The Religious Reforms of Akhenaten

**Stage 1**

In the first months of his reign the king announced a new form of the solar god which had been growing in popularity during the reigns of his immediate predecessors. This god was Re-Haronkhete, The Great Sun-Disk, The Fashioner of Brightness and The Living Disk who Brightens the Land with his Beauty.

In this proclamation, known only from a very damaged text found on two talatat blocks, he stated that his new god was unique. The Aten was a living, self-created god represented only by the light that radiated from the sun-disk. Other gods were worshipped as images or statues made by craftsmen from descriptions kept in books in the temple archives.

At this stage his new supreme god was still represented by the falcon-headed man in a lof with the sun-disk on his head. In the initial decoration of his father’s pylons, Amenhotep IV and his god were depicted opposite each other across a table of offerings. Revisited points out that in this earliest form, there is evidence of a close relationship with the king. In some scenes the falcon-headed god was shown with the same pot-belly as the pharaoh.

**Stage 2**

Possibly in his second or third year, Amenhotep IV introduced some major changes. These may have coincided with his jubilee which for some reason he held in his third year.

The anthropomorphic god (falcon-headed man) was replaced with an icon. The disk remained but took on another form. The Aten was now represented as a large disk with a reed and arm-like rays ending in hands. In some depictions the hands hold ankers and offer this symbol of life to the king. In other scenes the hands are open to accept the king’s abundant offerings.

The god’s name was now enclosed in two cartouches (showing it was a heavenly king) and accompanied by the new title Aton, the Living, the Great, Who is in Judgement, Lord of Heaven and Earth.

This new icon, with its accompanying double cartouches and new epitaphs, was inscribed on the Karnak pylons and on the walls of the new sun-temple complex that the king was building at east Karnak. However, an interesting feature of the reliefs in the dominance of Amenhotep IV in relation to the symbol of the sun-disk. The king’s figure is large and occupies the centre of the scene.

The significance of these changes is obvious.

- By choosing an icon rather than an anthropomorphic form for his god, Amenhotep IV was breaking with the tradition of cult images and the ritual associated with them. He was also pointing out that his god built himself by himself without the involvement of any human hand.

- The size and position of the image of the king in the scenes was an affirmation of the king’s divinity — the manifestation of the sun-disk on earth. The king became the focus of worship since only he could have a relationship with the Aten.

Despite his announcement of the supremacy of the Aton, Amenhotep IV built his new temples just outside the temple enclosure of the great Amun-Ra at Karnak. At this stage in the development of Amenhotep’s religious ideas, there was no break with any other god and the worship of the Aten was carried on side by side with that of Amun.

**Stage 3**

From year 5 to 9, Amenhotep’s belief that the sun-disk was the one and only god, was implemented with greater intensity. He decided to build a cult centre which belonged exclusively to Aten and about the same time took actions against the other gods. The chief focus of his attack was the great god of the Egyptian empire, Amun. As evidence of his break with Amun he changed his name from Amenhotep-Chen to Amun-Hatpti to Akhenaten (He who is Satisfactory to the Aton). Akhenaten ordered the closure of all the temples of other gods and the sanctuaries of the gods’ names from the walls of temples and tombs. The stelae of gods such as Osiris were no longer mentioned in the texts and the Canaanitish cities no longer practiced. The plural word gods was never used again during Akhenaten’s reign.

![The Great Sun-Disk](image-url)
Aten as a universal god
The monotheistic nature of Akhenaten’s religion has often been discussed. In the ‘Hymn to the Aten’ it is stated that Aten cherished all living things in all countries. Was the worship of the Aten linked to the symbol of the sun that all countries could share?

But only Akhenaten and his family could worship the Aten directly. All other Egyptians instead worshipped Akhenaten as a god on Earth. Prayers were directed to Akhenaten, not the Aten. Akhenaten was referred to as ‘the good god’, a common New Kingdom term for the king, and was depicted as the physical son of Aten. The Aten was seen as both a creator god and a natural source whose power was channelled to Earth through the king and his queen, Nefertiti.

At Amarna, most wealthy private houses had a shrine in the walled garden dedicated to the royal family and the Aten. Individuals could still make private temple donations and dedicate prayers to the Aten. Bronze vessels were found in the sanctuary of the Great Aten temple, one of which was dedicated by a military officer named Ramose.

The temple to the Aten, built in the new city, was also revolutionary. It was open to the light and air so that the Aten could be seen and worshipped. In contrast, the mysterious inner sanctums of the Amen temple at Karnak were dark and enclosed. A letter sent to Akhenaten possibly suggests that ceremonies were held out in the direct sunlight, to the horror of foreign delegates:

Why should messengers be made to stay out continually in the sun and so die in the sun? If staying out in the sun means profit for the king, then let the messenger stay out and let him die right there in the sun!

*Amarna Letters, 17*

The rule of one god
Akhenaten’s religion has been regarded by some historians as being monotheistic: that is, permitting the worship of only one god. In a few inscriptions the words ‘the gods’ were erased. Funeral inscriptions from tombs no longer mentioned Osiris or Anubis, but were directed to the Aten or through the king to the Aten.

Between Years 8 and 12, the god Amun was particularly singled out for persecution. It is not clear if his temple was closed down but his name was hacked out of inscriptions. The Amun was even removed from Akhenaten’s father’s name (Amenhotep III); during Akhenaten’s reign, Amenhotep was referred to as Neb-maat-Re. The name of Amun was even removed from small personal items such as pots for eye make-up.

It is not clear how the general population of Egypt viewed the reforms. Historian, Nick Reeves has interpreted the changes were dramatic (see right).

Why did the religion of Aten collapse?
Akhenaten’s hymn to the Aten stressed his personal relationship to the Aten. This personal relationship helps to explain why Akhenaten’s religion failed: the main link between ordinary people and the Aten was through Akhenaten himself and broke down once he had died.

For ordinary folk, there is little doubt that Akhenaten’s actions as king over time inflicted the greatest misery: the people were confused by the man’s religious vision, frightened by the ruthless manner in which it was imposed and quite likely appalled by his personal behaviour.

N. Reeves, *The Complete Valley of the Kings*, p.163

Left: Nefertiti and daughter and daughter making an offering to Amenhotep IV (before he became Akhenaten). Wall relief from Karnak.

Right: A wall relief from the tomb of Amarna. The scene has the king making offerings to Aten which bathes the royal family in life-giving rays.
THE GREAT HYMN

Your appearing is beautiful
in the horizon of heaven,
The Living Aten, the beginning of life;
you rise in the horizon of the east,
you fill every land with your beauty.
You are very beautiful, brilliant
and exalted above earth.
Your beams encompass all lands
which you have made.
You are the sun, you set their bounds,
You bind them with your love.
You are afar off, but your beams are upon the land;
you are on high, but the day passes with your going.
You rest in the western horizon of heaven,
and the land is in darkness like the dead.
They lie in their houses, their heads are covered,
Their breath is shut up, and eye sees not to eye;
Their things are taken, even from under their heads,
and they know it not.
Every lion comes forth from his den,
and all the serpents then bite;
the night shines with its lights,
the land lies in silence;
for he who made them is in his horizon.
The land brightens,
for you rise in the horizon,
shining as the Aten in the day;
the darkness flees,
for you give your beams,
Both lands are rejoicing every day.

Men awake and stand upon their feet,
for you lift them up;
they bathe their limbs,
they clothe themselves,
they lift their heads in adoration of your rising,
throughout the land they do their labours.
The cattle all rest in their pastures,
where grow the trees and herbs;
the birds fly in their haunts,
their wings adoring your ka,
all the flocks leap upon their feet,
the small birds live when you rise upon them.
The ships go forth north and south,
for every way opens at your rising.
The fishes in the river swim up to greet you,
your beams are within the depth of the great sea.
You created conception in women,
making the issue of mankind;
you make the son to live in the body of his mother,
you quiet him that he should not mourn,
nursing him in the body,
giving the spirit that all his growth may live.

When he comes forth on the day of his birth,
you open his mouth to speak,
you do what he needs.
The small bird in the egg, sounding within the shell,
you give to it breath within the egg,
to give life to that which you make.

It gathers itself to break forth from the egg,
it comes from the egg, and chirps with all its might,
Runs on its feet, when it has come forth.

How many are the things which you have made!
You created the land by your will, you alone,
with peoples, herds and flocks,
everything on the face of the earth that walks on its feet,
everything in the air that flies with its wings.
In the hills from Syria to Kush,
and the plain of Egypt,
you give to every one his place,
you frame their lives,
to every one his belongings,
reckoning his length of days;

Their tongues are diverse in their speech,
their natures in the colour of their skin.
As the divider you divide the strange peoples.
When you have made the Nile beneath the earth,
you bring it according to your will
to make the people to live:
Even as you have formed them unto yourself,
you are throughout their Lord,
even in their weakness.

O Lord of the land that rises for them.
Aten of the day,
revered by every distant land,
you make their life,
you placed a Nile in heaven
that it may rain upon them,
that it may make waters upon the hills
like the great sea,
watering their fields amongst their cities.
How excellent are your ways!

O Lord of eternity,
the Nile in Heaven is for the strange people,
and all wild beasts that go upon their feet.
The Nile that comes from below the earth
is for the land of Egypt,
that it may nourish every field.

You shine and they live by you.
You make the seasons of the year
to create all your works;
the winter making them cool,
the summer giving warmth.

You make the far-off heaven,
that you may rise in it,
that you may see all that you made
when you were alone.

Rising in your forms as the living Aten,
shining afar off and returning.

The villages, the cities, and the tribes,
on the road and the river,
all eyes see you before them,
you are the Aten of the day over all the land.

You are in my heart,
there is none who knows you,
excepting your son Akhnaten;
you cause that he should have understanding,
in your ways and in your might.

The land is in your hand,
even as you have made them;
You shine and they live,
and when you set they die;
for by you the people live,
they look on your excellencies until your setting;
they lay down all their labours
when you set in the west,
and when you rise, they grow.

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Since the day that you laid the
foundations of the earth,
you raised them up for your son
who came forth from your substance,
the king of Egypt, living in Truth,
lord of both lands, Akhnaten,
son of the sun, living in Truth, Akhenaten,
great in his duration;
Nefer'referu'Aten
Nefer'iti, living and flourishing
for ever eternally.