

Reformed Polytheism: Muhammad & Pharaoh Akhenaten (*www.bible.ca)

When it comes to starting a new religion, the parallels between Muhammad (600AD) and Pharaoh Akhenaten (1400 BC) are stunning. We see a "something old, something new" theme in both religious founders.

A. Akhenaten learns Monotheism from the Jews:

Although we cannot know for certain, the Jews are the obvious influence for monotheism in Egypt. Jacob and his twelve sons moved to Egypt as free men in about 1900 BC. Akhenaten began his reign in 1379 AD. Since the exodus of the Jews is dated at about 1450 BC, that means that Akhenaten lived about 70 years after the Pharaoh who experienced the 10 plagues of Moses. This would allow just enough time for all Akhenaten's ancestors who hated Jehovah, the monotheistic God of the Jews, to die. Akhenaten was therefore free to abandon the many false gods of Egypt in favor of his own version of monotheism, without any personal emotional baggage connected with monotheism. But rather than a 70 year old memory of how Jehovah triumphed over Egypt, why not current events? If our timing is right, the Jews began their occupation of Palestine about 30 years before Akhenaten became Pharaoh. This also means that Joshua and Akhenaten lived at the same time and knew of each other. Surely the nations that surrounded Israel learned to fear Jehovah as a more powerful God than the pagan gods who were driven out of Palestine. So for 70 years, Jehovah was triumphing over all the gods of the nations. This spectacular display of the advantages of monotheism surely must have impressed Akhenaten who would have surely heard about it. In fact it may have been the stories he heard of the conquest of Joshua that converted him to a monotheistic view. Although the connections we have suggested are circumstantial, it would be quite unbelievable that Akhenaten was unaware of the 10 plagues, the 40 years in the wilderness and the conquest of Palestine by Joshua.

We can infer with similar confidence, that Muhammad was influenced by Jewish and Christian monotheism. It is well documented that Christian missionaries had infiltrated even the interior of Arabia with the monotheistic gospel of Christ. Had Muhammad's monotheistic movement sprung up without the strong monotheist presence of Christianity, then this would be worth taking note of. But the facts of history prove the presence of non-Arab monotheism before birth of Islam.

* I do not agree with many of the views displayed on www.bible.ca. However, I still chose to present this article because it offers some valid points to consider.

B. Akhenaten: Monotheist or Henotheist?

Jehovah's Witnesses are Henotheists. Although accused of being polytheists, the correct term would be Henotheist. Jehovah's Witnesses reject the trinity and believe in an entire "henotheist" system of gods, including the "Almighty God", (the Father), "mighty God" (Son) to lesser gods including the devil, angels, and finally even men are gods. Now was Akhenaten a monotheist or a henotheist? Some suggest that Akhenaten was never a true monotheist during the Amarna period, since some evidence suggests, (although not conclusive) that he gives homage to Horus, Isis and Osiris. If he did, then Akhenaten was a henotheist. Other inclusive evidence suggests that Akhenaten viewed himself as the incarnate god Horus. After all, the whole premise of Egyptian rule by Pharaoh is that the Pharaoh is Horus on Earth; without this premise, there is no Pharaoh. Had he declared himself to not be a god, he would have immediately been deposed as a fraud. Some however, think Akhenaten may have been a closet monotheist, merely keeping the status quo. For a discussion of Akhenaten's possible monotheism, see Cyril Aldred's, "Akhenaten: King of Egypt".

C. Akhenaten's Proclamation of Monotheism:

To the complete surprise of the people and the outrage of the polytheistic priesthood, Akhenaten proclaimed that only one god "Aten" was to be worshipped and the other 733 gods were to be forsaken. Aten was somewhat unknown for two generations before Akhenaten. The popularity of the Aten is known in the reign of Amenhotep III when that ruler named the pleasure boat for his wife Tiye after the Aten. It is popularly believed that Nefertiti (and possibly Tiye) were adherents to the cult of the Aten, which was very small, and was able to magnify it through her husband (son). Other gods certainly were considered far more important to Egyptian culture at the time. For whatever reason, Akhenaten decided that Aten, an obscure "mail room" god, was to be promoted to the "board room" and become the CEO god of the official state religion. Akhenaten's command to stop worshipping the hundreds of old Egyptian gods was met with quite a bit of stubbornness with his people, and outright rebellion among the elite and powerful priesthood. Aten, formerly one of hundreds of Egyptian gods, was now the one and only god.

D. Akhenaten's banishment of competing gods:

Akhenaten was prepared to take action to ensure his new found monotheism was the dominant religion. Similar to a few of the kings and Judges of the Bible, he cleaned house by eradicating some, but not all, of the symbols or structures associated with polytheism. He tore down some pagan temples, removed publicly displayed names of some pagan gods from official buildings and statues. The god Amun, who formerly enjoyed a most popular position in Egyptian religious life, was suddenly out of a job. The extent to which Akhenaten rejected polytheism is actually astonishing since he even replaced the plural "gods" with the monotheistic singular "god" from official records, laws and proclamations. But Akhenaten did not ban the worship of all of the other gods; he particularly banned Amun and the cult of Amun-Ra since he was the former (and later) chief of all gods, a position that Akhenaten believed the Aten filled.

E. Akhenaten repackaging Polytheism

As Jeroboam, the son of Solomon understood, if you are going to start a new religion, you need to change the priesthood and places of worship. He started by making himself the High Priest, thus the top religious authority and power. He even changed his name to "Akhenaten" which means, "He who serves the Aten"; to express his new found monotheism. His original name was Amenhotep, meaning "Amun is Satisfied". In order to make a clean break from polytheism, he moved the Egyptian capitol from Thebes to a location 300 KM north and named it Akhetaten (present day Amarna), which means the "The Place Of The Aten's Effective Power." Akhenaten constructed beautiful, open air temples that would invite "divine sunlight" to bath the floor and worshippers with his presence.

Akhenaten did not like the existing logos of the sun god, so to his credit, came up with a unique new logo and symbol. Islam, on the other hand, merely copied the 2500 year old "crescent moon" logo of the pagan moon god and didn't bother to hire a graphic design artist. The crescent moon is found on top of every mosque and even at the Kaba on top of the Maqam Ibrahim, is virtually identical to that used in Babylonian moon god "Sîn" worship at Harran in 2100 BC.

Like Muhammad, Akhenaten retained the polytheistic practices and rituals of his newly repackaged monotheistic god.

In a hymn written by Akhenaten where he expresses his monotheism in poetry he says, "O thou sole god, whose power no other possesses. Though didst create the earth according to thy desire, being alone: Man, all cattle, large and small; All that are upon the earth." (Hymn to the Sun, Akhenaten, c. 1370 BC)

Note: Desperate bible skeptics suggest David plagiarized Akhenaten's hymn when he wrote Psalm 104 of the Bible. However the similarity is remote and not impressive, especially in light of the fact that Ps 104 doesn't even contain monotheistic statements like "O thou sole god, whose power no other possesses." In the very unlikely case that anyone copied, it would be Akhenaten who heard these kinds of statements from the Jews who once lived in Egypt. Perhaps David was recording an ancient Jewish Song that Pharaoh Akhenaten was familiar with and copied. However, our view is that the similarity between the two is so insignificant, that no one copied from anyone. After all, Akhenaten is praising the "sun god" while David is praising the God who created the sun.

F. Reverting to Polytheism after Akhenaten's death

Shortly before Pharaoh Akhenaten's death in 1362 BC the "forced to be monotheistic" priesthood, ruling class and common folk, desired to revert back to polytheism. Perhaps, like in many Muslim nations today, the people were never really converted, but were silenced under the threat of death. Shortly after Akhenaten's death, like the Judges of the Bible, monotheism was forgotten and all the pagan gods of Egypt were once again worshipped as before. In fact, special effort was made by Akhenaten's successors to appease the formerly shunned gods. Akhenaten's name was deleted from official king lists, and he was thereafter referred to in Egypt as "that criminal of Akhetaten." We wonder what immediate changes would take place in the Muslim controlled parts of the world, if the common people were free to practice their religion as they desire without the threat of death?

Although Muhammad never knew the details of Akhenaten's conversion to monotheism, it seems Muhammad could have learned important lessons from him on "how to start your own religion". Akhenaten was a pacifist who deplored "murdering his opposition for conquest" as most other Pharaohs practiced. Muhammad, on the other hand, "evangelized with the sword", just as we see today. The result was that the entire Arab world continued in its new found monotheism to the present.

What Muhammad and Akhenaten had in common:

- ✓ Both were born into families who worshipped hundreds of pagan gods.
- ✓ Both actively worshipped as pagan polytheists until their conversions to monotheism as adults.
- ✓ Both were strongly influenced by the monotheism of other religions. Jews and Christians.
- ✓ Both converted to a form of monotheism, where they continued to worship one pagan god. We call this repackaged polytheism.
- ✓ Both elevated obscure, lesser known deities to the top position. Aten and Allah
- ✓ Both chose the gods of celestial objects: sun and moon.
- ✓ Both banned the worship of all other pagan gods but the one pagan god they had selected.
- ✓ Both retained the name of the old polytheistic gods which the general population was familiar with: Aten and Allah.
- ✓ Both retained pagan practices and concepts in their new found monotheism.
- ✓ Both employed symbolic logos to represent their gods: solar disk with sun rays. Although Muhammad may not have directly adopted the crescent moon symbol, it was adopted shortly after his death.
- ✓ Both made themselves the highest human representative on earth for their gods. High priest and Muhammad the last and greatest prophet.
- ✓ Neither men performed any miracles or displayed any divine powers as both Moses and Christ and the apostles did when Judaism and Christianity were begun. Muhammad was a prophet without supernatural power.

How Muhammad and Akhenaten differed:

- ✓ Akhenaten's chose a lower ranking god "Aten" to be his highest god, whereas Muhammad chose "Allah" who, although not the most popular god, was considered to be a top ranking god.
- ✓ While both were former polytheists converted to monotheism, Akhenaten continued to worship the sun itself, whereas, Muhammad merely retained the disk of the crescent moon as a symbol for the one true god "Allah" who created the sun and moon. In this regard Muhammad's monotheism was superior to Akhenaten's. But then again, Muhammad had a 2600 year advantage of history over Akhenaten!
- ✓ Akhenaten's religion was one that did not require faith as it worshipped the visible sun as god. Muhammad's religion does require faith as it worships an invisible god.
- ✓ While Muhammad continued to worship the same pagan moon god in the same pagan temple (Kabah) before and after his conversion to monotheism, Akhenaten created a new temple in a new city for the old pagan god.
- ✓ The symbols and rituals of Islam are re-enactment rituals borrowed from the Bible with a grotesquely distorted mythical twist. We suggest Muhammad would have done much better had he hired a more imaginative "new religion writer". Akhenaten is clearly superior, for like Judaism and Christianity, Akhenaten realized that a new religion needed unique symbols and meanings. Muhammad failed to come up with anything new, but heavily plagiarized other religions and local myths. Akhenaten gets points for originality. While Christ introduced unique and new spiritualized meanings to physical Judaism, Islam merely creates physical re-enactments of historical events as seen in the "stand", "walk" and "throw" rituals of Islam. These ritual re-enactments evoke emotion, in the same way a remembrance day service does, but nothing new is happening.
- ✓ Akhenaten tolerated some other religions to be practiced under his domain. Muhammad murdered those who attempted to openly practice Christianity under his domain. Akhenaten was a pacifist who deplored "murdering his opposition for conquest" as most other Pharaohs practiced. Muhammad, on the other hand, "evangelized with the sword". In the absence of miraculous signs and powers,

Muhammad chose the necessary path to ensure his newly invented religion would endure. Akhenaten's religion of monotheism collapsed shortly after his death, while Muhammad's has endured the centuries.