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| **New Kingdom and Religion**   |  | | --- | | [[Women depicted in tombs Deir el-Medineh](javascript:launchImage())](javascript:launchImage()) | | Click on the image for a gallery view |   **With many local and national gods, Egyptian religion was a natural response to the mysteries of the universe and reflected the worries of everyday life in the Ancient World.**  Over the last thousand years, scientific discoveries have helped explain the natural world. We know about our bodies, conception and childbirth, and how diseases spread. We understand how the solar system works, the relationship of the earth, the moon and the sun, and therefore what causes day and night.   Three thousand years ago, the ancient Egyptians observed the same natural phenomena but could not explain them. They could see that day followed night, that tides came and went and that crops grew or failed. But they didn't know why.   **Mysterious and frightening**  This made the world confusing and frightening. So it was logical for them to use religion to explain these mysteries. The actions of the gods provided convincing explanations where no other existed. The gods caused night and day, harvest and famine, light and dark, because if they didn't, what or who did?   Religion helped Egyptians go about their lives without worrying too much. If they honored the right gods in the right way at the right time, all would be well.   **Maat**  Central to Egyptian religion was 'Maat' - the rightful order of the universe, established by the gods at the beginning of time. Maat was crucial to human life and included ideas of truth, justice and moderation.   If Maat was lost, the country could experience chaos - 'Isfet'. Peaceful and prosperous years were credited to a strong presence of Maat, whereas years of civil unrest were blamed on Isfet.   |  | | --- | | Ramesses II | | Ramesses II |   The [pharaoh](http://www.pbs.org/empires/egypt/newkingdom/pharaohs.html) was responsible for Maat. He was expected to control every part of Egyptian life. Although he had deputies to do some of the work, the buck stopped with him. He accepted praise when things went well, but took the blame for bad years.   **Polytheism**  Unlike the major religions of future centuries, like Islam or Christianity, Egyptian religion did not bring a single set of beliefs. Egyptians were polytheists - they worshipped more than one god.   And there were hundreds to choose from. Some were minor or local gods, while others were more important and much more powerful.   King of the Gods was Amen-Re, who came to prominence in Thebes during the New Kingdom. Both [Ahmose](http://www.pbs.org/empires/egypt/newkingdom/ahmose.html) and Tuthmosis II credited him for their military victories and his influence increased over the following centuries.   **Death and burial**  Egyptian culture attached a great deal of importance to burial rituals. The buildings, prayers and ceremonies were mainly designed to reflect the status of a person in life and help them keep their status in death. This is not surprising, given the hierarchical nature of Egyptian society. There were several important gods who had responsibilities relating to life and death.   For instance, Osiris was god both of fertility and the underworld, and his wife, Isis, was the goddess in charge of funeral rites. Anubis, often pictured with the head of a jackal, was the god of embalming and of burial places. In the underworld, he weighed the heart of a dead person to decide whether their good deeds during life outweighed the bad. Thoth, the god of wisdom and learning, was responsible for recording the names of those whose hearts had been weighed.   **The sun god**  One other god was very important, if only briefly. Fed up with the power of the priests honoring Amen-Re, Pharaoh [Amenhotep III](http://www.pbs.org/empires/egypt/newkingdom/amenhotep.html) switched attention to the minor sun god, Aten.   After his death, his son, [Akenhaten](http://www.pbs.org/empires/egypt/newkingdom/akenhaten.html), went much further and decreed that Aten was the only god, and later campaigned against all the other gods and religions. His monotheist approach was reversed by his son, [Tutankhamen](http://www.pbs.org/empires/egypt/newkingdom/tutankhamen.html), who decreed that Egypt would return to its traditions and worship its old gods once more. |

[**http://www.pbs.org/empires/egypt/newkingdom/religion.html**](http://www.pbs.org/empires/egypt/newkingdom/religion.html)