

“How Reading the Urantia Book led me to becoming a Unitarian  
with comments on the Atonement Doctrine”

by James McNelly

Saint Cloud Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

March 21, 2004

Perhaps I was naïve back in the 1960s when I thought that *everyone* in the counterculture was on a quest for meaning, searching for values that were seemingly there all around us if only we were receptive to the clear light that was only fleetingly glimpsed, upon occasion, if we were quiet enough, or stoned enough.

With vague “age of Aquarius” sense of expectancy, I was first introduced to the Urantia Book in 1966, a young lad of 15 visiting a friend’s house to check out his new motorcycle. His mother, a palmist and psychic of the first order took me aside and told me that I was “different” from her son’s other friends; that I had an aura that told her that I was ready to learn to meditate and explore the wisdom of spirit channelers, handing me a copy of the three and a half pound Urantia Book fraught with mystery and secret origins. Not having a clue what she was talking about, I took the book into my hands, thanking her, replying, “I am glad to meet you too, Mrs. Keith.”

Skimming over it for a few weeks, falling to sleep in a stupor if I dared read more than a few pages, my first exposure was like trying to start a fire with wet kindling, providing more smoke than light, so I brought the Urantia Book back to Morgan’s house with hardly a second thought. On my father’s birthday three years later, my mother, a contemplative Catholic, of all people, gave a copy to him, a science fiction buff and University English Professor. “Oh cool”, I said at the dinner table, “that is the book written by extraterrestrials to reunite humankind with the universal government”. The moment of silence went on for over a minute as the two of them digested what I had said. My mother sheepishly explained, “Your friend Jerry at the bookstore told me that *all* the science fiction writers were reading it and that you would love it.”

It turns out Jerry was right, at least about the science fiction writers, but my father would not get around to read it until late in his seventies. It seems that with only ten thousand copies in print by 1970, it had found its way into the hands of many science fiction writers, most notably Gene Roddenberry, who gleaned much of his Star Trek cosmology from it. Isaac Asimov and Frank Herbert dismissed it as cosmic mumbo jumbo. But they knew of it, owned copies and read at least large sections of it. Frank Herbert, a friend of my fathers, and I talked about it at length over the years, Frank telling me that parts of it were his inspiration for the Dune books, largely in a negative sense as he illustrated the dangers of off-world messiahs upsetting native cultures, disrupting generations of ecological efforts designed to terraform a desert planet into a garden oasis, instead sending them off on religious wars in their names.

My father, a man of the letters with little tolerance for either fantasy or mysticism beyond Yeats, Joyce and T.S. Elliott, put it on the shelf with a look of “that book will do little but gather dust in this house”.

If I were superstitious, I might think that that book was somehow trying to introduce itself to me when a year later, a friend came by and dropped off still another copy, saying he was unloading stuff before he went to Europe figuring that I could make some sense out of it if anyone could. Over thirty years later, most people have still never heard of the Urantia Book, but somehow, I had been introduced to

it three times before I was twenty. Having dropped out of college until I “went through the changes” and figured “it all out”, I had few distractions and finally sat down and in three months, actually read the mysterious book that had followed me home like a stray puppy dog.

It is not my intention to introduce you to the Urantia Book in this presentation. I have hardly brought the book up to anyone for over fifteen years and respect the sensibilities of Unitarians too much for any attempt to engage in a “people should read this” sort of presentation. I can thank much of this liberation from being a “true believer” and proslytizer to H.L Menken, a skeptical journalist whose writings can immunize any mind against “unquestioned answers” and instill a healthy attitude of critical thinking. Frankly, I couldn’t care less anymore whether people read it or not.

So here goes the introduction I promised not to do anyway, with a few quotes thrown in for good measure.

The book is presented in four sections, the first concerning Deity and Reality, the second regarding the Universe and the whole “time space” adventure, the third, the geological and human history of our earth, which they call “Urantia”, and the fourth part, a restatement of the Life and Teachings of Jesus, including the so called “lost years” from his childhood until the beginning of his public work.

It claims no human authorship in its table of contents, purporting to be “contact from the Universe Government” of trillions of worlds organized under an emerging democratic structure broken into regional administrations with the primary purpose of evolving bipedal free will creatures, humans such as ourselves who might choose to participate in the universe adventure of discovering truth, beauty and goodness through a series of progressive schools toward enlightenment called the “ascension plan”. The book is not the first, but the reportedly fifth contact of the universe government with the human race in a process of inviting our world to join the “federation of planets”.

Beginning with a printing of 10,000 copies in 1955 that were all sold by 1970, book sales increase steadily each year now up to around 35,000 annually. There are currently over 500,000 copies in print in over a dozen languages. Perhaps 50,000 individuals have bothered to seek contact of some sort regarding its study and teachings, of which around 5,000 have become active in forming study groups, societies and conventions.

I chatted with the noted guru and speaker, Baba Ram Dass about the Urantia Book in the early 1980s and he told me that he found it “stuffy”, meaning full of “stuff”: factoids and a cornucopia of information that is largely irrelevant to anyone’s spiritual development. And frankly, I agree with him. The Urantia Book seems to be written more toward “humanity’s development than it is for personal enlightenment.

Most other books are meant to be read from the beginning to the end, but there are probably less than 50 people alive who have succeeded in reading the Urantia Book from the beginning to the end without first bouncing around throughout the book reading sections that capture their imagination or pique their curiosity. The first sections, especially the forward are almost incomprehensible until the second or third reading, and are even then, still pretty dense and ponderous.

Noted skeptic, Martin Gardner wrote an “expose” called “Urantia, the Great Cult Mystery” in 1993 debunking its otherworldly origins by uncovering much of the largely secret history of its writing. His scholarship, however, did little to discredit the book’s remarkable consistency or find a source for its astounding account of the life and teachings of Jesus. If it is not the work of spirit writers as the book claims, it is at least one of the greatest novels of the twentieth century written by committee. I found Gardner’s premise that its human authorship somehow invalidated the entire book to be overly simplistic.

The debate over of human vs. spirit origin of the book is of concern only to the true believer anyway, and since the question of authority of the Book was not of interest to me by that time, I found Gardner's account amusing, more than threatening. So what if humans wrote it? Big deal. Later, Gardner did express regret in using the sensational term "cult" in his title as he provided little in his book suggesting that the Urantia Book has any of the common characterizations of cults, most notably dominant leaders, brainwashing, separation from family life, and social isolation. Other than about one in fifty readers believing that it is divine revelation, there is little about the Urantia Book or its movement that warrants cult status.

The fourth part of the book, the intriguing year by year account of the life of Jesus with rich detail, narrative and setting is largely what sets the Urantia Book apart from other religious works. Reading like a novel, hard to put down once started, there is something universally compelling about this fascinating account of this young man growing up in a Jewish family in Palestine during the Roman Empire.

It is this emphasis on the "life of Jesus" before his public work that sets it apart from the Bible accounts that mention little more than "three wise men, Herod's threats, an escape to Egypt, and the 12 year old Jesus wowing the scribes in the temple. From the Urantia Book perspective, Jesus mission "of a Creator Son living a life on an earth as a human" was completed at his baptism when he attained the illumination highlighted by the Father God's statement "this is a beloved son in whom I am well pleased". I find it significant that nowhere else in the New Testament or the Gospels does God actually speak.

It seems that each of the many Creator Sons, of which Jesus is purported to be one, must live a life on an earth, as an ordinary mortal at some time during their universe career. This process of "knowing what it is actually like out there on the worlds of time" is required if they are to be effective universe administrators. As luck would have it, our world was selected out of ten million and the local Creator Son's life as a human was lived two thousand years ago.

Not the second person of the trinity as some theologians suggest, this Creator Son did not come here to earth to redeem humans from sin from an angry Deity, to start a religion, or even to serve as an example for anyone then, now or in the future. He came for greater understanding of what it is like to live as a human by living an ordinary life among fellow humans without any divine pre-knowledge or miraculous powers and subsequently finding enlightenment, which is the goal of all humans, which he successfully achieved at his baptism.

At his baptism, according to the Urantia Book account, he was transformed into an enlightened state of awareness where he became aware of his prior existence as a Creator Son. He was provided with a new spiritized human body and was offered transport off the planet back to his administrative world if he so desired. His mission and work on the planet was finished from a technical point of view in terms of why he came to earth in the first place. He had already "resurrected" so to speak in the sense that he had achieved a spiritualized awareness of "God's will on earth as it is in heaven".

He chose, however, to live out his normal human life with his regular human body and die whatever type of death the natural course of events led to. He could have just as well have died of natural causes at a ripe old age as being brutally executed as he was. In this account, his public career as a religious teacher was largely an afterthought, not his principal mission. As such, Urantia Book readers would celebrate his baptism as his significant religious event, not his death.

Regarding his so called resurrection; again, this is portrayed as a relatively insignificant event. Survival of death is well nigh universal and is pretty much experienced by all humans of free will status. Survival of death, however, typically occurs on a more highly evolved afterlife world "called the Mansion Worlds" (as in the new testament quote, "In my Father's house there are many

mansions) far from the planet of origin, not on the world where the human life was lived. The body on the resurrection world is much like the body we are in. A spiritized body becomes ours when we achieve the level of enlightenment Jesus, and other illuminated individuals, attain when they become similarly integrated.

The dead as such do not resurrect on their home world, but Jesus, being a Creator Son, was an exception to this rule and, after his death, was able to assume his conjoined human and spirit body that he attained, but postponed inhabiting, when he achieved illumination at his baptism, over three years earlier. He occupied his new body and reappeared here and there for a month or so to provide some final words of comfort to his followers. It was not his intent to have his post-death appearances become the focus of his follower's "gospel", much less to provide impetus for Paul's subsequent obsession with his death and resurrection.

Just as Paul transplanted Jesus' simple teachings of love and service into a bizarre ritual and set of beliefs surrounding the "fact of the risen Christ" and a gospel of atonement for sin through the shedding of blood on the cross, many Urantia Book readers would spread the "news of the fact of the Urantia Book" and its purported otherworldly origin supplanting the same simple truth taught by Jesus which is love and service to one's fellows. Thankfully, the Book is largely self-correcting of such misplaced priorities, and over time, most readers come to realize the fallacy of creating a religion "about the Urantia Book".

In working on this presentation, I have come to think that the emerging fellowship of Urantia Book readers will eventually come to an understanding that the Unitarian model of religious association may be the best answer to their desire to congregate together. I see this not so much that these book readers will copy the Unitarian format and go off on their own starting a new church, but that they, like me, will find themselves eventually letting go of the "true believer - one true book" attitude and start coming to Unitarian churches and "feeling at home", much like I have felt welcomed in this congregation. The challenge for Urantia Book readers is to reject those ecclesiastical tendencies to "repeat what they grew up with", meaning forming a new church with authoritarian autocracies based upon a "new and improved" infallible scripture.

If you will, let me spend a few minutes reading selected quotes from the Urantia Book to give an idea of how its account of the life of Jesus differs from the Biblical record.

Begin quotes:

Mortal man was never the property of the arch deceivers. Jesus did not die to ransom man from the clutch of the apostate rulers and fallen princes of the spheres. The Father in heaven never conceived of such crass injustice as damning a mortal soul because of the evil doing of his ancestors. Neither was the Master's death on the cross a sacrifice which consisted in an effort to pay God a debt which the race of mankind had come to owe him.

All this concept of atonement and sacrificial salvation is rooted and grounded in selfishness. Jesus taught that *service* to one's fellows is the highest concept of the brotherhood of spirit believers. Salvation should be taken for granted by those who believe in the fatherhood of God. The believer's chief concern should not be the selfish desire for personal salvation but rather the unselfish urge to love and, therefore, serve one's fellows.

Neither do genuine believers trouble themselves so much about the future punishment of sin. True, wise fathers may chasten their sons, but they do all this in love and for corrective purposes. They do not punish in anger, neither do they chastise in retribution.

Even if God were the stern and legal monarch of a universe in which justice ruled supreme, he certainly would not be satisfied with the childish scheme of substituting an innocent sufferer for a guilty offender.

The great thing about the death of Jesus, as it is related to the enrichment of human experience and the enlargement of the way of salvation, is not the *fact* of his death but rather the superb manner and the matchless spirit in which he met death.

But this constitutes no valid reason why the individual descendants of these long-ago Jews should be made to suffer the persecutions which have been visited upon them by intolerant, unworthy, and bigoted professed followers of Jesus of Nazareth, who was, himself, a Jew by natural birth.

Many times has this unreasoning and un-Christ like hatred and persecution of modern Jews terminated in the suffering and death of some innocent and unoffending Jewish individual whose very ancestors, in the times of Jesus, heartily accepted his gospel and presently died unflinchingly for that truth which they so wholeheartedly believed. What a shudder of horror passes over the onlooking celestial beings as they behold the professed followers of Jesus indulge themselves in persecuting, harassing, and even murdering the later-day descendants of Peter, Philip, Matthew, and others of the Palestinian Jews who so gloriously yielded up their lives as the first martyrs of the gospel of the heavenly kingdom!

End quotes

Quite often during my true believer period I found myself with Urantia Book readers endlessly discussing methods whereby we could formulate new creeds, establish rituals and start a new church. Like Unitarians, we could hardly agree on anything, including what the key teachings of the Urantia Book are or even what its purpose is. I predict that the attempt of Urantia Book readers to create a new church is doomed, especially if it is based on the foolish notion of “the one truth” or scriptural authority. The last thing that civilization needs is a new church of credal indoctrination.

The Urantia Book actually calls for the eventual end of churches as they exist on earth today, suggesting that we would do better to evolve “temples of philosophy” and ‘ beautiful gardens” of serenity, art and inspiration. It has always bothered me that six days out of a week, expensive church buildings are largely unused.

What the planet needs is more people who are willing to accept religious diversity, forgoing religious authority and embracing the practice of a lay-lead congregational fellowship of citizens who are about the business of doing good through practices social justice, equality, and living in harmony with nature, all of which are fundamental teachings of the Urantia Book. Some true believers of the Urantia Book, like fundamentalist bible believers, may seek to infiltrate Unitarian fellowships in order to spread their doctrines. They of course will receive a tolerant, but cool reception if they have such ulterior motives and their false pretenses will be quickly seen through. On the other hand, I will not be surprised if the Unitarians begin to receive hundreds, if not thousands of Urantia Book readers who will invariably give up the notion of forming a new church on their own and eventually come to realize that the church format they are seeking is the one that embraced the Universalists and I predict will also eventually embrace the Urantians.

So who is reading the Urantia Book? First off, 90% of the readers keep it to themselves and would not think of bringing it up to anyone. Who knows who they are? When it comes to participants in societies, study groups and conferences, the Book has attracted avid questers such as myself, ex-Catholics, open-minded agnostics, troubled souls, wandering Jews, the odd pagan, recovering pentacostalists and charismatics, and a few open minded Christians. Its rapid spread in the past ten years has been in Spanish speaking countries. It has also attracted a large following among gays, lesbians and transgendered individuals, becoming a substantial religious force in the gay community of

San Francisco for example. Again, are you noticing the parallels with the Unitarians developing here?

One thing that contributes to the state of disarray among Urantia Book readers is the influx of new readers who come from traditional Christian backgrounds. They may have given up their allegiance to their previous church, but they haven't necessarily given up all their old beliefs. Many want an authoritative minister, standardized rituals and "worship services" such as they grew up with. My ten years involved with the Unitarians shows a similar pattern of strained assimilation of church bred Christians within the Unitarian community. Since most people in our culture are familiar with Christianity, it seems natural to look to it first as a model for a religious organization. The Urantia Book, however, teaches that "worship" and prayer are largely personal and family affairs, not necessarily a group experience.

Here are quotes concerning these issues of belief and faith:

"When a member of a social religious group has complied with the requirements of such a group, he should be encouraged to enjoy religious liberty in the full expression of his own personal interpretation of the truths of religious belief and the facts of religious experience. The security of a religious group depends on spiritual unity, not on theological uniformity. A religious group should be able to enjoy the liberty of freethinking without having to become 'freethinkers.' "

"Someday religionists will get together and actually effect co-operation on the basis of unity of ideals and purposes rather than attempting to do so on the basis of theological beliefs. Goals rather than creeds should unify religionists."

Belief has attained the level of faith when it motivates life and shapes the mode of living. The acceptance of a teaching as true is not faith; that is mere belief. Neither is certainty nor conviction faith. A state of mind attains to faith levels only when it actually dominates the mode of living. Faith is a living attribute of genuine personal religious experience.

Belief is always limiting and binding; faith is expanding and releasing. Belief fixates, faith liberates. But living religious faith is more than the association of noble beliefs; it is more than an exalted system of philosophy; it is a living experience concerned with spiritual meanings, divine ideals, and supreme values;

Words are irrelevant to prayer; they are merely the intellectual channel in which the river of spiritual supplication may chance to flow. Prayer is not a technique of escape from conflict but rather a stimulus to growth in the very face of conflict.

Religion has always been largely a matter of rites, rituals, observances, ceremonies, and dogmas. It has usually become tainted with that persistently mischief-making error, the chosen-people delusion.

It is a fallacy for any group of religionists to conceive of their creed as *The Truth*; such attitudes bespeak more of theological arrogance than of certainty of faith. There is not a world religion that could not profitably study and assimilate the best of the truths contained in every other faith, for all contain truth.

True religion is the only power which can lastingly increase the responsiveness of one social group to the needs and sufferings of other groups. In the past, institutional religion could remain passive while the upper strata of society turned a deaf ear to the sufferings and oppression of the helpless lower strata.

Institutional religion cannot afford inspiration and provide leadership in this impending world-wide social reconstruction and economic reorganization because it has unfortunately become more or less

of an organic part of the social order and the economic system which is destined to undergo reconstruction. Only the real religion of personal spiritual experience can function helpfully and creatively in the present crisis of civilization.

Institutional religion is now caught in the stalemate of a vicious circle. It cannot reconstruct society without first reconstructing itself; and being so much an integral part of the established order, it cannot reconstruct itself until society has been radically reconstructed.

The great weakness of all this unrecognized and unconscious type of religious activity is that it is unable to profit from open religious criticism and thereby attain to profitable levels of self-correction. It is a fact that religion does not grow unless it is disciplined by constructive criticism, amplified by philosophy, purified by science, and nourished by loyal fellowship.

Religion can be kept free from unholy secular alliances only by:

1. A critically corrective philosophy.
2. Freedom from all social, economic, and political alliances.
3. Creative, comforting, and love-expanding fellowships.
4. Progressive enhancement of spiritual insight and the appreciation of cosmic values.
5. Prevention of fanaticism by the compensations of the scientific mental attitude.

### *End Quotes*

As I look back at nearly ten years participating in a Unitarian congregation, I appreciate this congregation's decision to keep an arms length away from overt praying and worship rituals. As such, this fellowship has provided a respite from the cacophony of overly enthused true believers. One significant relationship I can point to which has strengthened my resolve to participate in this church is the opportunity to get to know Dick W, a founder of the Saint Cloud Unitarian Universalist Fellowship. Aside from being a compassionate and sincere listener, Dick was ever thoughtful and considerate of other's beliefs and religious background. Becoming closer to him during his battle with cancer, the courage and mental clarity he displayed regarding the onset of his death was very inspiring to me. Until meeting him, I had never known an agnostic who was facing death.

He did not seek words of prayer, for they had no relevance to him. He did not speak of "passing on" as he knew that his life was exemplary unto itself and did not require an afterlife for validation. He did not cry out "why me?" to a fictitious or cruel deity or engage in last minute bargaining to "cover his spiritual bases" or negotiate a secret back door into a heaven he did not believe in. His life remained unselfish and caring even in his last days.

No person I have ever known before or since embodied the sort of courage and calmness that I have come to understand was the attitude of Jesus facing his death more than Dick, an atheist and non-believer. . If I, a deist, can find a common denominator, meaning goals and values, with an atheist, then there truly is hope that unity, not uniformity can become a reality. This is because people like Dick are men of living faith, not purported belief, and it is such individuals that all believers can learn much about in regards to what it means to live a full and rich life while on this earth. He was truly a man among men.

If we can agree that beliefs are unimportant and seek instead to find living faith, goals and values instead, then I predict that many other Urantia Book readers will find themselves congregating with Unitarian Universalists, and that new hybrid religionists infused with Urantia Book deism will lead each other to greater social involvement and religious service in the coming decades. Whether they know it or not, Unitarians and Urantia Book readers are very much like each other and may greatly benefit from each others' perspectives to find effective channels of service in a world of increasing inhumanity and injustice, the sort of injustice that put another kind hearted, man among men, Jesus of Nazareth to a cruel death without a trial two thousand years ago.