

HOW CAN I FIND A DISTANT GOD?

Reflections after long, close examination of "Pharaohs of the Sun: Akhenaten Nefertiti Tutankhamen" (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)--collected from Germany, Holland, Egypt, France, & the USA. Instead of being a general Ancient Egypt exhibit such as I've seen in a number of countries, this one is limited to "the Amarna Age" (broadly defined as the 100 years before & including the coronation of King [pharaoh] Tut[ankhamen], 1332 BC/BCE--who abandoned Amarna [built by Akhenaten on virgin ground, as Egypt's Aten-worshipping capital, as a removal from Thebes, Egypt's old Amen-worshipping capital] & returned the capital to Thebes-&Amen, honorifically changing his name from his birth-name, Tutankhaten).)....The 267 pieces have come from 36 museums.

1 In our time, the early Luther's gnawing question "How can I find a gracious God?" has become "How can I find a gracious neighbor?" The vertical has collapsed into the horizontal, the theocentric into the anthropocentric. How refreshing, then, to meditate at least momentarily on Akhenaten,* who deliberately & systematically & thoroughly reversed the direction: he was, to the neglect of his empire (but not of his family), God-centered, Aten-intoxicated. Thebes, with the greatest wealth & widest extent of power Egypt ever achieved (parallel with the USA today), had domesticated the old pantheon: the god/desses were promiscuously blessing the Egyptians, who accordingly needed (in their opinion) to pay only pro-forma (not heart-felt) attention to religion: immanent indifference, let's call it: the deities had become, as it were, big grandparently Egyptians whose statues of all sizes, public & private, rendered them *too close*.

King Akh.'s analysis was that the renewal of religion & thus of culture depended on a recovery from the collapse of transcendence. The recovery occurred first in his inner life in response to a question I've framed in this Thinksheet's title. Bunyan's pilgrim left the City of Destruction (his Thebes) to walk toward the Celestial City (his Amarna): both Akh. & Pilgrim got distance with their feet.

We have here, I believe, an anthro-historical principle, viz., cultural **gravity**: creative-revealed transcendence, left to fall, falls into everyday commonsensical immanence. On religion's gender metaphor, the goddesses succeed the gods. (At this stage of our culture, the media cannot say "Father God" but easily say "Mother Earth.")

2 Akh. often & easily said "Father" Aten, to whom he was divine Son & mediator. (PROBLEM: Since he taught that he alone was mediator of Aten, Aten religion died when Akh. died.) (Being at least biologically closer to the children, the mother symbolizes immanence & the father transcendence--a generally accepted anthropological fact [as in Egypt's Osiris/Isis/Horus mythizing].)

3 A homely analogy: The ball in the air is masculine & the ground is feminine, & the ground waits for the ball to fall: sustaining-redefining the masculine is the cultural & cosmic project, which usually (synchronically & diachronically) fails, as at present in the USA (where we're beginning to get book-titles such as THE DECLINE OF THE MALE and THE FEMINIZATION OF THE CHURCH). Gods (male) & men (male) need something to do; & wherever heaven & earth are kept at a healthy distance, they are somehow put in charge (to speak, humorously, as though this were in the cultural mind & within the human will).

How is this relevant to Akh. (male) & Aten (his masculine exclusive deity)? Speaking of him, W.Rich.Comstock (gen.ed. of RELIGION AND MAN: AN INTRODUCTION [H&R/71]) says this: "In the civilization of the Near East [which now, against Eurocentrism, is called the Far West] some **distance** between the divine and the human worlds is maintained."

HISTORICAL PRINCIPLE: Human societies evolve from tribal (gathering/hunting/herding *feminine* [goddess-prevailing]) to urban--"civilized" ([literally, "citified"] *masculine* [god-prevailing]). On close inspection, some exceptions turn out to be not so: Athena, divine patroness of Athens, is a motherless daughter of the god Zeus. Even radical feminist neo-mythologists such as Gimbutas & Eisler grant this principle (& of course give their radical-feminist spin to it).

4 Akh. & Moses--both Egyptian names--were urban in upbringing & used **masculine pronouns** in addressing deity. As monotheists (or at least henotheists), they experienced deity as at maximum distance from humanity (i.e., transcendent), but also as providentially close (i.e., immanent). Aten & Yahweh set in order (Egyptian,

"maat"; Hebrew, "emeth"-"seder"-"mishpat") the universe, which they rule as (masculine) king (Egyptian, "pharaoh"; Hebrew, "melek"); & both, as (masculine) father, love & superintend life (especially, respectively, Egyptian & Hebrew life). Being singular deities, neither had a (female) consort: no room for goddess religion.

IRONY: Since goddess religion is now experiencing, especially in America, a revival, one would expect biblical thinkers to re-emphasize the linguistic masculinity of the biblical deity (not, of course, ontological masculinity)--but the very opposite is occurring, as in old-line Protestant dumping of the Bible's (all-&-only masculine) pronouns for God! This feminist-pacifying ploy plays into the hands of the Great Goddess, Mother Earth: it's become common for the media to refer to deity as "he or she," & for some avant-garde clergy even to alternate "he" & "she." And earthly gender-politics is being transcendentalized as a feminist **redesigning of deity** (including suppressing the Great Tradition's only-masculine titles/names for God with the exception of a few neuters [e.g. "Rock"] & common-gender nouns [e.g., "Friend"]). Dominoes: society gets feminized, then the church, then heaven. Meanwhile, thank God, most Christians on this globe are unaware of these fatal liberal Protestant language-concessions to gender feminism. Opposing this heresy are the Great Tradition (including the Bible), anthropology, social psychology, & history of religions.

5 The esthetic aspect of Akh.'s new religion correlates, in creativity, with his religious innovations. Akh.'s personal revolutionary spirit in religion & the arts intensified the vision of his father Amenhotep III, who ruled in Thebes & whose name included "Amen," the god of Thebes. As god of the sun, Amen was the successor to Ra, the universe's creator-maintainer-guide (& whose name appears in Ra-mses II, probably the pharaoh of Moses ["-mses"] a few generations after Akh.).

The traditional stiff conventions for the visual representation of Amen yielded, under the king who renamed himself from AMENhotep to AkhenATEN, to a free-style rendering of the new only god Aten, whom Akh.'s father had worshiped as the solar radiance (Amen the solar disc, Aten the light streaming from the sun & usually pictured as beams ending in hands of blessing, sometimes carrying to the very lips of Akh. the ankh, symbol of life.)

A PARALLEL: Like Celtic Christian art almost 20 centuries afterward, Akh.'s art (which in architecture, sculpture, engraving, & painting he personally directed) reveled in the multiformity of nature--as he said in his Hymn to Aten, "How various is the world you have created, each thing mysterious, sacred to sight...!....You fashioned earth to your heart's desire,...filled it with man and the family of creatures." Aten (says the hymn) is father, love, the light & body-penetrating warmth of the sun (& so, Aten within!); & he is the joy of all creation, & our joy in creation (& in creating!). (How refreshing: nature all over the place, but no Mother Earth.)

6 You'd be wrong were you to think that this emphasis on divine-masculine language reflected a low status for women in ancient Egypt: they had the highest status (as far as we know) in the world of women, superior to that of women in other societies of the period (semitic [Babylonian, Hebrew], hellenic [Cyprus-Greece-Philistia], et al). The wife-mother in the home had no equal except, much later, possibly the Roman matron (who was a powerful factor [visible in the NT] in the spread of early Christianity; she modeled for women in the entire Roman Empire)....A paradoxical double fact: No evidence that women did better under goddesses, some evidence that they did better under gods. Conclusion: The current softening (by redesigning) of the biblical deity will not prove to be good news for women, though feminized females/males predict it will be.

Akh.'s queen Nefertiti was a stunning beauty. The current traveling exhibit does not include the most breathtaking image of her, the full-color head I saw long ago in E.Berlin with a communist guard on either side to protect her. (Doubtless the Dalmen Museum wouldn't let her travel to Boston.) She's the only ancient Egyptian queen ever represented as wielding royal power; she was virtual co-regent with Akh., whose diplomatic correspondence was discovered at Amarna in 1887 & is still our primary source of international relations of the period (apparently including the Hebrews; but no evidence of Akh.'s monotheism influencing Moses*).

7 Unlike Father Aten's Son Akh. the only mediator, Jesus the only mediator didn't stay dead--or Christianity would have died as Atenism did, viz. when the founder died....Jesus said God "causes his sun to shine" on all: Aten is grace.