



Akhnaton's Eternal Message:

A Scientific Religion 3300 Years Old

SAVITRI DEVI

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by *Savitri Devi*

Edited by *R.G. Fowler*



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—R.G. Fowler

“Thy rays are on Thy bright Image,
the Ruler of Truth, who proceeded
from Eternity Thou givest Him Thy
duration and Thy years
As long as Heaven is, He shall be.”

—From an inscription in a
nobleman's tomb at Tell-el-Amarna

ONE of the most interesting and probably the oldest effort ever attempted by one man alone to revivify the spirit of true religion in a society stiffened by formalism—an effort much discussed by a few specialised scholars during the past thirty years, but generally unknown to the public at large—is that undertaken in Egypt by King Akhnaton, during the first half of the XIVth century B. C.

Sketch of the Movement

When, in 1375 B. C., Akhnaton ascended the throne of the Pharaohs at the death of his father, Amenhotep III, the most brilliant of all the kings of Egypt, the Egyptian empire was at the topmost of its glory. It extended from the Fourth Cataract of the Nile, southwards, up to the Upper Euphrates and the eastern boundaries of Asia Minor, northwards, and Nut-Amon, (or Thebes) its capital, with its glittering palaces, its huge obelisks inscribed with records of victories, its crowds of captives from all the surrounding nations, and, above all, with the magnificent temples of its local god, Amon, who had become the main god of all Egypt, was one of the most gorgeous cities that the world had ever seen.

But a reaction had already begun against the overwhelming power of the priesthood of Amon, in the name of a very ancient solar god, Aton (the Disk), originally worshipped at On (or Heliopolis), the oldest center of solar cult in Egypt. Queen Tiy, Amenhotep III's chief wife, and Akhnaton's mother, seems to have been devoted to that god. And the whole of Akhnaton's increasing effort throughout his reign—the dedication of a temple to Aton at Thebes, the use of a new religious symbol (the Disk of the Sun, with rays ending in hands) in the place of all the old ones, the change of his own name, Amenhotep, "Amon's delight," to Akhnaton, "Aton's delight," the transfer of the Court to a newly founded capital, Akhetaton (the City of the Horizon of Aton, the famous Tell-el-Amarna of the modern archeologists), the erasure of the name of Amon and, later on, of the plural word "gods" from every inscription—the whole of that effort, we repeat, appears as an attempt to replace Amon, and finally all the other

gods of Egypt and of the empire, by the one solar god Aton, raised to the status of a universal God.

Outwardly at least, the attempt proved a failure. A few years after Akhnaton's death in 1358 B.C., everything seemed as before, except that Egypt's Syrian dominion, sacrificed to the king's conscientious objection to war, had become a thing of the past, and that a new sense of the relation of man to God is discernible in the subsequent Egyptian religious literature. But for this, the movement, apparently too far in advance of its time, as we will see, left no trace. Akhnaton's name, anathematised, was erased from the inscriptions throughout the land and even from the ribbons of gold foil encircling his mummy,¹ so that he might be annihilated in the world of the dead as well as in that of the living. He was, for a time, referred to merely as "that heretic," "that criminal," etc., and then forgotten.

The Religious Conception of Aton

Now, what was the Aton faith—or perhaps more exactly the Aton philosophy—as it appears through the inscriptions (especially the two Hymns Composed by Akhnaton and copied, with a few variations, in the tombs of several of his nobles); through the relics of that "art of Tell-el-Arnarna" which flourished under his inspiration, and through the finest of all testimonies to its value: Akhnaton's life itself?

Aton, as we have said, is one the most ancient solar aspects of Godhead in Egypt, raised to the status of a universal God. Had he been nothing but that, still his idea would remain remarkable as a bold logical generalisation, much in progress on the conception of the purely local gods which had

¹ Savitri, probably influenced by Arthur Weigall's compelling arguments, believed that Akhnaton's mummy had been found in Valley of the Kings Tomb 55 by Theodore Davis in 1907. Later forensic examinations of the remains have, however, suggested that the individual was between 20 and 25/26 at the time of death, which is too young for Akhnaton but is consistent with what we know of Akhnaton's ephemeral co-regent and successor Smenkhara. In spite of this, some scholars, who find dubious the techniques used to estimate the individual's age of death, still maintain that the mummy is Akhnaton's.—Ed.

prevailed up to that date. But he was *not* nothing but that. From the Hymns, as well as from the inscriptions which refer to him, one or two important conclusions can be drawn:

(1) Whatever may have been the original god of Heliopolis and the etymology of the word "Aton," the universal God worshipped by Akhnaton was obviously *not the material* sun, nor any god with a mythology at the back of him, like the gods of Egypt. His full name, which appears already on a stele, jointly with the name of Amon, before Akhnaton's accession, suggests a compound of several aspects of the Sun with a special stress upon solar "energy": "Ra-Horakhti-of-the-Two-Horizons, rejoicing in his Horizon, in his name 'Shu' (*heat, or energy*)-which-is-in-the-Aton" (Disk).

That something more subtle and more essential than the visible sun, say, the Soul of the Sun, was worshipped under the name of Aton, is made clear by the very fact of Akhnaton's life-long struggle against the supremacy of Amon, a god who was also identified with the Sun. It would have been meaningless to consider the whole universe as the realm of the originally local god of Heliopolis, and to try to suppress the cult of Amon for his sake, at the cost of many troubles, instead of simply proclaiming the universality of the more popular Amon, had Amon and Aton embodied more or less the same thing.

The fact that, except the symbolic Sun-Disk with rays ending in human hands holding the "ankh" (sign of life), no image of Aton whatsoever was permitted, stands also in favour of the idea that Aton was an invisible, intangible God; while in Akhnaton's Hymns—the most conclusive instance—a remarkable insistence is displayed upon the world-wide beneficent activity and the *omnipresence* of the Sunrays, pointing to Radiant Energy, the principle of all life, the very essence of all being, as the actual object of worship. "No one seems to have realised until the present century," writes Sir Flinders Petrie, "the truth that was the basis of Akhnaton's worship: that the rays of the sun are the means of the sun's action, the source of all life and power in the universe. This abstraction of regarding the radiant energy as all-important was quite disregarded until the recent views of conservation of force, of heat as a mode of motion, and

of the identity of heat, light and electricity have made us familiar with the conception that was the characteristic feature of Akhnaton's new cult"²

(2) As the Soul of the Sun is the Soul of the world, the energetic principle of life itself, so the cult of Aton is the cult of Life. And in it, Life is inseparable from love and beauty.

Aton is called, in the Hymns, the "beginning of life," the One who "maketh all hearts to live," the "creator of the germ in woman, maker of the seed in man, giving life to the son in the body of his mother," the "Lord of Life," the God who, while *alone* and *self-existing*, has within Him "millions of vitalities," who "vivifieth hearts with His beauties, which are life." He is the God, also, of whom Akhnaton says: "Thou fillest every land with thy beauty, Thou bindest them by Thy love," "breath of life is to them to see Thy beams," "creatures live through Thee, while their eyes are upon Thy beauty." . . . And nothing is more striking than the picture of the world palpitating with life and joy under the daily touch of the Life-giver, the living Sun: men of every land, far and near, holding up their hands, birds lifting their wings, "in adoration of His 'Ka' (soul, essence) beasts skipping with joy in the fields, fish leaping up before Him from the depth of the waters as He rises, and the tender lilies opening themselves to His morning kiss." "Buds burst into flower, and the plants which grow in the waste lands send up shoots at Thy rising; they drink themselves drunk of Thy radiance before Thy face." This vision of the world is the inspired vision of an artist, which certainly, more than anything else, Akhnaton was.

We have already mentioned the scientific accuracy of the insight which led Akhnaton to make the mysterious Power within the beautiful Sun-beams, the "effulgence of several colours" which comes from the Disk, the object of his cult, a thing which Sir Flinders Petrie, Breasted and others have marvelled at. But as most if not all ideas of genius, this one appears as a direct intuition. And what the Hymns tell us of Akhnaton's extreme sensitiveness to beauty makes us think of the fundamental connection

² Sir Flinders Petrie, *A History of Egypt*, Vol. II (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1924), p. 214.

between scientific enlightenment and artistic inspiration—a point put forward nowadays by eminent creative scientists.³

(3) It seems hardly necessary to point out, after what has been said, that philosophically, the “One and only God, Aton” is not a transcendent God, similar to the “only” God of later religions known as monotheistic, but an *immanent* one, in consistence with a religious attitude different from theirs. He is a God from within the Universe, not from without; a God who created all existing things out of “the millions of vitalities which are in *Him*,” not out of nothingness.

(4) It is difficult to say if, and to what extent, the number of foreign and specially Indo-Aryan (Mitannian) women at the Court of his father may have influenced Akhnaton in his childhood and contributed unconsciously to his conception of a universal God manifest in a visible symbol which reminds us of one of the Sanskrit names of the Sun: “angshumalli.” Without systematically denying the possibility of such early influences, it seems to us that one should not overestimate them. Parallels are easy, and any two solar symbols, if not too far-fetched, are bound to have something in common. The point is that, whatever may have been the conception of Godhead of those whom he respected, nay even of his mother, Queen Tiy, herself a worshipper of Aton, the idea of Aton as the Principle of Radiant Energy, source of all life, seems to have struck Akhnaton's intuition as a direct knowledge, revealed to him from within, by Aton Himself; as an inexpressible truth which he alone understood because he felt it. In one of the Hymns he says to Aton: “Thou art in my heart, and there is no other that knoweth Thee, save Thy Son, Akhnaton; Thou hast made him wise to understand Thy plans and Thy power . . .” Elsewhere, he calls himself: “Thy Son, Nefer-kheperu-Ra Ua-en-Ra (beautiful Essence of the Sun, only One of the Sun), who came forth from Thy limbs,” and “Son of the living Aton, like unto Him without ceasing . . .” And these words, while spoken by one who cared as little for conventions as Akhnaton did, appear to express the inmost certitude of a self-realised

³ See Henri Poincaré's *La Science et l'Hypothese* (Paris: Flammarion, 1923).

soul who can say of God: “I am He,” rather than the ordinary utterance of a king of Egypt about his solar descent.

(5) The struggle to establish the cult of Aton in the place of that of Amon was not the struggle of a “jealous” deity against other deities, but that of real religion against priesthood.

Akhnaton has not only been harshly treated by his actual opponents during his lifetime and immediately after his death, but also charged with “fanaticism,” “intolerance,” etc., and criticised by some men of the XXth century A.D. with as much bitter hatred as if these gentlemen looked upon him as their personal foe. Sir Wallis Budge goes to the extent of hinting that he must have been capable of any of the crimes of later religious persecutors, on the only—and somewhat astonishing—ground that he was “an Oriental”!⁴ In reality the erasure of the name of Amon from the inscriptions throughout Egypt, the prohibition of Amon’s public cult and, later on, the suppression of the plural word “gods,” wherever found, did not imply any persecution of the worshippers either of Amon or of the other gods. Budge admits himself that there are no records to back his assumption. We add that, had there been the slightest instance of tyranny on Akhnaton’s part, the restorers of the Amon cult would have been too glad to tell us so in *their* records. Moreover, in spite of the utter revolutionary character of the steps taken against the cult of Amon—the supreme god of Egypt at that time—there is no record of any rising to oppose their execution, throughout Akhnaton’s reign.

What appears from all that one knows of the king’s character, and from the very conception of his universal God—not “a” god, but the essence of all gods, of any cult—is that it was the dead formalism of the Amon worship and the increasing arrogance of its enormously wealthy priesthood that Akhnaton intended to strike at. What he wanted was not to force onto his people “a” new religion of his own liking in the place of the old one, but to infuse into their hearts the genuine spirit of religion; to awaken them, from the routine of formulas, of symbols, of endless ceremonies, of which the

⁴ See Wallis Budge’s *Tutankhamen: Amenism, Atenism and Egyptian Monotheism* (London: Martin Hopkinson and Co., Ltd., 1923), pp. 107 and 108.

original inspiration had long ago disappeared and the hidden meaning been forgotten, to the feeling of the Supreme Reality, through the rational worship of the living Sun.

To infuse the truth of life into the cult of Amon seemed—and probably was—impossible. The worship of the Theban god had become, says A. Weigall, “as intellectually low and primitive as its status was high and pompous.” Only a new God—or a very old one, from the days the world was young and more intuitive to godly things—could accomplish the miracle of regiving inspiration to priest-ridden Egypt, and nothing but a cult both scientific and simple could ever aspire to become the cult of the world. And that was the intention of Akhnaton's life-long effort: to give—or to regive—the world, embarrassed with a host of conflicting gods and goddesses, with mythologies, rituals, elaborated mysteries, entangled metaphysics, the pure scientific essence of real religion, without any metaphysics, any mysteries, any mythology; the worship of the eternal Principle, Cause and Ordainer of life—Radiant Energy—through the visible Sun, its universal manifestation.

The Ethics of the Aton Teaching, Akhnaton's Example

Some modern writers (with the striking exception of Sir Flinders Petrie), insist upon the fact that there is no trace of ethics in the religion preached by Akhnaton. But besides that there is probably much information about the Aton worship still lying undiscovered among the ruins of the City of the Horizon, so that any sweeping judgment would be premature (as A. Weigall and Breasted admit), it seems that the identification of Godhead with love and life, not to speak of Akhnaton's definite stress upon “truth,” stand sufficiently to prove the ethical value of his teaching.

We find in the tomb of Ay, one of his nobles, the inscribed words: “He” (the king) “put truth into me, and my abomination is to lie.” Similar assertions, on the part of other nobles, are common. No less eloquent is the title constantly associated with the name of Akhnaton in every record:

“Ankh-em-Maat,”—“Living in Truth.” But more eloquent than anything else is Akhnaton’s own life, the best illustration of what “truth,” “love,” “religion” meant to him.

The main feature of Akhnaton’s character is uncompromising truthfulness, perfect sincerity, allied to the rare courage to stick to what he considered right, even at the cost of the highest of interests. It has been said that, to his eyes, “what *is*, was right,” and nothing could be better said, provided we realise the full meaning of the sentence. “What *is*,” here, means what is *real*, in the religious sense what does not depend upon men’s whims or men’s interests what is in consistence with the eternal order of the Universe, with the laws of life which are the laws of God. And the law of God, according to Akhnaton’s teaching, is love.

From what we know of it through the beautiful relics of the Tell-el-Amarna art, and through the inscriptions, Akhnaton’s private life, even judged from the standpoint of the purest morality, was spotless. It was not the life of an ascetic, conscious of the power of sin in the midst of his renunciation of it, but that of a man who, by nature, seems to have had no tendency to either excess or perversion, and, at the same time, no prejudice against the innocent pleasures of life. The artists of his Court—whom he himself taught to discard the conventionally “noble” attitudes and represent their models as they saw them—have pictured him in scenes of daily life: eating, enjoying a cup of wine, listening to music, resting, or smelling a bunch of flowers held by Nefertiti, his queen, before his nose. Nefertiti is practically always represented by his side (even on state occasions), and sometimes in attitudes of touching familiarity. Often their children—six little princesses—are present in the picture. There is a statuette of Akhnaton fondling one of them in his arms. In the inscriptions, the queen’s name is generally mentioned, and a common form of the royal oath is: “As my heart is happy in the Queen and her children.” Moreover, there is no mention of “secondary wives” in Akhnaton’s life,⁵ and though the absence of a male

⁵ After Savitri wrote this essay, evidence emerged that Akhnaton had had at least one other wife, known as Kiya, who may have been the mother of Tutankhamen. The coffin

heir must have caused him some anxiety (for he knew that his opponents were powerful), it seems, as A. Weigall believes, that he could never bring himself to follow the time-honoured custom of polygamy, however natural it was to the eyes of all the ancient world, and put his interest before his feelings.⁶ Any action, great or small, which did not correspond to a genuine feeling, was to him a living lie, and the picture of his family life, in the beautiful and peaceful surroundings which he had created at Akhetaton, is only one illustration of his fundamental moral features: his truthfulness, his sensitiveness to beauty, both visible and invisible, and capacity to seize it in the simplest things; his natural tenderness.

No less conclusive would be to recall Akhnaton's attitude towards men in general. Several of his courtiers mention in their tomb inscriptions the kindness with which he used to treat them and the generous presents they used to receive from him. We know now how very few were the actually faithful ones at Akhetaton, and how, as soon as the king passed away, most of those whom he had taught, and loved and rewarded, made haste to join the reaction against his whole life's work, while not one of them had the courage to walk in his footsteps, against the tide. But, no doubt, as long as he lived, they did not spare trouble to show themselves his disciples, and Akhnaton, in the genuineness of his heart, did not for a long time—if he did at all, in the end, suspect any of them of deceiving him. He gave them all, as he gave all those whom he came in touch with, the very best of himself.

Akhnaton's loving confidence in human nature can be seen even in his indignant letter to Aziru, his treacherous Syrian vassal, after it had been confirmed that Aziru had handed over Ribaddi, the loyal prince of Byblos, to his enemies, the Amorite princes. "Dost thou not write to the king, thy lord: 'I am thy servant . . .'? Yet hast thou committed this crime?" "Didst thou not know the hatred of these men" (the Amorite princes) "for him"

and canopic jars found in Tomb 55 may have been manufactured for Kiya and then adapted for Akhnaton's burial.—Ed.

⁶ See Arthur Weigall's *The Life and Times of Akhnaton, Pharaoh of Egypt* (London: Thornton Butterworth Ltd., 1923).

(Ribaddi)—writes Akhnaton—and he continues: “If thou art indeed a servant of the king, why hast thou not arranged for his sending to the king, thy lord?” To send Ribaddi to Egypt, so that his accusing voice might be heard there, was the last thing which the traitor could have been expected to do. But Akhnaton was too good even to suspect such an amount of deceit, meanness and cruelty as that of his unworthy vassal, specially after all Aziru’s protestations of loyalty—and his letter reveals to us his painful amazement in front of the darkest side of humanity, suddenly thrust before him by hard facts.

But the most striking example of uncompromising faithfulness to his principles is perhaps to be found in Akhnaton’s determined opposition to war. What this perfect man has been the most bitterly criticised for, by modern authors, is his steady refusal to fight, or even to allow his generals to do so, exactly at the most critical juncture of Egyptian history, when the slightest military help, sent in time to his loyal vassals, would have saved an empire built up by two centuries of efforts, and apparently changed the whole course of subsequent history. From a strictly political point of view, the critics may be right—though, taking a very broad and very long view of the question, one can never say to what extent they may also be wrong. But in the light of all those who put above worldly interests that which they look upon as right, there can be no words too strong to praise Akhnaton for the example which he has left.

We do not intend to give here the history of the overthrow of Egyptian domination in Syria and in Palestine during the last part of Akhnaton’s reign. We have already mentioned the name of Aziru, the foremost intriguer against Egyptian interests, and that of Ribaddi, the faithful prince of Byblos. Akhnaton had other faithful vassals—for instance Abdakhipa, governor of Jerusalem, the author of many of the “Amarna letters”—and there was a time when, apparently, the smallest encouragement given to them would have “saved the situation.” (In one of his early letters, Ribaddi merely asks for “three hundred soldiers,” to hold his city, and in another, “forty chariots” only.) As no aid was sent, the messages from Syria became more and more frequent and more and more pathetic, not to say desperate. One

cannot think of that period of history without remembering the letter addressed to Akhnaton by the citizens of Tunip: "Tunip, thy city, weeps." It is one of the most moving official documents of all times.

But even such appeals were not able to make Akhnaton give up his conscientious objection to war, and to the bitter end he refused to use armed force against those who were undermining his authority in Syria and Palestine, with the result that he lost his Asiatic dominions wholesale. On the other hand, his letter to Aziru shows that he was fully conscious of his power, and might well have used it, had he chosen to do so. Nor was he ignorant of, the advantages that the possession of Syria gave him. Together with his new Egyptian capital, Akhetaton, he had built in Syria a second sacred City, and a third one in Nubia, hoping that from these centers of unmixed Aton worship, the name of his universal God and his simple doctrine of love would spread throughout his dominions and beyond their boundaries. Nor was such a man as he indifferent to the plight of his loyal subjects. Their distressed messages were no doubt a torture to his heart; and if we may suppose that, as a man, he has sometimes experienced the temptation to compromise with his conscience, this must have been when such pathetic cries as those of Ribaddi or of the citizens of distant Tunip reached him in his peaceful City. But he stood firm till the end, and did not compromise. The very idea of war was in contradiction with the truth which he preached, and whatever his new cult might have gained, outwardly, had he kept by force of arms the territories conquered by his fathers and lived long enough to establish a dozen other religious centers there as well as in Egypt, there is no doubt that to his eyes, any compromise would have been the denial of *the spirit* of Aton worship, and therefore the end of it all.

Akhnaton lived long enough to hear the last messenger tell him the fall of his last fortress, and probably also to foresee the coming reaction which in a few years was going to reinstall the former priesthoods of Egypt, along with the hosts of national gods—Amon at the head of them—and sweep away forever all trace of what he had done. He died at the early age of twenty-nine, after a reign of seventeen years, but probably not more than

thirteen or fourteen years of personal government. As we have already said, his enemies persecuted him even beyond death, and of those who once professed to love him and follow his teaching, not one cared—or dared—to stand against the tide and defend his memory. But there are few things in history as beautiful as his short life. And whatever be the lack of written evidence, it seems impossible to say that a doctrine which puts the truth of love before every other concern—a doctrine which found its expression in such a life—is “devoid of the sense of righteousness.”

It would be better to say that, no less in its ethics than in its other aspects, the Aton worship is inseparable from the personality of its promoter. Every religious teaching is so; but later “world-religions” have had the chance to live as organised bodies for a long time; the need of adaptation to various material conditions has introduced into their tradition novelties which the founders never imagined and compromises of which they would not always have approved. While the Aton cult, on account of its mere twelve or fifteen years of existence as a public worship, remains exclusively the work of one man, whose stamp it keeps through time.

An Undying Teaching

Sir Flinders Petrie puts great stress upon the scientific accuracy of Akhnaton’s view of the universe: “If this,” he writes, “were a new religion invented to satisfy our modern scientific conceptions, we could not find a flaw in the correctness of his view of the energy of the solar system” . . . “he” (Akhnaton) “had certainly bounded forward in his views and symbolism to a position which we cannot logically improve upon at the present day. Not a rag of superstition or of falsity can be found clinging to this new worship evolved out of the old Aton of Heliopolis, the sole Lord of the Universe”⁷

And when we sit to think that this 3300 year old worship suitable for our own times—and still in advance on the religious views of ninety-nine per cent of our contemporary fellow men—was evolved by a youth within

⁷ Sir Flinders Petrie, *A History of Egypt*, Vol. II p. 214.

his teens, we cannot but recognise in that youth one of the few human beings who have the right to be regarded as incarnations of the Divine Soul.

But no less amazing, no less admirable, and perhaps still more in advance both on his time and on ours, is Akhnaton's bold stand against the law of violence which had ruled the world from the beginning and is ruling it still. No ruler of an empire at the height of its strength has ever sacrificed as much as he did to the cause of peace; nor has a religion of love, before him, ever directed decisions of vital political importance. Eleven hundred years after him, India's Asoka stands as the first instance of an "ahimshavadi" emperor, and India is probably still the only land where Akhnaton's attitude towards war would be fully understood and admired to the present day, if only it were known. But for this illustrious exception, there is not a nation, ancient or modern, which ever seriously tried to bring forth the real "new world order" that was Akhnaton's dearest dream. And could the youthful founder of the Aton cult come back to-day, among us who should have grown wiser but who did not, he would, it seems, remain as alone as he was in his far-gone days of strife—too good for this earth.

In 1942, exactly 3300 years will have elapsed since he passed away. If, tired of war, men be ready, then, to express their aspiration towards a higher ideal, no better suggestion, it seems, could be given, than that of celebrating all over the world the "thirty-third Centenary" of the oldest Prince of Peace, and teaching the future generations to love his memory "forever and ever."

Calcutta
December, 1940

