

ATENISM: MONOTHEISM OR HENOTHEISM?

These two objects represent each of the two proposed classifications for the Atenism instituted by Akhenaten. One points towards Atenism being a monotheistic religion (belief in one god) while the other points towards it being henotheistic (the belief in one god primarily, but not discounting the existence of other deities). But they also bring problems of their own, and determining whether Atenism was monotheistic or henotheistic is not so clear-cut.

MONOTHEISM



London: The British Museum. Museum item number EA5.

Name of Amenhotep III removing the reference to Amun (later restored). Features on the back of a statue of Amenhotep III from his temple at Thebes.

A systematic attempt to erase a god of the traditional ancient Egyptian pantheon took place in the last five years of Akhenaten's reign. In this erasure physical traces of Amun were removed — even from the name of Akhenaten's father Amenhotep III (Hoffmeier 2015: 200), demonstrating the extent this removal went. The efforts at erasure were “comprehensive, if not complete” by the time Akhenaten died (Quirke 2001: 169).

This is highly significant because erasing the names was considered tantamount to obliterating the deity itself, and points towards Atenism being monotheistic (Hoffmeier 2015: 203). The attack on the name of Amun (along with his consort Mut) is even more significant as it was a deliberate attempt to destroy the ‘father’ god of Egypt and replace it with the Aten (Quirke 2001: 168) who was all-encompassing.

However: the names of other deities were not erased, e.g. Sphinx Stela of Amenhotep II at Giza (Hoffmeier 2015: 201). Only Amun was systematically persecuted (Assmann 2001: 218).

How can we make sense of this?

The attack on Amun began after the death of Akhenaten's mother Tiye — an appropriate time to begin (Quirke 2001: 167). If Akhenaten lived longer, perhaps the destruction of other deities would have been completed to the same extent.

Was Atenism a monotheism, albeit one whose position was never was fully cemented in Akhenaten's lifetime?



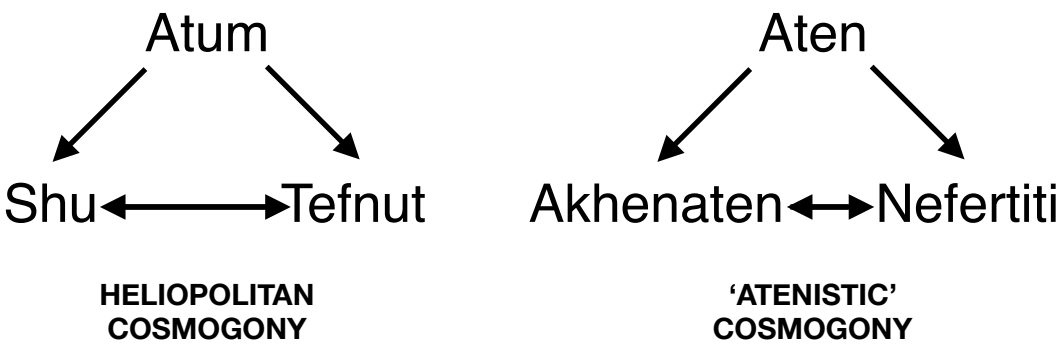
New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Accession Number: 26.7.767

HENOTHEISM

Gold signet ring discovered at Amarna of Akhenaten and Nefertiti as the deities Shu and Tefnut respectively.

Why would Akhenaten and his wife Nefertiti be represented as two deities that should not exist within the new monotheistic framework?

The ring (and other depiction) suggest that Atenism was just a henotheistic reformulation of conventional Egyptian religion. Specifically, a complex adaptation of Heliopolitan theology and that ideas expressed in the Coffin Texts 80 (Assmann 2001: 178-179).



This indicates that the worship of other deities existed alongside Aten and suggests a henotheistic religion (Brewer and Teeter 1999: 53)

However: this reformulation of Heliopolitan theology could be seen in a monotheistic light. If Shu and Tefnut became concepts — not deities in their own right — they could still exist in a new monotheistic theology (much like the concept of the Trinity in Christianity).

How can we make sense of this?

Shu and Tefnut became *concepts* (of air and moisture), and were in essence replaced by the triad with Akhenaten and Nefertiti (van Dijk 2001: 269) who embodied these concepts.

Similarly, Maat already existed as a concept (embodied and upheld by the Pharaoh as it had been in the traditional Egyptian religious thought). *As such the representations of these deities may not exclude Atenism from being classified as a monotheism.*

Bibliography

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