to last. Shortly after his own death, the old gods were restored to their former prominence and the majority of Akhenaten's reforms were completely undone. Perhaps the idea that there was no need for the existence of any god was too radical for the majority of the Egyptian populous. It seems that the major shortcoming of Akhenaten's philosophy was the fact that it was so closely linked with Akhenaten himself. By making himself effectively the closest thing to a god in his philosophy he had not allowed for the continuation of his philosophy after his own death. Akhenaten's reluctance to involve Egypt in foreign conflicts left the nation in a dangerous position and created circumstances that greatly influenced the pattern of succession that followed his reign. In

addition, the ideas that were put forward in Akhenaten's program of reform may have helped to bolster support for the legitimization of the kings that succeeded him.

The reign of Akhenaten's immediate successor, Smenkhkare, was relatively uneventful especially considering all the controversy that surrounds his identity. Many scholars have put forth the idea that Smenkhkare was not a male of blood relation to Akhenaten (most likely his brother) but actually Nefertiti ruling as the sole pharaoh. However, there are no writings that attest to Nefertiti's presence during the final years of Akhenaten's rule and she disappears from the record shortly after the death of the couple's daughter, Meketaten. This fact seems to suggest that Nefertiti most probably predeceased her husband and therefore could not have become his successor. There is some evidence to suggest that Smekhkhare began to make attempts to reintegrate the old gods back into the Egyptian pantheon. For instance, in a Theban tomb there exists a hymn inscribed by "a scribe of offerings of Amun in the chapel of Ankhkheperure in Thebes."<sup>123</sup> However, the king died sometime during his third regnal year and thus did not have time to make much of an impact on the historical record.

It was at this time that the boy king, Tutankhamun, ascended to the throne of Egypt at Amarna. It is not known for certain what became of queen Meritaten or whether she ever in fact acted as a regent for Tutankhamun. It does appear relatively certain that the commander of the Egyptian army, Horemheb, acted on behalf of Tutankhamun during his years as a minor. During his ten year reign Tut and his court enacted a number of reforms that began to bring Egypt back to the traditional way of life that had existed before Akhenaten's revolution.<sup>124</sup> In his Restoration Stele, Tutankhamun paints Akhenaten's reforms in an extremely negative light,

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<sup>123</sup> Jacobus Van Dijk. "Horemheb and the Struggle for the Throne of Tutankhamen." *The Bulletin of the Australian Centre for Egyptology*. Volume 7. North Ryde, Australia: The Australian Centre for Egyptology, 1996. Pg. 32.

<sup>124</sup> Jacobus Van Dijk. "The Amarna Period and the Later New Kingdom," *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*. Ed. Ian Shaw. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. Pg. 290.

discussing how the cults of the old gods had been abolished and how their temples had fallen into disrepair. This neglect had led the gods to abandon Egypt and thus accounted for the military disasters that had befallen the country.<sup>125</sup> These allegations cannot be taken completely seriously, as it was fairly common for Egyptian rulers to claim that they had lifted the country from a time of decay and fixed all the nation's problems. There is little evidence to suggest that Akhenaten had left Egypt in a considerable state of disrepair, aside from in the arena of international relations. The Restoration Stele is obviously a stab at Akhenaten's practice of ignoring foreign policy, which led to the loss of some of Egypt's territory and the growing might of the Hittites. However, it is apparent that for whatever reason Tutankhamun did not subscribe to the beliefs that Akhenaten espoused and could quite possibly have resented him for neglecting Egypt's international relations for so long and leaving a complicated and messy situation for his successors. The animosity that Akhenaten's indifference towards anything that did not pertain to cultural revolution must have caused in his successors was almost certainly a large factor in driving Smenkhkare and Tutankhamun towards a more traditional path. If Akhenaten had wanted to leave a more lasting effect on Egyptian society he should have made efforts to make his religion more appealing to the pharaohs that would inherit Egypt from him. The fact that Akhenaten's innovations were so polarizing and that consumed all of his energy and attention is easily the greatest mistake that Akhenaten made in regards to allowing Atenism to gain acceptance and to flourish even after his own death.

The emergence of Atenism appears to be one of the first instances of a non-polytheistic religion in the course of human history. The only other belief system that could possibly have been in existence at the time of Akhenaten's reign was Zoroastrianism, the monistic religion that

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<sup>125</sup> Van Dijk, Amarna Period, pg. 291.

probably arose in Greater Iran sometime during the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BCE. There is no exact date known for the founding date of Zoroastrianism, which was first put forth by the prophet Zoroaster. It has been surmised that the religion was founded sometime between 1200-1500 BCE based on linguistic comparisons with the Hindu Rig Veda, as Zoroastrianism was fairly similar to early forms of Hinduism.<sup>126</sup> Those that followed the Zoroastrian religion believed in the existence of one god, called Ahura Mazda, whose creation embodies truth and order and exists as the antithesis of chaos. The resulting conflict between order and chaos pervades throughout the entire universe including within humanity. In order for humans to participate in this struggle and to keep disorder at bay it was important for one to live a life defined by good thoughts and deeds.<sup>127</sup>

Although the exact beliefs of Atenism and Zoroastrianism are not perfectly alike, there is undoubtedly a great deal of similarity between the two religions. Both are said to have been created by individuals who were able to use their charisma and influence in order to accrue followers. Each religion espouses the idea of devotion to a singular figure, the Aten in Atenism and Ahura Mazda in Zoroastrianism. Finally both forms of religion espouse the importance of living a 'good' life that is characterized by tolerance and kindness. Perhaps most significantly, both Atenism and Zoroastrianism arose within the same time period in the same region of the world. These similarities beg the question as to whether these two religions are at all related to one another. Is it possible that the emergence of one of these lines of thought was spread to another area of the world and adapted to suit the beliefs of the people living there?

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<sup>126</sup> Peter Clark. *Zoroastrianism: An Introduction to an Ancient Faith*. Portland, Oregon: Sussex Academic Press, 1998. Pg. 19.

<sup>127</sup> Jenny Rose. *Zoroastrianism: An Introduction*. New York, NY: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2011. Pg. 12.

It is well documented in the Amarna Letters (a collection of correspondences between Akhetaten and foreign leaders or vassals found near Akhenaten's royal palace) that Egypt maintained relations with the civilizations that existed in the area where Zoroastrianism arose.<sup>128</sup> This suggests that it would have indeed been possible for the ideas about Zoroastrianism or Atenism to have been carried to a foreign land. As it appears that Zoroastrianism was most likely founded before Atenism, one has to wonder if Akhenaten was aware of this religion and if its tenets influenced his own beliefs to the point where he was inspired to create his own philosophy. Some scholars have suggested that Akhenaten's mother, Queen Tiye, was of foreign descent based on the unusual name of her father, a man called Yuya. The proponents of this argument believe that perhaps Akhenaten could have been influenced by the exotic beliefs, which could have included ideas about Zoroastrianism, which his mother would have been exposed to from her own father. Egyptologists have noted that Yuya was taller than the average height for an Egyptian and possessed features that appeared to be rather foreign.<sup>129</sup> However, there is no concrete evidence to suggest that Yuya was in fact of foreign birth and the only place that Yuya is known to have resided was the northern Egyptian town of Akhmim. Even if his grandfather was not of foreign descent it is still highly possible that Akhenaten could have heard news of this revolutionary exotic religion from some other member of his father's administration. The extent to which these two religions were influenced by one another, if at all, is certainly worth exploring with further research in order to better understand the circumstances in which religions that were not polytheistic in nature arose.

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<sup>128</sup> *The Amarna Letters*. William L. Moran Ed. And Trans. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992. Pg. xvi.

<sup>129</sup> Ann Rosalie David and Antony E. David. *A Biographical Dictionary of Ancient Egypt*. Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996. Pg. 167.

## CONCLUSION

It is important to acknowledge that it is impossible to undoubtedly determine why Akhenaten felt the need to completely upheave the traditional modes of operation in almost every arena of life in ancient Egypt or what he truly intended the nature of his religion to be. We cannot enter into the king's thoughts nor is there any written statement that obviously proclaims the reasoning behind Akhenaten's cultural reforms. However, that is not to say that such unknowable things should not be studied. Apart from being an excellent intellectual exercise, by studying such a religious ideas, especially one that are as hotly contested as Akhenaten's, one is able to gather a better understanding of the culture in which that philosophy was followed.

This is made more apparent with a brief overview of the theories put forth by Emile Durkheim, who asserts that collective superstition is what holds people together in a community and perhaps more provocatively that society and god are ultimately one in the same to the average person.<sup>130</sup> These two concepts are indeed very similar because the way that one conceives of 'society' is akin to the abstract concept of the existence of a divine being. One also behaves in a similar fashion towards both the community and that group's particular god/gods in that one is expected to sacrifice oneself for the good of society in the same way that they would for any divine being. Society is also seen to possess enormous amounts of power in that it can collectively deify human beings and objects, such as the totem. Further, Durkheim suggests that the extraordinary feelings that are produced within the individual during a large gathering are responsible for man's belief in some sort of larger power. In Durkheim's conception, religion is a unifying force that allows societies to remain bound together.

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<sup>130</sup> Emil Durkheim. "Society as Sacred." *Eight Theories of Religion*. Ed. Daniel L. Pals. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006., pg. 86.

By looking at past historical events with Durkheim's theories in mind it is easier to understand the hugely important role that religion has had to play in the formation and maintenance of societies. The capacity of religion in shaping and mirroring the culture in which it exists is especially apparent in the case of Atenism. Akhenaten and his followers were essentially bonded together through their shared adherence to the tenets of the king's new philosophy. Their community at Akhetaten was differentiated from the rest of Egyptian society in that they readily chose to subscribe to this radical new religion, at least on the surface, while the other cities and towns in Egypt managed to function largely as they had for thousands of years. This historical instance also offers a cautionary instance in which religion bound a community almost too much together to the point where the pharaoh and his administration mostly ignored foreign policy outside of their capital city.

Further, in an obvious manner, Akhenaten's radical cultural revolution greatly shifted the course of Egypt's history. An entire area of Egypt's economy, that is, its religious cults and temples, was discontinued, the capital city was moved, foreign policy was neglected, and the conventions of language and art were completely changed. Even though Akhenaten's religion itself did not last, its creation left behind a series of effects that were visible within Egyptian culture for many years. As stated above, Akhenaten's reformed version of Egyptian language remained after the pharaoh's death and was the standard form of recorded writing for decades. Further, Akhenaten's reluctance to involve Egypt in foreign conflicts left the nation in a dangerous position and created circumstances that greatly influenced the pattern of succession that followed his reign.

The radical shift in the customs and philosophy that characterized the Amarna period was greatly influential in shaping the course that Egyptian history took following Akhenaten's reign.

The case of the Amarna revolution serves without a doubt as an important instance in history that greatly shaped the course that later events in Egypt and the rest of the world would take. Egypt's position in the world had been weakened largely because of the king's disinterest in foreign policy. During his reign Akhenaten had been extremely neglectful of the increasingly hostile situation that existed outside the borders of Egypt proper. Tensions had been growing between the Hittites and the Mitanni, an ally of Egypt's, and had led to fighting on the outskirts of Egypt. As the situation continued to deteriorate, letters poured in from Egypt's vassal states begging the pharaoh for military assistance. These pleas went unheeded, however, and eventually led to the loss of one of Egypt's territories, Kadesh.<sup>131</sup> The Amarna Letters document another one of Akhenaten's blunders in foreign policy. Aziru, the ruler of Amurru and the son of an Egyptian vassal, had betrayed one of Egypt's allies who had also called for Egypt's support, the ruler of Gubla, and had sent him to almost certain death. Akhenaten summoned Aziru to Egypt to explain his actions, but he was eventually released without penalty. Aziru then betrayed Egypt by switching his alliance permanently to the Hittites.<sup>132</sup> Akhenaten's practice of ignoring the calls for aid from his vassals and allies continued until the time of his death.

Akhenaten's radical world view had managed to break many taboos in Egyptian culture, one of which was extremely important in allowing the first effective king following Akhenaten to gain legitimization and to install a long line of strong leaders in the 19<sup>th</sup> Dynasty. After Tutankhamun's death one of his advisors, Ay, took up rule over Egypt as an interim king, but died shortly afterwards. Following Ay, the general Horemheb ascended to Egypt's throne. With Horemheb, Egypt was finally granted a capable pharaoh who managed to reign for more than a few short years. However, he was not a member of the royal family and therefore had to

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<sup>131</sup> Trevor Bryce. *The Kingdom of the Hittites*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998. Pg. 176.

<sup>132</sup> Bryce, pg. 184-185.

construct means for his legitimization. Since he did not possess royal blood, Horemheb could not claim to be a direct descendent of the god Amun, but he found a clever way around this problem. In his Coronation Text, Horemheb openly acknowledges the fact that he does not belong to the royal lineage, but he claims that as a child, the god of his home town, Horus of Hutnesu, had chosen him to become pharaoh.<sup>133</sup> He also attributes the favor that he received from king Tut to this form of Horus and discusses how his time as deputy and prince regent under Tut, a claim that is illustrated in Horemheb's royal tomb, prepared him for his own kingship.<sup>134</sup> It is also this Horus who finally presents Horemheb to Amun during the Opet Festival. Horemheb therefore owes his position as king to his direct ties to the god of his home town. This unusual means of legitimization can be viewed as a consequence of the ideas that predominated during the Amarna period. During this time the general public was openly encouraged to make direct offerings to Akhenaten and the royal family, who served as the only image of god. The idea that the public could have direct access to deities persisted following the return to more traditional concepts of Egyptian religion as evidenced by the new trend in tomb art depicting the deceased directly worshipping the gods.<sup>135</sup>

Despite the resentment that Horemheb felt for Akhenaten, he had much for which to be grateful to the heretic king. If Akhenaten had been more proactive in terms of his foreign policy it is not nearly as likely that Horemheb would have been able to attain a position of such influence under kings Tut and Ay, a role that eventually allowed him to become king.

Akhenaten's philosophy involving direct interaction with the appointed image of gods also

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<sup>133</sup> Van Dijk, Amarna Period, pg. 293-294.

<sup>134</sup> Jacobus Van Dijk. "Horemheb and the Struggle for the Throne of Tutankhamen." The Bulletin of the Australian Centre for Egyptology. Volume 7. North Ryde, Australia: The Australian Centre for Egyptology, 1996. pg. 35-36.

<sup>135</sup> Van Dijk, Amarna Period, pg. 289.

helped to bolster Horemheb's means of legitimization of his own rule. Akhenaten's unusual policies may not have lasted themselves, but their influence is evident in the course that history took following his death.

As these examples demonstrate the twelve or so years during which Akhenaten instated his natural philosophy had an enormous impact on the course of history for the next several hundred years and left behind a series of obvious cultural remnants. The importance of this religion and its founder therefore cannot be overstated. Atenism was certainly the world's first form of spiritual atheism and could possibly have been the first religion to be other than polytheistic in nature. It is important to study and understand such past forms of thought in order to understand how our modern beliefs fit into the course of human history. Most people would probably classify atheism as being a relatively modern concept, but this analysis of Atenism suggests otherwise. It seems that our supposedly modern ideas about preeminence of nature and the significance of tolerance and equality appear to actually be over three thousand years old. Studying the past is thus paramount to our current understandings of the world and where our societies fit in in relation to the beliefs and constructs of other human beings. This study of Atenism seems to suggest that our spiritual beliefs have not evolved as radically as some of us would like to believe and that some of the most controversial forms of religious thought today were espoused and even accepted by the ancients. Akhenaten and his natural philosophy were truly revolutionary as there would not be any similar form of religious thought for thousands of years. I will therefore close with a quotation from the famed Egyptologist Henry James Breasted which I believe appropriately sums up the magnitude of Akhenaten's achievements: "Until

Ikhnaton the history of the world had been the irresistible flow of tradition. All men had been but drops of water in the great current. Ikhnaton [Akhenaten] was the first individual in history.”<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> James Henry Breasted. *The Development of Religion and Thought in Ancient Egypt*. New York. University of Pennsylvania Press: 1972. Pg. 339.

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## APPENDIX

The following texts have all been translated by Miriam Lichtheim as found in her book, *Ancient Egyptian Literature Volume II*.

### **The Great Hymn to the Aten:**

Adoration of *Re-Harakhti-who-rejoices-in-lightland In-his-name-Shu-who-is-Aten*, living forever; the great living Aten who is in jubilee, the lord of all that the Disk encircles, lord of the sky, lord of the earth, lord of the house-of-Aten in Akhet-Aten; (and of) the King of Upper and Lower Egypt, who lives by Maat, the Lord of the Two Lands, *Neferkheprure, Sole-one-of-Re*; the Son of Re who lives by Maat, the Lord of Crowns, *Akhenaten*, great in his lifetime; (and) his beloved great Queen, the Lady of the Two Lands, *Nefer-nefru-Aten Nefertiti*, who lives in health and youth forever. The Vizier, the Fanbearer on the right of the King, ----- [Ay]; he says:

Splendid you rise in heaven's lightland,  
O living Aten, creator of life!  
When you have dawned in eastern lightland,  
You fill every land with your beauty.  
You are beautiful, great, radiant,  
High over every land;  
Your rays embrace the lands,  
To the limit of all that you made.  
Being Re, you reach their limits,  
You bend them (for) the son whom you love;  
Though you are far, your rays are on earth,  
Though one sees you, your strides are unseen.

When you set in western lightland,  
Earth is in darkness as if in death;  
One sleeps in chambers, heads covered,  
One eye does not see another.  
Were they robbed of their goods,  
That are under their heads,  
People would not remark it.  
Every lion comes from its den,  
All the serpents bite;  
Darkness hovers, earth is silent,  
As their maker rests in lightland.

Earth brightens when you dawn in lightland,  
When you shine as Aten of daytime;  
As you dispel the dark,  
As you cast your rays,  
The Two Lands are in festivity.  
Awake they stand on their feet,  
You have roused them;

Bodies cleansed, clothed.  
Their arms adore your appearance.  
The entire land sets out to work,  
All beasts browse on their herbs;  
Trees, herbs are sprouting,  
Birds fly from their nests,  
Their wings greeting your *ka*.  
All flocks frisk on their feet,  
All that fly up and alight,  
They live when you dawn for them.  
Ships fare north, fare south as well,  
Roads lie open when you rise;  
The fish in the river dart before you,  
Your rays are in the midst of the sea.

Who makes seed grow in women,  
Who creates people from sperm;  
Who feeds the son in his mother's womb,  
Who soothes him to still his tears.  
Nurse in the womb,  
Giver of breath,  
To nourish all that he made.  
When he comes from the womb to breathe,  
On the day of his birth,  
You open wide his mouth,  
You supply his needs.  
When the chick in the egg speaks in the shell,  
You give him breath within to sustain him;  
When you have made him complete,  
To break out from the egg,  
He comes out from the egg,  
To announce his completion,  
Walking on his legs he comes from it.

How many are your deeds,  
Though hidden from sight,  
O Sole God beside whom there is none!  
You made the earth as you wished, you alone,  
All peoples, herds, and flocks;  
All upon earth that walk on legs,  
All on high that fly on wings,  
The lands of Khor and Kush,  
The land of Egypt.  
You set every man in his place,  
You supply their needs;  
Everyone has his food;

His lifetime is counted.  
Their tongues differ in speech,  
Their characters likewise;  
Their skins are distinct,  
For you distinguished the peoples.

You made Hapy in *dat*,  
You bring him when you will,  
To nourish the people,  
For you made them for yourself.  
Lord of all who toils for them,  
Aten of daytime, great in glory!  
All distant lands, you made them live,  
You made a heavenly Hapy descend for them;  
He makes waves on the mountains like the sea,  
To drench their fields and their towns.  
How excellent are your ways, O Lord of eternity!  
A Hapy from heaven for foreign peoples,  
And all lands' creatures that walk on legs,  
For Egypt the Hapy who comes from *dat*.

You rays nurse all fields.  
When you shine they live, they grow for you;  
You made the seasons to foster all that you made,  
Winter to cool them, heat that they taste you.  
You made the far sky to shine therein,  
To behold all that you made;  
You alone, shining in your form of living Aten,  
Risen, radiant, distant, near.  
You made millions of forms from yourself alone,  
Towns, villages, fields, the river's course;  
All eyes observe you upon them,  
For you are the Aten of daytime on high.

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You are in my heart,  
There is no other who knows you,  
Only your son, *Neferkheprure, Sole-one-of-Re*,  
Whom you have taught your ways and your might.  
(Those on) earth come from your hand as you made them,  
When you have dawned they live,  
When you set they die;  
You yourself are lifetime, one lives by you.  
All eyes are on (your) beauty until you set,  
All labor ceases when you rest in the west;  
When you rise you stir [everyone] for the King,

Every leg is on the move since you founded the earth.  
You rouse them for your son who came from your body,  
The King who lives by Maat, the Lord of the Two Lands,  
*Neferkheprure, Sole-one-of-Re,*  
The Son of Re who lives by Maat, the Lord of crowns,  
*Akhenaten*, great in his lifetime;  
(And) the great Queen whom he loves, the Lady of the Two  
Lands,  
*Nefer-nefru-Aten Nefertiti*, living forever.

**The Short Hymn to the Aten:**

Adoration of *Re-Harakhti-who-rejoices-in-lightland In-his-name-Shu-who-is-Aten*, who gives  
life forever, by the King who lives by Maat,  
The Lord of the Two Lands: *Neferkheprure, Sole-one-of-Re*; the Son of Re who lives by Maat,  
the Lord of crowns: *Akhenaten*, great in his lifetime, given life forever.

Splendid you rise, O living Aten, eternal lord!  
You are radiant, beautiful, mighty.  
Your love is great, immense.  
Your rays light up all faces,  
Your bright hue gives life to hearts,  
When you fill the Two Lands with your love.  
August God who fashioned himself,  
Who made every land, created what is in it,  
All peoples, herds, and flocks,  
All trees that grow from soil;  
They live when you dawn for them,  
You are mother and father of all that you made.

When you dawn their eyes observe you,  
As your rays light the whole earth;  
Every heart acclaim your sight,  
When you are risen as their lord.  
When you set in the sky's western lightland,  
Their arms adore you *ka*,  
As you nourish the hearts by your beauty;  
One lives when you cast your rays,  
Every land is in festivity.

Singers, musicians, shout with joy.  
In the court of the *benben*-shrine,  
And in all temples in Akhet-Aten,  
The place of truth in which you rejoice.  
Foods are offered in their midst,  
Your holy son performs your praises,

O Aten living in his risings,  
And all your creatures leap before you.  
Your august son exults in joy,  
O Aten living daily content in the sky,  
Your offspring, your august son, Sole one of Re;  
The Son of Re does not cease to extol his beauty,  
*Neferkheprure, Sole-one-of-Re.*

I am your son who serves, who exalts you name,  
Your power, your strength, are firm in my heart;  
You are the living Aten whose image endures,  
You have made the far sky to shine in it,  
To observe all that you made.  
You are One yet a million lives are in you,  
To make them live (you give) the breath of life to their noses;  
By the sight of your rays all flowers exists,  
What lives and sprouts from the soil grows when you shine.  
Drinking deep of your sight all flocks frisk,  
The birds in the nest fly up in joy;  
Their folded wings unfold in praise  
Of the living Aten, their maker.

### **1. Hymn to the Aten and the King:**

Adoration of *Re-Harakhti-who-rejoices-in-lightland In-his-name-Shu-who-is-Aten*, who gives life forever; (and of) the King of Upper and Lower Egypt: *Neferkheprure, Sole-one-of-Re*, the Son of Re: *Akhenaten*, great in his lifetime; (and) the great Queen, *Nefer-nefru-Aten Nefertiti*, living forever.

Praises to you when you dawn in lightland,  
O living Aten, lord of eternity!  
Kissing the ground when you dawn in heaven,  
To light all lands with your beauty.  
Your rays are on your son, your beloved,  
Your hands hold millions of jubilees  
For the King, *Neferkheprure, Sole-one-of-Re*,  
Your child who came from your rays.  
You grant him your lifetime, your years,  
You hearken to the wish of his heart,  
You love him, you make him like Aten.  
You dawn to give him eternity,  
When you set you give him infinity.  
You create him daily like your forms,  
You build him in your image like Aten.  
The Ruler of Maat who came from eternity,  
The Son of Re who exalts his beauty,

Who offers him the product of his rays,  
The King who lives by Maat,  
The Lord of the Two Lands, *Neferkheprure, Sole-one-of-Re*,  
(And) the great Queen, *Nefer-nefru-Aten Nefertiti*.

## **2. Hymn to the Aten and the King:**

The God's Father, the favorite of the Good God, the Vizier and Fanbearer to the right of the King, the Master of all the horses of his majesty, the true, beloved royal scribe, Ay. He says:

Hail to you, O living Aten!  
Dawning in heaven he floods the hearts,  
Every land is in feast at his rising;  
Their hearts rejoice in acclamations,  
When their lord, their maker, shines upon them.  
Your son offers Maat to your fair face,  
You delight in seeing him who came from you;  
The son of eternity who came from Aten,  
Who benefits his benefactor, pleases the heart of Aten.

When he dawns in heaven he rejoices in his son,  
He enfolds him in his rays;  
He gives him eternity as king like the Aten;  
*Neferkheprure, Sole-one-of-Re*, my God,  
Who made me, who fosters my *ka*.  
Grant me to be satiated with seeing you always,  
My Lord, built like Aten, abounding in wealth;  
Happy flowing daily who nourished Egypt,  
Silver and gold are like the sands of the shores.  
The land wakes to hail the power of his *ka*,  
O Son of Aten, you are eternal,  
*Neferkheprure, Sole-one-of-Re*,  
You live and thrive for her made you.

## **3. Self-Justification and Prayer to the King:**

The God's Father, the Vizier and Fanbearer on the right of the King, the Master of all the horses of his majesty, the true, beloved Royal Scribe, Ay. He says:

I am one truthful to the King who fostered him,  
One who is straight to the Ruler and helps his Lord:  
A *ka*-attendant of his majesty, his favorite,  
Who sees his beauty when he appears in his palace.  
I am leader of the nobles, the royal companions,  
Chief of all those who follow his majesty;  
He set Maat in my body, I abhor falsehood,  
I know what pleases the Sole one of Re, my Lord,

Who is knowing like Aten, truly wise.  
He heaps my rewards of silver and gold,  
I being chief of the nobles, leader of the people;  
My nature, my good character made my position,  
My Lord has taught me, I do his teaching.  
I live by worshipping his *ka*,  
I am sated by attending him;  
My breath, by which I live, is this northwind,  
This thousandfold Hapy who flows every day,  
*Neferkheprure, Sole-one-of-Re.*

Grant me a lifetime high in your favor!  
How happy is your favortie, O Son of the Aten!  
All his deeds will endure and be firm,  
When the *ka* of the Ruler is with him forever,  
He will be sated with life when he reaches old age.  
My Lord who makes people and fosters a lifetime,  
Give a happy fate to him whom you favor,  
Whose heart rests on Maat, who abhors falsehood.  
How happy is he who hears your teaching of life!  
He is sated by seeing you constantly,  
His eyes beholding the Aten each day.  
Grant me a good old age as you favor me,  
Grant me a good burial by the wish of your *ka*  
In the tomb you assigned me to rest in,  
In the mountain of Akhet-Aten, the blessed place.  
May I hear your sweet voice in the *benben*-temple,  
As you do what you father praises, the living Aten;  
He will assign you to everlastingness,  
He will reward you with jubilee feasts.

Like a counting of shore- (sands) by the *oipe*,  
Like reckoning the sea by the *dja*,  
The sum total of mountains weighed in the balance,  
The feathers of birds, the leaves of trees—  
Such are the jubilees of the Sole one of Re, king forever,  
And of the great Queen, his beloved, rich in beauty,  
Who contents the Aten with a sweet voice,  
With her beautiful hands on the sistra,  
The Lady of the Two Lands, *Nefer-nefru-Aten Nefertiti*,  
everliving  
Who is at the side of the Sole one of Re for all time.

As heaven will endure with what it contains,  
Your father, the Aten, will dawn in the sky,  
To protect you every day for he made you.

Grant me to kiss the holy ground,  
To come before you with offerings  
To Aten, your father, as gifts of you *ka*.  
Grant that my *ka* abide and flourish for me,  
As when on earth I followed your *ka*,  
So as to rise in my name to the blessed place,  
In which you grant me to rest, my word being true,  
May my name be pronounced in it by your will,  
I being your favorite who follows your *ka*,  
That I may go with your favor when old age has come:  
For the *ka* of the Vizier, Fanbearer on the right of the King,  
True, beloved Royal Scribe, God's Father, Ay, living anew.