

Mysteries of the Sun: The Hermetic Teachings of Omraam Mikhaël Aïvanhov

"Eternity, therefore, is an image of god; the cosmos is an image of eternity; and the sun is an image of the cosmos.

The human is an image of the sun."

Corpus Hermeticum

By Siobhan Houston

As twilight settled over the verdant countryside, the dilapidated bus in which I rode neared the city of Sherbrooke in Eastern Québec. My ultimate destination was a few miles outside the city--the Domaine Blagoslovenie, a retreat center situated on 22 pristine rural acres, founded by the Bulgarian philosopher, Omraam Mikhaël Aïvanhov (1900-1986). Ever since I first heard about the Domaine (whose name translates into "the Realm of Blessings"), I had longed to visit.

In July 1996, I finally had a chance to spend a week there, during the annual three-week summer congress of the Canadian branch of the Fraternité Blanche Universelle (the Universal White Brotherhood), the organization of Aïvanhov's students. Although a little nervous about the trip (I knew no one at the center and was to be the only non-Francophone in attendance), I was excited about finally meeting the students of Aïvanhov, whose books I had read since 1988.

Aïvanhov, considered by many to be an adept, taught in the classic Western esoteric tradition.¹ Inspired by Pythagoras and Plato, he taught his students to reawaken to the gnosis or spiritual knowledge within them by interpreting the "living book of Nature"; in esotericism, Nature is often understood as book of "symbols and hidden realities to be 'read' by the intuitive mind."² He believed that in order for people to become reintegrated with the Divine, which was the aim of human life, certain practices were paramount. These included living a morally pure life, which included a modified vegetarian diet (he sanctioned the eating of fish). Moreover, music was paramount to one's spiritual advancement, in his opinion. His students spend many hours singing sacred Bulgarian songs in complex four-part harmonies, as well as listening to classical music, especially oratorios and masses. But the most significant aspects of his teaching revolved around solar meditation.

At the age of 17 while living in Bulgaria, Aïvanhov met his spiritual mentor, Peter Deunov. A teacher of gnostic Christianity, Deunov advocated sun contemplation in the curriculum of his initiatic school.³ The young Aïvanhov later attended college and graduate school, concentrating on psychology, philosophy and the natural sciences. During the 1930s, he held a professorship at a Bulgarian university and subsequently worked as a college principal in the country's capital city of Sofia.

In 1937 his spiritual master sent him to France to teach, and the following year Aïvanhov gave his first public lecture in Paris at the Place de la Sorbonne, speaking on the role of astrological symbolism in spiritual life. He resided in France for the next 50 years, and spent

considerable time traveling worldwide, lecturing on the Hermeticist philosophy.⁴ Aïvanhov died in France on Christmas Day, 1986. Although he appointed no successor, he left behind an international fellowship of students.⁵

For his North American students, the retreat center in Québec is the motherhouse, as it were; currently there is no residential center in the United States. Located in the beautiful Estrie region of Québec, this bucolic establishment includes guest houses, permanent residences, a dining and lecture hall, as well as seven ponds and many vegetable, flower and herb gardens. Aïvanhov's students purchased the land, formerly a golf course, in 1984.

When I arrived for the retreat last July, I was shown to the women's dormitory, a spotlessly clean and sparsely furnished dwelling. I quickly stowed my gear under my bunk bed and met some of the other participants. Most were middle-aged, between 30 and 60 years old, and a few were quite elderly. My sense was that the attendees, for the most part, were well-educated middle-class professionals. The majority lived in Québec, although a few came from other provinces. American visitors, I was told, were a rarity.

Awakening in my bunk bed on the first morning of my stay, I quickly dressed and headed outside for the silent sunrise meditation, which began at 5 AM. We carried our folding lawn chairs to a small plot of land overlooking a magnificent valley. Sitting in the chilly air, we waited quietly for the sun to rise. Slowly, rose and lavender ribbons of light streaked the dusky sky, followed by the effulgent solar orb rising above the gorge. Only the occasional bird call and a mild breeze murmuring in the leaves broke the stillness. My sunrise meditations from my apartment balcony, situated in the midst of the Boston metropolis, in no way compared with the intense experience of that morning. After forty-five minutes, the president of the Canadian fraternity, Frère Romeo, began a pranayama (yogic breathing) exercise, and we all joined in. At six o'clock, we saluted the sun with raised right palms, then headed back to our lodgings. The entire exercise took place in complete silence.

Aïvanhov's students observe this sunrise meditation each dawn between the vernal and autumnal equinoxes, the time period when the subtle energy of the solar rays is considered to be most potent. What are they meditating upon as the sun ascends, and why do they think that solar contemplation is efficacious? The answers lie in Aïvanhov's system of "solar yoga," or sun-centered meditation and prayer. He also refers to this practice as "surya yoga," after Surya, a Vedic sun god. In spite of the fact that Aïvanhov taught Western esotericism, he frequently employed Sanskrit terms to describe various concepts.

In Aïvanhov's view, surya-yoga was the topmost yoga system, containing all the elements of the other yogic systems. For example, in bhakti-yoga (the yoga of devotion), one focuses on one's chosen deity, i.e., Krishna, Shiva, Devi, and so on. By expressing devotion to and meditating upon this divine image, the devotee becomes more godlike by virtue of sympathetic affinity, just as an iron poker placed in a roaring fire soon burns red-hot itself.

In surya yoga, one's deity is the sun, which Aïvanhov envisioned as the perfect model of "disinterested" or impartial love. The sun shines upon all without discrimination, and a devotee of the sun aspires to a similar state of consciousness, extending love to all without thought of return. This is just one way to practice solar meditation; Aïvanhov taught many other methods of working with light and solar imagery, some of which will be elaborated in this article. As George Feurstein notes, "Surya yoga consists in our conscious collaboration

with the sun and with light in all its forms.⁶ But Aivanhov was always careful to emphasize, however, that the sun should not be worshipped as God: “God is utterly ineffable, beyond our powers of conception; there is no question of thinking the sun is God.”⁷

Following in the Platonic tradition, Aivanhov conceived of the sun--indeed, the entire universe--as being alive, intelligent, and ensouled. He taught that humans have no separate existence from the Creator; any concept that humans are separated from God was an illusion. Solar contemplation could heal the rift between one's eternal self (the individuality, in Aivanhov's parlance), which was always aware of its connection to God, and the lower self (the personality) which had become overcome by a sense of isolation from God.

In addition to passive contemplation, communion with the solar luminary should also be active. One may pray to the sun for virtues such as wisdom, kindness, tolerance, and compassion. Petitioning the sun was far more potent than venerating a human guru or master, according to Aivanhov. No mere mortal, not even an adept of the mysteries, might compare with the divine power and glory of the sun.⁸

Some unfamiliar with the ascendant position of the sun in Hermeticism might think the Bulgarian sage's theological emphasis on the sun rather strange, his claims about the potency of the sun fantastic. It is helpful, therefore, to position Aivanhov's system of solar yoga in historical perspective by briefly examining the sun's pivotal place in Western esoteric thought. And an excellent place to focus this examination of the sun's centrality in Hermeticism is the philosophy and cosmology of the Renaissance astronomer, Giordano Bruno. Both Bruno and Aivanhov taught systems of solar meditation, and to chart the similarities proves an illuminating exercise.

To begin with, sun exaltation has an ancient lineage in the West. Among those who envisioned the solar orb as a powerful deity were the Egyptians, who venerated their Pharaoh as an incarnation of the sun; the Romans, whose cult of Sol Invictus (the Unconquerable Sun) became their official state religion; and the Aztecs, who sustained their sun god's life force with still-trembling human hearts, torn from the bodies of the sacrificed.

Solar symbology permeated Greek philosophy as well. Plato understood the sun as the representation of the Logos, “the underlying Order of the universe, the blueprint on which all creation is based.”⁹ David Fideler writes, “. . . [I]n the Pythagorean and Platonic schools of Hellenistic Alexandria, the sun came to be regarded as the doorway linking together the sensible and intelligible spheres, the material and spiritual orders of existence.” This concept that the sun was “the heart of the celestial pattern” strongly influenced Hellenistic cosmology, science and metaphysics.¹⁰

In their desire to promulgate solar-centered spirituality, both Bruno and Aivanhov utilized certain writings that emerged from the Hellenistic matrix of Alexandria. These were the celebrated *Corpus Hermeticum* (also referred to as the *Hermetica*), a collection of texts written in Alexandrian Greek during the first three centuries of the common era. The reputed author of the *Hermetica* was Hermes Trismegistus, a god-inspired teacher of the ancient Egyptian mysteries and a proponent of sun religion and magic. He was considered to be the first in an ancient chain of spiritual teachers (along with Orpheus, Pythagoras and Plato, among others) who espoused the *prisca theologia* or “eternal philosophy.”

In the cosmology attributed to Hermes, the Sun is seen as one of the two principal gods:

The chief or principal gods are as follows . . . The Sun, or Light, for it is through the intermediary of the solar circle that light is spread to all. The Sun illuminates the other stars not so much by the power of his light as by his divinity and sanctity. He must be held as the second god [after or along with Jupiter]. The world is living and all things in it are alive and it is the sun which governs all living things.¹¹

The *Corpus Hermetica* promoted a philosophy that may be linked to the same current that inspired Egyptian sun magic, according to Frances Yates. Not surprisingly, given the cosmopolitan nature of Alexandria at that time, the *Hermetica* literature teemed with gnostic and Neoplatonic elements as well. Faivre mentions that between the second and fourth centuries, Neoplatonism, Gnosticism, Hermetism and Christianity existed simultaneously, and that each shared significant elements with the others.¹² Translated into Latin by Marsilio Ficino in the fifteenth century, the *Corpus Hermeticum* subsequently shaped the work of the Renaissance Hermetic Neoplatonists, the brilliant Giordano Bruno among them.¹³

Born in 1548, Bruno led a colorful and ultimately tragic existence. During his controversial life-span, this extraordinary Italian scholar and excommunicated priest seized the torch of sun veneration, preached a version of Hermetic Christianity and created a scientific and philosophical revolution in the process. In 1600, the Inquisition burnt him at the stake for his heretical views.

In his multitudinous lectures and books, Bruno consistently reiterated his conviction that the true religion was based on the sun. He believed that the solar-magical Egyptian religion of the *Corpus Hermeticum* would again become popular in the West. According to him, the astronomer Nicholas Copernicus did not fully understand the religious implications of his heliocentric theory, the broader ramifications of which lay in the fact that it portended the resurrection of sun-centered religiosity.¹⁴ As one of the early champions of the Copernican theory of heliocentricity, Bruno was not alone in his glorification of the sun. According to Richard Tarnas, “Neoplatonic and Pythagorean mathematical mysticism and Sun exaltation . . . ran through all the major Copernican astronomers.”¹⁵

Bruno’s writings overflowed with examples of solar magic and sun veneration. In one of his most famous works, *The Ash Wednesday Supper* (1548), he elucidated his personal cosmology, addressing the Copernican theory and its religious connotations. Bruno clearly saw himself as a prophet of the Egyptian solar tradition, believing that he had “risen through the spheres” (a Neoplatonic and gnostic metaphor for purification and reintegration) and thus was an empowered medium and guide for the reemerging solar religion.¹⁶ He hoped that his philosophical conclusions would help bridge the theological differences between Catholics and Protestants, most particularly in reference to the sacrament of communion (the term “Ash Wednesday Supper” refers to the Eucharist).¹⁷

Another book that reflects Bruno’s glorification of the sun is *De umbris idearum* (The Shadow of Ideas), a treatise on the art of memory. Frances Yates describes this art of memory, which was popular among the Renaissance magi:

The Roman orators used a mnemonic. . . [which] consisted in memorising a series of places in a building, and attaching to these memorised places, images

to remind of the points of the speech . . . In the Renaissance it [the classical art of memory] became fashionable among Neoplatonists and Hermetists. It was now understood as a method of printing basic or archetypal images on the memory, with the cosmic order itself as the 'place' system, a kind of inner way of knowing the universe.”

Using this art, in which the imagination was charged with planetary or magical images, one might align oneself with the powers of the universe. For example, Marsilio Ficino recommended painting astrological and magical symbols upon one's ceiling for easy viewing, so that when one left the house, all the phenomena that one encountered would be organized or filed into this magical reference system imprinted on the mind. Such a discipline might increase one's cosmic wisdom and power.¹⁸

Bruno, a well-known teacher of mnemonics, framed *De umbris idearum* in the form of a dialogue between three people: Hermes Trismegistus, Philothimus, and Logifer. In this volume, the figure of Trismegistus espoused a powerful sun magic whose goal was the perception of the Divine Intellect that lay behind the discernible sun. Bruno drew an analogy between the sun and intellect; he wrote that both never cease to illuminate, but we do not always heed their light.¹⁹

Another of Bruno's works on the art of memory was entitled *Cantus Circaeus* (The Cantic of Circe), published in 1582. The book opened with Circe, the sun's daughter, reciting an incantation to the sun that enumerated his titles and qualities as well as the names of the animals, plants, gems, and metals connected with the solar orb. This ritual chant contained a strong illusion to “natural magic,” which the Renaissance magi understood to be the ability of natural elements to magnetize and capture the rays emanating from the stars and planets. For instance, solar rays were embodied in flora and fauna like the lion and heliotrope, while lunar rays were stored within moonstones and silver. By properly manipulating these natural elements, the magician might generate certain effects, such as improved health, relief from melancholia, heightened knowledge and so forth.²⁰

Through his lectures and writings, Giordano Bruno, ever an idealist, endeavored to bring about the revival of Egyptian solar religion. Although silenced by the Church, his ideas continued to inspire a myriad of scientists, philosophers, and visionaries over the centuries. Even today, numerous Hermetists look to the *Corpus Hermeticum* as an unequalled source of sagacity.

Turning back once again to the work of the Hermeticist Omraam Mikhaël Aïvanhov, his assertions about the power of the sun may now appear more feasible. Viewed in the light of esoteric history, Aïvanhov's philosophy can be regarded with a new appreciation. And for those interested in taking up the practice of solar meditation, his extensive lectures brim over with systematic exercises.

For example, a student might reflect upon the sun as an efficacious way to unite with the Supreme Creator: “The nearer you get to the sun in spirit, soul, and thought, with your heart and will, the nearer you will be to God, for on the physical plane, the sun is the symbol and the tangible representative of the Deity.”²¹

In addition, Aïvanhov asserted (reiterating Bruno's art of memory system) that through contemplation of the solar orb, one might animate one's inner sun and bring order to one's life. Watching the morning sunrise was especially helpful in this regard, for it quickly brought one's attention to the inner sun. Moreover, he cited the "law of imitative magic" (Bruno's natural magic), saying that gazing at the sun influenced the soul to become a "luminous, incandescent sphere."²²

Contemplation of the sun might offer physical benefits as well; Aïvanhov imparted techniques that purported to "harvest" the etheric particles of the sun, which consequently might increase one's spiritual and physical vitality. The sun gave life to everything on earth, he declared, and "[b]y uniting ourselves with the sun we are bound to get results, for we are uniting with the central power that governs and animates all the planets of our universe."²³

The sun and the human have a profound relationship, because they are constructed along a comparable model, according to Aïvanhov, echoing the teaching of Hermes Trismegistus:

"And as we are built on the same pattern as the sun, we can, by means of our thoughts and our soul and spirit, project our powers far, far beyond the limits of our physical bodies. Just as the action of the sun affects minerals, metals, plants, flowers, animals and human beings, penetrating, warming and nourishing them, so can we transform, ameliorate, enlighten and vivify other beings by means of our emanations."²⁴

He frequently referred to Hermes Trismegistus, the preeminent teacher of divine solar magic, in his lectures. In one instance, he invoked the principle of homologic correspondence in describing the relationship between the macrocosm and the microcosm. Quoting from the *Emerald Tablet*, he repeated the famous phrase attributed to Hermes, "That which is below is like to that which is above." Aïvanhov pointed out that in the above axiom, Hermes used the word "like", which means "similar to" rather than the word "identical". Thus, the created world is not an exact replica of a higher realm (the Platonic Ideals), but is a shadowy reflection of the divine realm.²⁵ The sun is not the Divine Intellect, but a perfect representative of this Intellect (also referred to as the Christ, the Logos or *Nous*), fashioned by God to serve as a educational model for humans. Aïvanhov observed, "And as all life on earth comes from the sun, surely it is obvious that God manifests Himself more perfectly through the sun than through any other creature."²⁶

In another reference to Hermes Trismegistus, Aïvanhov averred that he was the greatest of all initiates, those adepts who have delved into the mysteries of the universe. He once said, "Hermes Trismegistus said it quite clearly, then: There is a force that comes from the sun . . . Behind the light of the sun are many other forces, and Telesma [subtle cosmic energy] is a force so potent that, as the Emerald Tablet puts it, 'it overcomes every subtle thing and penetrates every solid substance.'"

The initiate's work is to channel this Telesma and condense it within his cells until a transformation takes place.²⁷ Similarly, one can fabricate talismans (a word philologically related to "telesma", according to Aïvanhov), by imbuing them with this force, a practice advocated by Bruno and other natural magicians. Aïvanhov asserted, however, that directly

working with the sun by prayer and contemplation was inestimably more powerful than talismanic magic.²⁸

Aïvanhov lectured many times on humankind's relationship to the sun, and the above excerpts touch only briefly on his voluminous solar teachings. Even though he died over a decade ago, his students maintain many of the surya-yoga practices he instituted. In addition to the dawn meditation, the students do daily "gymnastic" exercises in the sunshine. (If the weather is not pleasant, the exercises may be done indoors.) Aïvanhov put great stress on these meditative gymnastic postures, which are designed to develop the practitioner's will. And during the summer and spring communal gatherings, the students perform the sacred circle dance of paneurhythmy, thought to harmonize the dancers with the cosmic forces of goodness and justice. The paneurhythmy is only done on Sundays, and then only if the sun is shining.²⁹

These recommendations are just a few of the copious practical instructions transmitted by Aïvanhov. His teachings offer a path to "the Great Work" of the Hermeticists; the metamorphosis of an individual human being into "a living synthesis of celestial light and elements of the earth," a human being who consciously participates in the transmutation of the world.³⁰

This vision of metamorphosis, elucidated by the mythical Hermes Trismegistus, likewise captured the imagination of Giordano Bruno. Bruno and Aïvanhov both desired to contemplate and understand the Divine through the "living book of Nature": "Multi-layered, rich in potential revelations of every kind, it [Nature] must be read like a book."³¹ And perhaps the most powerful image in this text of Nature is the sun, deserving of the most careful attention on the part of the serious Hermeticist dedicated to the Great Work.

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¹ Using Antoine Faivre's typology, the esoteric current in the West consists of four major components: systems of correspondence between microcosm and macrocosm; the study of the "living book of nature"; the use of imagination to acquire gnosis; and the metamorphic experience. Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 10-14. An adept is one who has achieved an extremely high level of esoteric mastery.

² Georg Feurstein, "Solar Sage," in *Yoga Journal*, March/April 1990, 78.

³ See David Lorimer, ed., *Prophet for Our Times: The Life and Teachings of Peter Deunov* (Rockport, MA: Element, Inc.), 1991.

⁴ Faivre clarifies the difference between the two oft-confused terms, Hermetism and Hermeticism: "The word 'hermetism' should be used to refer (a) to the Alexandrian texts in Greek called the *Hermetika*, many of which (like the *Corpus Hermeticum*) are attributed to the legendary Hermes Trismegistus; (b) to the literature directly inspired by such texts and produced later, up to the beginnings of modern times (particularly in the fifteenth to twentieth centuries). The word 'hermeticism' should be used in a wider sense, which covers many aspects of Western esotericism, such as alchemy, astrological speculations, and the like." Antoine Faivre and Jacob Needleman, ed., *Modern Esoteric Spirituality* (New York: Crossroad, 1995), 3.

⁵ Membership in the Fraternité is a low-key affair. There are no initiations or doctrinal covenants to be signed; only a minimum yearly donation (\$50 in the US) requested. This money helps to support Prosveta, the publishers of Aïvanhov's immense lecture series. In Canada, a portion of it goes to sustain the Domaine Blagoslovenie.

⁶ Feurstein, 79.

⁷Omraam Mikhaël Aïvanhov, *The Splendour of Tiphareth : The Yoga of the Sun* (Fréjus Cedex, France: Editions Prosveta, 1987), 168.

⁸Ibid., 142-3.

⁹David Fideler, *Jesus Christ, Sun of God: Ancient Cosmology and Early Christian Symbolism* (Wheaton, IL: Quest Books), 38.

¹⁰Ibid., 39.

¹¹The *Asclepius*, cited in Frances A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 36.

¹²Faivre and Needleman, *Modern Esoteric Spirituality*, 3.

¹³To be precise, 14 of the 17 *Hermetica* treatises were translated by Ficino.

¹⁴In Copernicus' system, the earth circled around a unmoving sun, but the fixed stars and other elements of the Aristotelian-Ptolemaic geocentric world view remained the same. Bruno developed this new theory much further, and was the first Copernican to speak of a sun gyrating on its axis, of an infinite universe with an infinite number of suns and planets

¹⁵Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind* (New York: Harmony Books, 1990), 295.

¹⁶Yates, 275.

¹⁷Giordano Bruno, *The Ash Wednesday Supper (La Cena de le ceneri)*, edited and translated by Edward A. Gosselin and Lawrence S. Lerner (Hamden, CT: Archon Books), 35.

¹⁸Yates, 190-1.

¹⁹Ibid., 192-5.

²⁰Ibid., 199-200.

²¹Aïvanhov, 22.

²²Ibid., 31.

²³Ibid., 16-17.

²⁴Ibid., 223.

²⁵Ibid., 52.

²⁶Ibid., 56.

²⁷Isolating "Telesma" (also known as the Philosopher's Stone) and utilizing it for transmutational processes that might accelerate human evolution has been the goal of the certain Hermetist alchemists over the centuries.

²⁸In other lectures, Aïvanhov denounces any magic done for material gain, whether it be for love, money, career enhancement, and so on. His system of "divine magic" (sometimes called "theurgy" by esotericists) concentrates solely on inner transformation which he believes will lead to transformation of the world at large.

²⁹for further explication of paneurhythmy, see David Lorimer, ed., *The Circle of Sacred Dance: Peter Deunov's Paneurhythmy* (Rockport, MA: Element, Inc., 1991).

³⁰Anonymous, *Meditations on the Tarot: A Journey into Christian Hermeticism* (Rockport, MA: Element, Inc., 1995), 68.

³¹Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, 11.