

## AMAZING GRACE AND THE BOOK

by Patricia Fearey, December 1990

There had to be plenty of overhead room. For the angels, of course. To a fervent medieval congregation, a soaring cathedral truly was the house of God.

During the Middle Ages, to enter a "state of grace" at a site considered sacred, people were willing to endure long journeys. And in this time of pilgrimage, a sudden religious building boom transformed all Western Christendom. New knowledge from afar contributed. So did gratitude - that the world hadn't ended with the millennium. About 1135 A.D., the radical architecture of the Gothic cathedrals began its dramatic florescence. Surprisingly perfected from the outset, this style became, in our terms, an instant fad across the land.

In earlier Romanesque churches, massive walls had borne the weight of covered vaults above. For all its limitations, this tradition persisted. But medieval Europe's highest religious aspirations found their true expression in a Gothic architecture indebted to Arabic geometry. Great thrusts could balance in midair. Gothic arches pointed toward the sky. Support from flying buttresses enabled heights within to rise, jeweled in light from window-walls.

Despite its later art-for-art's-sake copies, Gothic church architecture was no mere style. The original cathedrals may well have been revelations written in stone. Even now, the Cathedral of Chartres, still luminous and resonant, is magical in its effect. Perhaps it really was a cosmic musical instrument given form on earth, as some believe. Its geometric alignments are exquisitely precise, even harmonic. Both occult thinkers and art historians say the guilds of master masons guarded certain esoteric secrets.<sup>1</sup> With this knowledge, medieval builders could construct an experience for people, an entrance into that longed-for state of grace where worshipers can glimpse a high potential for humanity.

Today, The URANTIA Book revelation, compressed into print, offers entrance into worlds more vast and more divinely perfect than any earthly arts could represent. Tremendous, transformative, even symphonic - that is how serious readers understand this book. Like the greatest of Gothic cathedrals, this is a vehicle, a gateway, an expression of the laws of harmony. The URANTIA Book's values and descriptions guide us through, and far beyond, our ground-level human state, with assurance of our infinite potentials as ascendant beings. Its far-from-"airy fairy" angels are quite mathematically savvy. Its heaven promises not rest-in-peace but dynamic experiences of incremental progression. We are introduced

to a very human Jesus, at first unaware of his Christhood, who was more holistic than holy. "As above, so below", from the book's perspective on the kingdom of God and the glories of the universe, makes complete - and exciting - sense.

As a reader of The URANTIA Book, with a longtime spiritual home in our local study group, I have also made a large inner-city cathedral my church home. I feel comfortable with, nurtured by, and inspired through my membership in this Gothic-style church, so ritually traditional in many ways and so magnificent in outward form. To some UB readers, this grand scale could seem in perfect harmony with the book's soaring dimensions. To others, choosing to join any ornate cathedral-church could seem incongruous - and they have good reason to prefer an unembellished approach to worship. Our all-too-human institutional behavior surrounding any spiritual core - including The URANTIA Book - can raise well-justified questions in need of our honest answers. The URANTIA Book calls us to practice the religion of Jesus, in all its direct simplicity. We are not to mistake a religion about Jesus (or about this book itself) for that profound clarity. As a UB reader, I believe there is another factuality than certain literal - and cornerstone - creeds in the Christian theological tradition proclaim. In my search for essence, I left my early Episcopalian background many years ago to explore Eastern religions, American Indian beliefs, Unitarianism - ultimately finding The URANTIA Book. Why then, of all choices now, a cathedral - especially symbolic, especially theatrical, and perhaps a vulnerable anachronism in these secular, threatening, and financially inequitable times?

The cathedral in question is that peculiarly San Franciscan entity, affectionately called "Amazing Grace". Episcopal by birth, she is widely known today to be a "House of Prayer for All People."

Grace Cathedral does remain staunchly Episcopalian. Time-honored traditions of an Anglican cathedral are ceremonially observed. As a bishop's diocesan seat, as well as a functioning church, ritual services (often elaborate) occur with regularity. Visiting dignitaries speak. Tourists come, to worship or simply "not to miss" a monument already rich in history and the formal arts. The cathedral is relatively young, and still incomplete, with an ambitious building plan. She may not be to modern burghers the central focus of their town, as cathedrals were in the Middle Ages. But some send their children to Grace every day; like any medieval cathedral-church, this is a center of learning, with a school attached. Grace Cathedral holds her head high, in a city where she is respected, responsible, and a source of even civic pride, as the "Big House on the Hill". all

Traditional roles and worthy ministries are nothing new for the Anglican church. But heritage alone did not stave off predictions, earlier in the 20th century, of dinosauric church decline. Grace Cathedral, in acting as a "House of Prayer for All People" today,

has had a reputation not of her own making to overcome. In the days of my East Coast childhood, Episcopalian robes and rituals seemed to cloak, not a heart of mystery, but a bland unquestioned institutionalism, lacking in passion and short on compassion. The stereotypical Episcopalian congregation was seen to exist in smug isolation, reserving its pews for an upper class. Routine prevailed. Never could I see a woman serving as a priest. Only catechismal instruction allowed me to share the sacramental bread and wine. The ragged and diseased, though loving people of the church did care for them, were somewhere far away. Laughter, too, was held at bay, "irreverent in church".

Coast  
the cathedral today  
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But this West coast Cathedral, this center of Grace, at the 20th-century's end, is quite another story! Like a person grown to openhearted maturity - or, even more to the point, like The URANTIA Book - Grace Cathedral exemplifies a multifaceted symmetry and balance. Unafraid to experiment, she offers many "New Age" programs and events. (And these would mean far less to me, I realize, were that foundation of honored tradition removed - just as The URANTIA Book might seem to be another metaphysical work of science fiction without its historical sweep.) Unafraid to wrestle with all the moral and political implications of problems as huge as the now-global village surrounding her, Grace Cathedral points the way toward our survival in a humane 21st century.

Cathedrals, once great hubs of activity in medieval times, could easily occupy an irrelevant niche in terms of planetary issues today. But not "Amazing Grace". She networks with the world. Her founders provided for that in 1910. With an over-arching vision, its Articles of Incorporation anticipated that Grace Cathedral would have an outreach and a function "far beyond its immediate ecclesiastical connections." This New Year's Eve of 1990 at the cathedral proved that. I was there, helping to welcome Asian families, black families, Sikhs in turbans, people in wheelchairs, mothers with toddlers, East Indians, tourists, elderly couples, downtown businessmen, spike-haired teenagers. All day long they came, to meditate, to signify their longing for peace on earth, and to join Bobby McFerrin's choral group in a 24-hour nonstop chant for healing. Network TV came as well - CNN taped part of the proceedings and an interview with this event's director, Canon Pastor Lauren Artress, head of Quest, the new Grace Cathedral Center for Spiritual Wholeness. At the end, marvelously ringing throughout the cathedral, our hundreds of voices chanted together for an entire hour the ancient sacred Sanskrit "A..U..M.."

Every time I go to Grace Cathedral, I see the clear, direct "religion of Jesus" practiced within all the pageantry - and the Supreme outworking there through all the human family's rich variety, unabashed sense of humor, and dignity in sharing the contemporary common sorrows of our world. We are here on earth for "the mending of our own hearts" and for "the mending of the world", says Dean Alan Jones. He extends the cathedral's welcome

to all, ~~Christian~~ faithful, "half-faithful", or no. I have seen the Jewish yarmulke and saffron Eastern robes, not just at special events, but in a Sunday congregation. I have seen the face of AIDS there - and witnessed the faith which illness has inspired. In this time of epidemics, hunger, homelessness, the renewed threat of world war, and the loss of values on our national scene, Dean Jones' Advent sermons - on the mystery of our birth and that birth of Jesus in the Middle East - reminded us that we are "all one flesh, one blood." Just as The URANTIA Book indicates, he tells us we are here to look at the worst without losing heart. In fact, he has a copy of The URANTIA Book on his office library shelf. I have often wondered whether some passage in the book might have inspired a particular reflection. His sermons, with their radical, contemplative, and often austere "desert spirituality" never fail to have, for me, a helpful synchronicity which speaks to my deep concerns about certain group issues and personal tests of faith.

It is impossible here to do justice either to Grace Cathedral's wide range of activities or my many impressions of cathedral experiences. Going all the way back to a shocked reaction to Martin Luther King's assassination, which spilled out onto the streets in a great march, I have found the cathedral pulling me into a spiritual relationship with the world. My friend teaching English in Nicaragua, who is becoming an authority on tropical agriculture, is there through the cathedral's sponsorship and hunger outreach. Banners from the AIDS Quilt have hung high overhead in the cathedral, bearing names of some well-known to me and to many local UB readers. My own blue-stars' concentric-circles drawing, in memory of a study-group friend, has been on display at times. I took part in creating the giant hangings of folded peace cranes ~~which were planned~~ for the annual remembrance of AIDS victims, ~~and~~ stayed up long afterward as a reminder of unexpected earthquake damage. Unfortunately, I had to miss the recent observance of St. Francis' blessing of the animals, its procession attended by a pooper-scooper squad of volunteers. In the midst of death, we are in life - sometimes uproariously so. "Amazing Grace" knows how to give the supposed polarities a new significance, not only through worship, but also through dance-dramas, festivals, workshops, ~~and~~ lecture series, and concerts in its great acoustic space. My staid white-gloved-Episcopalian Aunt Martha, born as the 20th century began, would never have understood the need, in a cathedral, for Tibetan gongs, the Japanese koto, or American-Indian tom-toms - or for sleeping bags on the floor, brought in for regularly recurring teenage "Nightwatch" events and for each Women's Dream Quest at the new year's start. And I, who can anticipate the turn of a century and a millennium both, within a few years, will not live to see whether today's young and vibrant church of Grace can echo its Gothic forbears' generations of dedicated cathedral-building. But I can be, and am, most grateful for an amazing grace that has opened my eyes to many far-reaching harmonious connections, through - and between - The URANTIA Book and Grace Cathedral. On page 1122, The URANTIA Book tells us that

"religion grasps the idea-of-the-whole, the entire cosmos."<sup>2</sup> And Alan Jones assures cathedral congregations that the joyous end of all things is "a feast, a party."

As it often seems to happen in revelational times, a dream best symbolized these truths for me. <sup>In the cathedral, in (l.c.)</sup> In my sleeping bag, positioned just below a lifelike Jesus frozen in suspension on the cross, I dreamed - quite in accord with the Women's Dream Quest's intent. Too "wired" to sleep heavily, all throughout the night I saw, before my half-waking inner vision, blue glowing spheres. They floated, dipped majestically, and wheeled. Even in my dream, I said to myself, "Aha! The URANTIA Book is what this means!" And waking, I could see - and share with others, when we spoke of the night's experience - how well this dream beneath a crucifix provided a wonderful answer, straight out of The URANTIA Book, to a wry and despairing comment the night before. Looking up at this Jesus in pain, someone had said she didn't need to face yet another reminder of her own self-caused suffering. I could mention "our" book and its pledge that resurrection, not crucifixion or suffering, is what really happens and is what really counts. As for glowing blue spheres, only much later did I realize those very Urantian dream constructions might well delight those angels, so technologically aware, whom we meet in the UB. Sacred geometry and mystical illumination, the hallmarks of Gothic cathedrals, can convey high truths in many ways. Were there angels overhead that night, bouncing balls across my particular field of dreams, to teach me truth? And were they also having fun? I think perhaps they were...

### Epilogue

On Sunday, January 13, 1991, as the world counted down toward war, a profound event took place in Grace Cathedral. Bishop William Swing, baptizing several children that morning, then invited everyone to come forward in renewed commitment to our identity as children of God. Each received a blessing, given and received in awareness of the ministry of angels. Jesus, after his baptism in the Jordan river, went off to wage a lonely inner war of decision-making in the wilderness, but he was not alone. He was surrounded by a mighty host of celestial beings. Angels, Bishop Swing had said in his sermon, will surround us and come to our aid - often in the form of our fellow human beings - when we are willing to build peace by waging our own inner wars. "Thy will be done," he said, is not a prayer, then, but a life lived.

<sup>Alaykum</sup> In the words of the Middle East - "Shalom <sup>A</sup>leichem" and "<sup>(Salaam)</sup> ~~S~~allam ~~alayjun~~" - we had asked that the peace of God be "always with you. And also with you." So may it be, for us all in these times, dear friends.

1. See the following:

A) The Mysteries of Chartres Cathedral, Louis Charpentier, Avon Books, 1966.

B) The Gothic Cathedral, Wim Swaan, Park Lane, 1981.

C) In the Winter 1991 Gnosis magazine ("A Journal of the Western Inner Traditions"), there is an interesting range of bibliographies in an article on the 12th century's marvels (cathedrals being only one aspect).

2. The URANTIA Book, 1955, URANTIA Foundation, Chicago.