Discuss the Cases For and Against the View that the Aten Cult was Monotheistic

Speculation that the Egyptian religion was monotheistic during the Amarna period has made this period and its god the Aten the subject of much scholarly debate. There seem to have been two periods where the cult of the Aten flourished as an independent entity – before and during the reign of Amenhotep IV.

Atenism Prior to Amenhotep IV

The term “aten” (\(|tn\) was certainly not unknown in the years before the accession of Amenhotep IV, indeed as E. A. Wallis Budge noted, it is a very old word merely signifying the sun disc.\(^1\) According to Sayed Tawfik, the term |tn has four meanings: a disc, for example for the moon or a mirror; the sun as a heavenly body; a place where solar gods may manifest; or the name of a deity.\(^2\) Use of the term |tn for the sun-disc is well-attested during the Middle Kingdom, and as a deity from the 18\(^{th}\) Dynasty onward.\(^3\) On a scarab of Thutmose IV the Aten is mentioned as a god of battles – “the King fought with the Aton before him...to make the foreigners to be like the [Egyptian] people...in order to serve the Aton forever.”\(^4\) By the time of Amenhotep III the Aten was definitely seen as a god in his own right, and seems to have had a cult of his own by that stage: an official named Penbuy was named “scribe of the treasury of the temple of the Aten”\(^5\)

It seems unlikely that the Aten cult at this stage was monotheistic in tone. The famous sun hymn of the brothers Suti and Hor (which may or may not have been the inspiration for Akhenaten’s sun-hymns) praised Amun in his form as Ra, Kheperi, Harakhte, Khnum and Aten – there certainly does not seem to have been any denial of other gods and the Aten took his place among the sun-gods, though he was not as important a god as, say, Ra. “Aten had long been known, but it had been left to Akhenaten to discover his real nature and supreme dignity. He was not an invention

\(^1\) E. A. Wallis BUDGE “Tutankamen: Amenism, Atenism and Egyptian Monotheism” (London: Martin Hopkinson & Co., Ltd, 1923) p79
\(^2\) Sayed TAWFIK “Aten Studies I: Aton Before the Reign of Akhenaton”, Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts Abteilung Kairo (MDIK) XXIX (1973) p77n.1
\(^3\) See for example the stela of King Ahmose where the King is regarded “as Aton [when he] shines”; the words of Ineni, overseer at Karnak under Amenhotep I, Thutmose I, II & III and Hatshepsut on the death of Amenhotep I: “His Majesty...went forth to heaven, he became united with the Aton, he mingled with the one whom he had come from”, and the Horus name of Thutmose I, which says “...who emerges from Aton...” (Examples given in TAWFIK, ibid., p78) The example of Ineni, according to Tawfik, is to be regarded as a clear reference to Aten as a god. Donald B REDFORD writes that |tn occasionally used as a synonym for Ra or Amun-Ra during the 18\(^{th}\) Dynasty (REDFORD “The Sun-disc in Akhenaten’s Program: Its Worship and Antecedents I”, Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt XIII (1976) p50). ALDRED notes that Aten was considered a god of battles under Thutmose IV (Cyril ALDRED “Akhenaten: Pharaoh of Egypt – a new study” Thames & Hudson, 1968, p166). However, GARDINER seems to regard Aten as an invention of the late 18\(^{th}\) Dynasty as a reaction against more established gods. (Alan GARDINER “Egypt of the Pharaohs: An Introduction” Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961, p217). On opposition to Aten as a pre-18\(^{th}\) Dynasty god see works cited in TAWFIK, MDIK XXIX p77-8n.5.
\(^4\) Historical scarab of Thutmose IV, quoted in TAWFIK, MDIK XXIX, pp78-9.
\(^5\) Cited in TAWFIK, ibid., p79. GARDINER notes that “it is difficult to interpret this otherwise than as implying that the Aton already received a cult at Thebes” (Gardiner, ibid., p217). Tawfik concludes that “at least at the time of Amenhotep III or earlier a cult for the god Aton, probably [sic] with its own priests, had been existing in Thebes beside the cult of Amon.” (p82)
of the king, but a revelation to deeper perception. He was in fact old; old as the oldest god, the equal of Shu at least, and soon to become Father Re himself.'

While the cult of the Aten prior to Akhenaten does not seem to have been monotheistic in itself, it has been suggested that there was a monotheistic tendency which encouraged Akhenaten. According to V. A. Tobin, such a tendency must have existed in order for a monotheistic belief structure to have emerged under Akhenaten. During the early years of the New Kingdom a series of new sacred books were placed in Theban tombs, “The Book of What is in the Nether World”, “The Litany of the Sun” and “The Book of Caverns” which “reveal a new preoccupation with a monotheistic syncretism of ancient beliefs.” In these texts, Ra is described as the universe itself, and as the sole god. It has been suggested that the expansion of the Egyptian empire under Amenhotep III, and the ‘forced universalism’ caused by the Hykos kings caused a shift in theological thinking which naturally led towards monotheism. As the empire expanded, so the gods were seen as having dominion not only over Egypt, but over the entire world. As J. H. Breasted writes, “Monotheism is but imperialism in religion” and thus the universalist tendency in Egyptian religion led naturally to a monotheistic belief. The tendency to make the gods universal was reflected in what Jan Assmann has termed the “new sun theology”, present in the New Kingdom and to some extent foreshadowing the religious reforms of Akhenaten. He writes that “[Egyptian solar religion was] a sort of monotheism that regards the sun as the natural manifestation of the uniqueness of god and even precipitates a violent revolution in the form of Amarna religion.” This new theology, combined with the Egyptians’ “powerful urge towards monotheism” may, so the argument says, show that Akhenaten merely realised a tendency already within Egyptian religion.

Atenism under Akhenaten

While Atenism was not unknown before the time of Amenhotep IV, it was during his reign that the Aten gained great (even sole) prominence among the gods, and it is to that reign we must look to decide whether Atenism was necessarily monotheistic.

Amenhotep IV showed a marked preference for the Aten from the beginning of his reign, building a temple at Karnak in his honour, and moving to a city named in honour of the Aten in Year 6 of his reign. He gave his god a formal name, enclosed within two cartouches, the early form of which (prior to Year 9) has been translated by Hornung as “Re-Harakty, who rejoices in the horizon in his name Shu, who is Aten.” Scholars such as

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6 N. de G. DAVIES “Akhenaten at Thebes” Journal of Egyptian Archaeology IX (1923) p146
8 Cyril ALDRED “Akhenaten: Pharaoh of Egypt – a new study” Thames & Hudson, 1968, p165
Tobin and Tawfik have translated Sw as “brightness”, “light”, “heat”, or as another term for the sun, rather than the name of the god Shu. However, Morenz argues that the word Shu here is an allusion to Shu as the son of Ra-Atum and that this “thereby raises the god-king Akhanjâti (‘Akhnaton’) to unity with his father…this is a trinitarian formulation.” Morenz believes there are two ways to understand the early name of the Aten, either as a modalistic trinity of Ra-Harakhte, Shu and Aten, or a “trinity of becoming” of Ra-Harakhte, Aten and the son of Shu – who is Akhenaten. While it is certainly possible to make a case that Akhenaten was regarded as a god, to identify him either with the son of Shu, or with Shu himself, seems rather more difficult. There seems to be no reason why we should not read this ‘trinity’ as Ra-Harakhte, Aten and Shu/Akhenaten, thus identifying Akhenaten with Shu himself rather than with a conjectured “son of Shu”. Especially considering that Akhenaten referred to himself as the child of his god then in a ‘trinity of becoming’ we might expect Akhenaten to be the child of Ra-Harakhte (i.e. Shu the son of Ra) rather than the grand-child of the god. Alternately it is also possible to say that Akhenaten is to be identified with the Aten itself, and not with Shu or Ra-Harakhte (except by the nature of a trinity). As courtiers worshipped the Aten only through the intermediary of Akhenaten, their altars contained pictures of the royal family rather than representations of the god alone, and prayers in the tombs were addressed to Akhenaten rather than to the Aten directly, it is not perhaps unreasonable to assume with Aldred that “if the Aten were a Sole God, as is so often proclaimed, it is clear that his son, Akhenaten, can only be an incarnation of himself.” Donald Redford has also written that the term Hoy, used in the name of the Aten, had alternate meanings. During the reign of Amenhotep III, Pr-Hoy was used as a term for the palace at MalQata, which was used for the celebration of the jubilees, and this palace certainly seems to have had significance for the new faith, as the ‘palace-window’ scene found in Theban tombs (indicating the rewards given to a righteous official by his king) was also influenced by the palace of MalQata, according to N. de G. Davies. Jubilees were also a part of the titles of the Aten – perhaps reflecting his role


14 Siegfried MORENZ, “Egyptian Religion” p147

15 “Since you [Aten] founded the world, you rouse them/ for your son, who emerged from your body,/ the king of the two Egypts, who lives on Maat, Neferkheperure Waenre,/ the son of Re, who lives on Maat,/ the lord of diadems, Akhenaten, great in his lifetime...” (The Great Hymn to the Aten, translated by Erik HORNUNG, “Akhenaten and the Religion of Light” Tr. David Lorton, Cornell University Press, 1999, p83)

16 Cyril ALRED “Akhenaten: Pharaoh of Egypt – a new study” (Thames & Hudson, 1968) p185

17 Cyril ALRED “Akhenaten: Pharaoh of Egypt – a new study” (Thames & Hudson, 1968) p185

18 Cyril ALRED “Akhenaten: Pharaoh of Egypt – a new study” (Thames & Hudson, 1968) p185


20 N. de G. DAVIES “Akhenaten at Thebes” Journal of Egyptian Archaeology IX (1923) p148. Davies writes “the design of the ‘palace window’...must, I think, be a distorted reflection of the throne chamber at MalQatah..."
as the ‘heavenly Pharaoh – and he was called “the Great Living Aten who is in Jubilee”’

Redford writes, “in the second year of Akhenaten’s reign, we encounter the expanded form bXn "oy-m-#Xt, which can only be rendered as ‘the castle of him who rejoices in the horizon’...On the basis of this meaning, then, the most obvious candidate for the epithet ‘He who rejoices in the horizon’ is the king himself.”

Sayed Tawfik writes that the talatat of Karnak show that Akhenaten viewed himself as a god, as some show the title “chamberlain and first prophet or Nefer-khepru-Re waO-en-Re” (Akhenaten). According to Aldred, “Akhenaten” means “the Effective Spirit (=incarnation) of the Aten” thus showing that Akhenaten was indeed regarded as the Aten-made-flesh. It certainly seems possible that Akhenaten could be regarded as a member of the ‘trinity of becoming’, and even possible that he was identified with the Aten itself.

The question in all this is whether, if Akhenaten’s god was in such a ‘trinity of becoming’, it was therefore monotheistic? Trinities were not unknown in Egypt prior to Akhenaten, as Morenz points out but religion before Akhenaten is not generally said to be explicitly monotheistic. Nor does the existence of such a god tell us anything about how adherents regarded the claims of other gods. Even if Akhenaten is to be regarded as a member of this trinity of gods, then we need not stray from monotheism. The wording of the title of the Aten seems to make it clear that Shu and Aten are to be regarded as forms of Ra-Harakhte, whether as separate persons within one godhead, or different modes of the one god, this is still a monotheistic formula.

In Year 9 of Akhenaten’s rule, he changed the title of his god to “The Living One, Ra, ruler of the two horizons, who rejoices in the horizon in his name as Ra who has come in the Aten.” Akhenaten thus removed the names of Harakhte and Shu from his god. This later stage of his reign also saw persecution of other gods on monuments, with the name of Amun in particular being erased even from the name of the king’s father Amenhotep III. The representation of the Aten no longer included the falcon-headed god, and even the plural “gods” was sometimes removed, and the word for “god” was replaced with “aten”.

This period of the reign also saw the foundation of a new city – Akhetaten – as the home of the god in Year 6.

This stage of the reign has been seen as indisputably proving the monotheistic character of Akhenaten’s new religion – if Akhenaten believed the other gods of Egypt existed and had power, he would not have defaced their names in the manner

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19 Cited in Cyril ALDRED “Akhenaten: Pharaoh of Egypt – a new study” (Thames & Hudson, 1968) p168. Aten seems to have held three jubilees, and they seem to have coincided with the jubilees of Amenhotep III, during the time in which Aldred posits a co-regency between Amenhotep III and IV.


21 Cyril ALDRED “Akhenaten: Pharaoh of Egypt – a new study” (Thames & Hudson, 1968) p185

22 Siegfried MORENZ “Egyptian Religion” Tr. Ann E. Keep, (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd, 1960) pp142-149. Morenz believes that these trinities were fundamentally monotheistic, that they showed the tendency of Egyptian religion to worship “one God with many aspects” (p150)

23 (onX Ro HQ# #Xty Hoy m #Xt m rl fm Ro li ti m Itn) Translated by Vincent Arieh TOBIN “Theological Principles of Egyptian Religion” (New York: Peter Lang, 1989) p164. This is also translated as “ReO ruler of the horizon in his manifestation of ReO, the father, who returns as the Aton” (Sayed TAWFIK “Aten Studies IV: Was Aton – The God of Akhenaten – Only a Manifestation of the God ReO?” MDIK XXXII 1976 p220) and “Live Re, the ruler of the horizon, who rejoices in the horizon in his name Re the father (?), who returns as Aten” (Erik HORNUNG “Akhenaten and the Religion of Light” Tr. David Lorton, Cornell University Press, 1999, p76)

24 So instead of the “divine [god-] offering” they now had the “Aten-offering”. As cited in J. H. BREASTED “Development of Religion and Thought in Ancient Egypt” (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1912)
So Hornung writes that “henotheism has been transformed into monotheism.” At this stage. According to Hornung, the early part of the reign saw Akhenaten embrace henotheism, he worshipped one god – Ra/Aten – but did not conceive of him as a one-and-only existing god. Thus, when he came to believe that Aten was the only god who existed, he naturally wished to stop others worshipping non-existent gods like Amun and Osiris. Some others have believed that Akhenaten was a monotheist from the start of his reign, but ignored the worship of (for him) non-existent deities until he received opposition to his reforms (and specifically his consumption of temple revenues for the glory of the Aten) from the priesthoods of those old religion – especially the priests of Amun. Hornung suggests that Atenism be considered monotheistic for the same reason that the Old Testament is considered monotheistic – because the god is jealous of his worshippers, and that this is a statement of the non-existence of other gods than he. Whereas before Akhenaten a Pharaoh might have signified his preference for one god over the others (i.e. been a henotheist), never before had anyone removed the names of the other gods, never before had anyone negated their existence in such a visible fashion. As Hornung writes, “the blow struck at the many deities of the traditional pantheon was a clear sign that Akhenaten was now intent on the uncompromising realization of a more or less strict monotheism.”

However, even Hornung admits that “not once is it stated that [Akhenaten] had the intention of converting all of Egypt to belief in Aten” which seems inconsistent with his persecution of Amun. Why would he not seek to replace the worship of Amun and the rest of the pantheon with the worship of Aten? If Akhenaten was a monotheist, this seems particularly strange, as he would not then believe Amun *et al* existed or had power of any sort and we might expect him either to completely ignore those deities, or persecute them and replace their worship with that of the true god Aten. Instead, however, we see Akhenaten destroy monuments containing the names of other gods, but not destroying temples or cult centres, and some of this destruction was inconsistent – the name of Amun in Akhenaten’s own former name (Amenhotep IV) was sometimes not removed, and Thoth was not affected by the change. N. de G. Davies writes, “The deletion of the name of Amûn only displays a political and particular antagonism; that of the word ‘gods’, however, is on a different plane, and does indicate a theoretical monotheism. But that exists also in many very imperfect religions.” Davies does not call Atenism a monotheistic system because of the inconsistencies within it – for example the name of Amenhotep IV where it appeared on monuments set up before he changed his name was sometimes left, and the Theban tomb of Parennefer (cup-bearer and chamberlain of Akhenaten), and where Davies believes he came back to be buried once the Atenists had left El-

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27 Thus TOBIN says, “It [Atenism] attempted to destroy all other deities instead of just ignoring them. The basis of this, however, appears not to have been a theological one, but rather one which was political and perhaps even fanatic.” Vincent Arieh TOBIN “Theological Principles of Egyptian Religion” (New York: Peter Lang, 1989) p167. However Cyril ALDRED believes there was no opposition to Akhenaten’s reforms from anyone in Egypt, and suggests that this is the invention of 19th Century Egyptologists who were obsessed with religious conflicts in Europe. He says, “any suggestion, therefore, that an official or unofficial opposition to Akhenaten existed can be discounted.” (“Akhenaten: Pharaoh of Egypt – a new study” Thames & Hudson, 1968, p194)
29 Erik HORNUNG, ibid., p86
30 N. de G. DAVIES, “Akhenaten at Thebes” Journal of Egyptian Archaeology IX (1923) p150
Amarna, calls him the “superintendent of the priests of all the gods”.

Davies characterises the Amarna system as henotheism, as a monotheistic system forced to compromise with a polytheistic world.

We cannot characterise Atenism as polytheistic, because it is a matter of fact that Akhenaten did not acknowledge any other deities in the writings about Aten, but we reach problems if we say that those writings or the iconography indicate a monotheistic system – as many authors have pointed out, it is hardly unknown for gods to be described as “Lord of all”, “one”, “sole”, “alone” or “self-created” and yet to be within a polytheistic system. They may be said to indicate a henotheistic system, “worship of one god at a time but not of a single god” as Hornung defines it. The most compelling piece of evidence for the idea that Atenism was a monotheistic system appears to be the erasure of the word “gods” from monuments, and the replacement of the word “god” with “aten”. The fact that this was not done everywhere, and that even tombs of Atenists such as Parennefer could contain references to gods, and even say that he was in charge of the priests of all the gods, makes definite identification of the Amarna system as monotheistic difficult. We have relatively little information on the Amarna beliefs – due to the destruction of Tel El-Amarna, and the fact that those beliefs did not outlive Akhenaten. That lack of information makes it difficult to decide whether Atenism was monotheistic or not – as there are indications of both monotheism, and of henotheism, and possibly of other explanations for the actions of Akhenaten as well. Perhaps, though, we should take the approach of Jan Assmann, and not attempt to label Amarna beliefs in that way, as he says: “It is first and foremost not a matter of importance whether there are other gods besides this solitary god of the solar journey, but rather than he can be thought of and described as acting without reference to other gods.”

We can certainly label Aten as a solitary god, and in the absence of any statement on the existence or non-existence of other god from Atenist sources, perhaps it is better to think of him simply as a solitary god, and to define Atenism as a monolatrous religion, to use Morenz’s definition.

31 N. de G. Davies, *ibid.*, p150n.2 emphasis his.
32 As Tobin puts it, “this traditional plurality of deities, a polytheistic form of expression, would have made it virtually impossible for the myth-orientated mentality of Egypt to reject all other deities in favour of one sole god”. (Vincent Arish Tobin “Theological Principles of Egyptian Religion” New York: Peter Lang, 1989, p157) Evidently this mythological orientation extended even to the Atenists, if we are to interpret their failure to expunge the name of Amun and of other gods from monuments as a revolt against the destruction of their traditional gods.
33 Some have suggested that the mentions of Ra indicate a polytheistic or duothestic system, but it would seem to be the case that Ra and Aten were viewed as one and the same god. See Sayed Tawfiq “Aton Studies IV: Was Aton – The God of Akhenaten – Only a Manifestation of the God ReO?” MDIK XXXII 1976