

HOW THE URANTIA BOOK HELPS US UNDERSTAND THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD

CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

by

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URANTIA BROTHERHOOD
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Our summer study session in 1972 is an attempt to look at ourselves, and our world, by utilizing the great insights of the Urantia Book. Now this is quite presumptuous. The Urantia message is revelation. Thus, it would seem that our first task is just to take this message in a straightforward way, to learn and to assimilate. In this way we become more effective messengers of the kingdom and perhaps we save our souls. I am sure our unseen friends see this human task--the task of simply learning--as the foremost and most essential before us.

And yet today, seventeen years after the message became book, some nine human beings will attempt to interpret our society, our world, our environment, and ourselves, by means of the teachings of the Urantia Book. This is quite a step. This is like having a fish interpret his own watery environment. After all, the fish can see only the closest bit of seaweed, the grains of sand, or the pebbles nearest to him, a scattering of nearby similar species, or perhaps a predator. When we talk about society, we must admit that we see little more than the fish. The book gives us a perspective that an accomplished marine scientist could give the fish.

What is society anyway? It is the sum total of all the bits and pieces of our physical, technical, biological, and social environment. It is a global term that defies discrete analysis. Books and theses have been written by great and mediocre sociologists, with little more enlightenment for us than the fish gained by examining the seaweed. In giving us "enlarged concepts and advanced truth in (the) endeavor to expand cosmic consciousness and enhance spiritual perception," (p.1) as the Urantia foreword proclaims, the authors of the book give us a bonus. They described our primitive, earthly antecedents and they portrayed the magnificent goals which are possible of attainment even here on Urantia. By looking at both antecedent and goal, we may make some assessment of where we are. We will undoubtedly be off the mark in this assessment, especially as we may hazard guesses about how quickly some of the goals may be achieved, but it does give us an important sense of perspective.

Since society is such an all-encompassing word, in order to make much sense we have to break it into its component parts. That's one of the reasons why you see the topics as they have been selected for this summer study session. Society consists of such things as government, technology, institutions of all sorts, human values, practices of commerce and industry, and all of the factors that affect the varying relationships among human beings.

Paper 52 on Planetary Mortal Epochs gives us alpha and omega. The beginning and the end, as far as our social progress is concerned. *Primitive society is described as the physical survival of the fittest. "In the light of subsequent civilization, this era of primitive man is a long, dark, and bloody chapter. The ethics of the jungle and the morals of the primeval forest are not in keeping with the standards of later dispensations of revealed religion and highest spiritual development." (p.589) We begin our primitive searchings for truth by adopting superstition, a characteristic which still has considerable sway for us. *"The survival of superstition in the Urantia races is hardly complimentary to (our)

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revolutionary development or compatible with (our) otherwise splendid achievements in material progress. But this early fear religion serves a very valuable purpose in subduing the fiery tempers of primitive human beings. It is the forerunner of civilization and the soil for the subsequent planting of the seeds of revealed religion." (p. 590)

It is safe to say that our society today is more accurately described by the section on primitive man than by the book's description of the ages of light and life. Today we fight viciously among ourselves. We wage war, and it is hard to tell when we will put any effective stop to this primitive aggression. In the age of light and life, war has become a matter of history and there are no more armies or police forces.

Today we witness some 150 governmental systems ranging from the absolutely despotic and/or chaotic to relatively new attempts at self-government by people. In the age of light and life, government is gradually disappearing. Self-control is slowly rendering laws of human enactment obsolete.

Today, even though we pay lip service to the ideals of universal education, our schools still resemble education factories, with an emphasis on rote learning, usually for quite nationalistic purposes. Only a fraction of our children have access to schooling. In the age of light and life, schools are vastly improved and are devoted to the training of mind and the expansion of soul. Today our overburdening technology makes a difficult task of even such a mundane affair as shopping in a supermarket. In the age of light and life, life is refreshingly simple; man has at last coordinated a high state of mechanical development with an inspiring intellectual attainment, and has overshadowed both with an exquisite spiritual achievement. The pursuit of happiness is an experience of joy and satisfaction.

Today, commerce and industry are too often ends in themselves, being the vehicles for selfish financial aggrandizement. In the age of light and life, industry has largely been diverted to serving the higher aims of a superb civilization. The economic life of such a world has become ethical.

Nevertheless, we do make progress. We at least have as initial examples some simple types of world government; we witness what may be the beginning of the breakdown of national systems in the forms of cooperation now occurring in Europe; we are beginning to speculate that economics and technology must be controlled for higher purposes; we begin to see the problems of human population, of poverty, of disease, and of social justice in terms of higher advanced ideals. We are in an age of social criticism and beginning social insight that are unlike even the crude attempts of just a few years ago. The great minds of the world are beginning to lead us. Take Bertrand Russell, a man who has been as much maligned as he has been admired. In his book Human Society in Ethics and Politics he says, "A number of problems of great complexity arise from the impact of new techniques upon a society whose organization and habits of thought are adapted to an older system. There have been two great revolutions in human history which came about in this way. The first was the introduction of agriculture; the second, that of scientific industrialism. In each case the technical advance was a cause of vast human misery.

Agriculture introduced serfdom, human sacrifice, the subjection of women, and the despotic empires which succeeded each other from the first Egyptian dynasty to the fall of Rome. The evils resulting from the intrusion of scientific technique are, it is to be feared, only just beginning. The greatest of them is the intensification of war, but there are many others. Exhaustion of natural resources, destruction of individual initiative by governments, control over men's minds by central organs of education and propaganda, are some of the major evils which appear to be on increase as a result of the impact of science upon minds suited by tradition to an earlier kind of world."

Russell may err in some of his specific analyses, but he is right when he talks about the great social evils promulgated by the rampant advance of technology without a concomitant growth of social and moral savvy. At the same time, it is the existence of these great problems that does cause us, grossly and inadequately, of course, to seek new solutions. The Urantia Book tells us that even with the despotism and serfdom brought about by the agricultural revolution that we saw the growth of the family in this stage of human history. People became settled even though subjugated.

We can conclude that problem-solving by man under the guidance of his superhuman mentors is the mechanism which brings growth - spiritual, biological, and otherwise. As we attempt to reconcile the great stresses and strains of our society, and if we do it well, we grow, we achieve a new plateau of existence and understanding and then we cause new problems which we have to go about solving.

This growth through stress becomes vastly complicated. Traditions linger long after their usefulness is over, becoming a part of the new problem. We can see this process of the ebb and flow of problems and solutions constantly complicated by obsolete traditions as the book considers the question of wealth. Wealth is necessary, it is a tool, it is used for meeting physical needs and even ultimately social and spiritual needs. Yes, I say spiritual, because if wealth is used in its best way it is a mechanism for freeing man for higher purposes.

In any event, the book tells us that "Accumulations of wealth early became the badge of social distinction. Individuals in certain tribes would accumulate property for years just to create an impression by burning it up on some holiday or by freely distributing it to fellow tribesmen. This made them great men. Even modern peoples revel in the lavish distribution of Christmas gifts while rich men endow great institutions of philanthropy and learning. Man's technique varies, but his disposition remains quite unchanged.

"But it is only fair to record that many an ancient man distributed much of his fortune because of his fear of being killed by those who coveted his treasures. Wealthy men commonly sacrificed scores of slaves to show disdain for wealth.

"Though capital has tended to liberate man, it has greatly complicated his social and industrial organization. The abuse of capital by unfair capitalists does not destroy the fact that it is the basis of modern industrial society. Through capital and invention the present generation enjoys a higher degree of freedom than any that ever proceeded it on earth. This is placed on record as a fact and not in justification of the many misuses of capital by thoughtless and selfish custodians." (p. 777)

The book gives us other examples of how seemingly malicious practices led to highly desirable social growth. Today in our world we see only the remnants of slavery even though the problems of this degrading institution remain with us in massive forms. The book says, "Slavery was an indispensable link in the chain of human civilization. It was the bridge over which society passed from chaos and indolence to order and civilized activities; it compelled backward and lazy peoples to work and thus provide wealth and leisure for the social advancement of their superiors.

"The institution of slavery compelled man to invent the regulative mechanism of primitive society; it gave origin to the beginnings of government. Slavery demands strong regulation and during the European Middle Ages virtually disappeared because the feudal lords could not control the slaves. The backward tribes of ancient times, like the native Australians of today, never had slaves.

"True, slavery was oppressive, but it was in the schools of oppression that man learned industry. Eventually the slaves shared the blessings of a higher society, which they so unwillingly helped create. Slavery creates an organization of cultural and social achievement but soon insidiously attacks society internally as the gravest of all social maladies." (p. 779)

It is the results of this destructive process caused by slavery that we cope with today. Because of the problems caused by slavery we focus our attention on the questions of social, political, and financial equality. That is, we are reaching for a new stage of enlightenment as we cope with the residual problems of inequality, of man's debasement of other men, of slavery, if you will. Thoughtful sociologists today describe how we can achieve human growth by solving the problems of inequality. Herbert J. Gans of Columbia University says that "conflicts can best be compromised fairly if society is more egalitarian, if differences of self-interest that result from sharp inequality of income and power can be reduced. The more egalitarian a society, the greater the similarity of interests among the citizens and the greater the likelihood that disagreements between them can also be settled through fair compromise. Also, only in a more egalitarian society is it possible to develop policies that are truly in the public interest. For only in such a society do enough citizens share enough interest so that these policies can be considered to be truly public ones. Consequently, the time has come to start thinking about a more egalitarian America and to develop a model of equality that combines the traditional emphasis on the pursuit of liberty with the newly emerging need to reduce inequality."

There is an interesting, highly significant and potentially the most provocative of spin-offs from this quest for equality. Our attention now is focused on the status of women in our society and we are somewhat surprised how this question has so suddenly come upon us. After all, we had things fairly well settled, with women in a mildly subservient position to the superior male, and things weren't going too badly. Sure, women were the first real slaves, but it was a benign kind of custody and after all there are biological, mental and temperamental differences which made this so natural and desirable. The institution of marriage, that is, the system of families, seemed to be doing pretty well with things as they were. But wait, a recent issue of Life said that "Marriage in America is changing, largely because people are demanding new quality from it. Within this cherished framework they are searching as never before for the kinds of honest human relationships that so much of our synthetic society denies them. The result has been a variety of experiments in marriage that would have been inconceivable ten years ago." Or we

might look at the recent Democratic Convention which asserted that women had to be represented in fairly equal proportions with men and one delegation was evicted for its egregious failure to observe this and other conditions. Ladies and gentlemen, and I use the terms advisedly, we are on our way to something big here and some of us may be a little uncomfortable before this is all over. But, to be sure, we will grow; yes, we will grow, morally and spiritually when we solve this one. Remember the words of Jesus, who said, **"My brother, always remember that man has no rightful authority over woman unless the woman has willingly and voluntarily given him such authority. Your wife has engaged to go through life with you, to help you fight its battles, and to assume the far greater share of the burden of bearing and rearing your children; and in return for this special service it is only fair that she receive from you that special protection which man can give to woman as a partner who must carry, bear, and nurture the children. The loving care and consideration which a man is willing to bestow upon his wife and their children are the measures of that man's attainment of the higher levels of creative and spiritual selfconsciousness. Do you not know that men and women are partners with God and that they cooperate to create beings who grow up to possess themselves of the potential of immortal souls? The Father in heaven treats the Spirit Mother of the children of the universe as one equal to himself. It is Godlike to share your life and all that relates thereto on equal terms with the mother partner who so fully shares with you that divine experience of reproducing yourselves in the lives of your children. If you can only love your children as God loves you, you will love and cherish your wife as the Father in heaven honors and exalts the Infinite Spirit, the mother of all the spirit children of a vast universe."* (p. 1471)

This is an exalted admonition and has more meaning for more of us today than almost any other in the book. We, as individuals, may not be responsible for the economic or technological catastrophes of the world. We may have little effect on the systems of malignant governments. We can only grope inadequately with the failures of our educational and religious systems. But we can treat our male and female partners in such a way as to enlighten our children, and to stimulate others toward higher ideals of human cooperation. Bertrand Russell says, "It is in the matter of cooperation that man fails of complete success." It is in our family, with our helpmates, that we can begin the process of cooperation.

We may look with some disdain upon the experimentation with the forms of marriage today, wondering if these will be at all fruitful. Some of them are downright silly. There is an interesting insight that Patricia Coffin, who writes in Life, provides us. She said, "The people in our stories are experimenting with the form, not with the basic need for marriage. They are determined to make the institution more responsive, not to destroy it. For them this is a sober and serious task, in no sense the sex games of thrill-seeking kids." Is it possible that the institution of marriage, which enlightened people value so highly, is still only very primitive in form? Is it possible that there is great work that yet must be done on the form, because we value the institution? The book tells us that the family as an educational institution must be maintained, but it also suggests that it can be vastly improved. **"Marriage has always been and still is man's supreme dream of temporal ideality. Though this beautiful dream is seldom realized in its entirety, it endures as a glorious ideal, ever luring progressing mankind on to greater strivings for human happiness.... Twentieth century marriages stand high in comparison with those of past ages, notwithstanding that the home institution is now undergoing a serious testing because of the problems so suddenly thrust upon the social organization by the precipitant augmentation of women's liberties, rights so long denied her in the tardy evolution of the mores of past generations."* (p. 910)

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In other words, the pursuit of spiritual and moral ends is tied in closely with the ends of education. No longer are status or financial achievement the goals of education, but instead the goals are cultural, moral, and ethical.

It is a curious thing to me that the Urantia Book is relatively silent on the deficiencies of our current educational system and some of the objectives which may be immediately attainable. There is much more said in the book about the religious systems, which should be expected, governmental progress, and other facets of human activity. It may be that when the book was in development questions were not asked about education. Or it may be that the problem is so complex and so fraught with varying alternatives that even our super-human mentors find it difficult to portray to us the options and challenges of this problem. We can only speculate, of course.

There are many ways in which the book comments on our current values and practices, ranging from the great problems of ultimate human development to some of the sillier ones, such as the lingering belief in astrological systems. The commentary of the Urantia Book has come during a certain half-century in the history of the world that happens to coincide with the greatest level of awareness on the part of knowledgeable observers concerning our society and its problems. With this level of awareness, of course, there exists much suggestion for reform, of which a good portion is unacceptable. But the social commentary today undoubtedly contains the seeds for rapidly advancing human growth, and I believe that the existence of these seeds is not simply a coincidence.

Let's look at some of the things of which we are now aware. A reporter named Draeger spent a great deal of time in finding out what people believed about our society. Inevitably he found frustration over an interminable and baffling war; over the decline of the quality of life in the midst of theoretical plenty; over violence and corruption and the rotting of our cities; over the impetuosity of our young and the intolerance of the old; over the littering of the landscape and the water and the air.

But these were the surface discoveries. What Draeger found underneath was the significant part. For one thing, he found a remarkable tendency by the people of radically differing ages and backgrounds, and callings and dispositions to come together on fundamentals. People seemed to agree on the proposition that if our magnificent technology can be harnessed to the service of people and the nation can rediscover its soul, the American dream can yet be fulfilled and they can share the confidence that this will happen.

Draeger concludes that in this era of rockets, H bombs, and social upheaval our faith has been shaken violently in many ways, but in the process, Draeger found that the individual American has not only hung on to his spirit but gained in wisdom. It's as though all the cosmic upheavals and the social confusion and violence had jolted the individual American into a fresh assessment of his life and goals. But wait. We have been talking about national goals, the American Dream. It is true we believe that on this continent and in this country we have developed some of the highest ideals of governmental ethics and achievement. But we are talking about one relatively close-knit society here, one system of government and values that are relatively closely aligned as in comparison with the values of society and the operations of society over the whole world. We are hardly one world. In fact, we are so split that at the same time we witness the remnants of the most absolutely

primitive societies existing with a few instances of exalted self-government. (Relatively few, I must add.) We see poverty and economic inequality existing far out of proportion to the resources of the world. We witness oppression, both private and public, as more the norm than actual freedom. In order to make some sense of where our society is, even if we are only talking about the American society, we must make an estimate of what is happening within the world society, and the picture is not pretty. Jesus points to the major problem today for us when he says: *"War is not man's great and terrible disease; war is a symptom, a result. The real disease is the virus of national sovereignty."

*"Urantia nations have not possessed real sovereignty; they never have had a sovereignty which could protect them from the ravages and devastations of world wars. In the creation of the global government of mankind, the nations are not giving up sovereignty so much as they are actually creating a real bona fide and lasting world sovereignty which will henceforth be able fully to protect them from all war..."

*"World peace cannot be maintained by treaties, diplomacy, foreign policies, alliances, balances of power, or any other type of makeshift juggling with the sovereignties of nationalism. World law must come into being and must be enforced by world government, the sovereignty of all mankind."

*"The individual will enjoy far more world liberty under world government. Today the citizens of the great powers are taxed, regulated and controlled almost oppressively, and much of this present day interference with individual liberties will vanish when the national governments are willing to trustee their sovereignty as regards international affairs into the hands of global government." (p. 1491)

I return to my earlier comment when I say that when we look at Jesus' analysis we are far closer to the beginning than we are to the eventual goal.

One of the great beauties of the Urantia Book is that it gives us the spectrum, the view of the beginning as well as a view of the end. We are in midstream, or I should say, closer to the shore we are leaving than to the shore we must reach. The stream is turbulent and we are never quite sure of our position, our direction, or the strength of the current, but we have been privileged to view the other shore as it stands dimly shrouded, a great distance away. In the middle of this stream we have to make a lot of judgments. We search for the next rock underfoot to secure ourselves. We wonder if the water becomes colder or warmer. We speculate where the current will next turn us. Will we be swept up by the current toward turbulence that we cannot control? Will we encounter floating logs hurtling down upon us from unknown sources? Is the group still together? Or are our associates scattered all over the middle of the stream? The prospect is frightening, but we put forth our foot and search out a secure place, for the next step. Among many other things, the Urantia Book gives us the courage and the motivation to take that next step.

We know that whether or not we make the next step safely, members of the group, that is, members of the human race, will make it. We will have gained by making the effort. In this way we have contributed to the effort of crossing the stream successfully or, to depart from the analogy, we have made some contribution to society. I suspect that most of us are as inept as the superstitious peoples of

past ages in our attempts to make some impact upon the forces of progress. And yet, since we have been privileged with some particular insights as provided in the Urantia Book, the task for us, because of this outpouring of great fortune, has become one of far greater significance. We have been privileged to learn something about the past and to see the dim but exalted view of the future. We may not know where we are now, but we are making a good effort to keep on the right track.