

The Urantia Book and Christian Perspectives on Revelation

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"If we so understood that we no longer had to seek, it would not be the God of revelation that we had found." ...Avery Dulles

A Problem for Contemporary Theology

The twentieth century has brought with it challenges and dilemmas for fundamental and systematic theology unlike anything encountered by Christians in previous centuries. The explosion of knowledge and education, the extension of communication to all corners of the globe and the mixing of disparate cultures and religious groups are just a few of the elements which challenge us in our efforts to grasp the spiritual dimensions of the reality in which we live and to present a relevant view of Jesus' gospel to a morally and spiritually distracted world.

Karl Rahner describes this situation in his essay, *Reflections on a New Task for Fundamental Theology* as well as in the introduction to his *Foundations of Christian Faith*.^[ii]

Rahner points out that in today's world, the mass of philosophical problems, range of methods, variety of starting points and goals, the constant increase in knowledge, methods of analysis and increasing influence of studies in such fields as psychology, sociology and the history of religion, all combine to create a formidable challenge to theology. He states that,

"The present situation is basically new. The goal of creating a comprehensive and well-grounded system of fundamental theology through direct work is no longer feasible."^[iii]

He goes on to decry the lack of comprehensive expositions of fundamental theology and makes the observation that,

"...a sober assessment forces one to conclude that this science with its established methods has ceased to be a practical possibility and has become a limit case, a remote ideal which may be aimed at but can never be fully realized."^[iv]

The idea that a comprehensively integrated view of the human situation is impossible to achieve in the contemporary world implies a fundamental shift in the nature of the epistemological ground from which theology has traditionally formulated its positions. It also underscores the difficulty of formulating a meaningful and relevant theology amidst rapidly developing complexity and plurality.

It is relative to this legitimate and serious concern voiced by contemporary theology that we might consider the claims being made within the pages of "The Urantia Book"^[v] and the

question of whether or not we are standing at a crossroads wherein revelation may once again clearly illuminate to a struggling humanity, the direction in which salvation may be found.

The Urantia Book

In his introduction to H. Richard Niebuhr's book, *The Kingdom of God in America*, Martin Marty describes a "classic" text as "the kind of work from which one cannot again break free once the work has made its statement." He goes on to mention the work of Freud and Marx as examples of texts which, regardless of the view of the reader towards their contents, inform and influence all subsequent thinking on their respective subjects. The depth and scope of the narrative explication of Christian theology presented in "The Urantia Book" similarly impacts all subsequent consideration of the elements of our religious heritage. ^[vi]

With over a million copies now in print, distributed world-wide in a growing number of languages and with tens of thousands of seriously dedicated readers who participate in study groups, hold regional and international conferences, publish websites, blogs, and social media pages, the day cannot be far off when responsible theologians and clergy will be called upon to offer an informed opinion on the content and nature of this text. A growing global readership is becoming increasingly well established.

When one considers the spiritual vacuum which exists today in much of our culture alongside a well-documented growing hunger for meaningful spiritual encounter, it appears inevitable that this text will rapidly find its way into diverse communities of religionists and into the lives of many individuals.

But does it really provide a valid fundamental basis, consistent with the traditional gospel and responsible scholarship, upon which we may apprehend the elements of our faith in ways relevant to the scientific and intellectual understanding of our time? Does it provide significant assistance in the task of conserving and expanding the essential meanings, values and ideals of the Christian gospel in a rapidly changing world?

Perhaps a more relevant question is posed by University of Oxford Professor Richard Swinburne. He asks, if we believe in an all-powerful and all-good God, ". . . do we then have reason to suppose that he would intervene in human history to reveal things to us?" Swinburne asks whether or not we have reason to expect a revelation and how we would know if we had actually received one. ^[vii]

I would rephrase his questions and relate them to our present context asking, "Is a time which has seen two world wars, continuing economic upheaval, social change and political transformation on a scale unprecedented in human history, a degree of technological mastery undreamed of even a century ago, human deprivation and environmental degradation on a global scale—is such a period of time any less in need of God's intervention and guidance than the

period represented by the flight from Egypt and the subsequent transformation of the early Hebrew tribes from Bedouin hunter-gatherers into a settled agricultural people, or the period following Alexander's world-opening conquests, dominated by the Hellenistic cultural expansion and Roman political development in which Jesus appeared?

It is my purpose here to consider a framework within which such questions might be considered. This framework will consist of two components. The first is a review of ideas about the topic of revelation. The second is a brief overview of the Urantia papers.

A Brief Review of the Idea of Revelation in Christian Thought

The Old Testament itself is permeated with stories of God's intervention in the affairs of His people and with the idea that God participates with us in our struggles to realize His presence in our communities and in our world.

Within the Judeo-Christian tradition, revelatory texts go back to at least the sixth century B.C. with the development of Apocalyptic as a literary genre derived from ideas based upon earlier prophetic eschatology. Apocalyptic became a well-established form of religious expression over the following centuries up through the inter-testamental period, the Revelation of John contained in the New Testament canon providing perhaps the best known example. ^[viii]

Christian tradition has generally recognized two distinct forms of revelation, general and special. Psalm 19 reflects this attitude while the opening of John's gospel provides an introduction to the special revelation embodied in Jesus of Nazareth.

In addition, we can identify two distinct trends in the apprehension of revelation—personal and communal. The former can be seen in the ideals of Christian monastic mysticism and the latter in the development of ideas regarding the work of the Holy Spirit within communities of believers.

Ernst Troeltsch describes the religious significance of the history of Christianity as an on-going development of the revelation begun with Jesus. In his view, transferring the concept of the Holy Spirit from its embodiment in the authority of the church into the experiential Christian life-world and its context is a significant achievement of modern thought. ^[ix]

Many questions are raised by such expanding views of the locus of spiritual activity in the domain of on-going Christian life. From a process view, Benjamin Reist asks,

"How do we understand our confessional conviction that the God of Jesus of Nazareth confessed to be the Christ is still creatively involved in the emergence of all that is becoming? How, that is, do we grasp and become grasped by the fact that the relating and liberating God is relating and liberating only in terms of a creativity that is still creating?" ^[x]

Reist describes significant dimensions of Christian faith which could not possibly have become explicit outside the context of modern thought and the reality of a "creating God."

In his *Foundations of Christian Faith*,^[xi] Karl Rahner treats the categories of general and special revelation as "transcendental" and "historical," where any historically conditioned revelation of God's presence is a locally qualified presentation of an existential, unchanging transcendent revelation of God. Such historical presentations are necessary in order to make an understanding of God's presence relevant and available within a variety of local time/space constraints. Says Rahner,

"The whole history of salvation and revelation as we understand it in the categorical and particular terms of time and space does not seem to be able to be anything else but the process of limiting...something which was already present in its fullness from the outset."^[xii]

Rahner goes on to remark how we handicap ourselves when we limit our understanding of revelation to the explicit history of salvation contained in the Old Testament. He points out that the Old Testament itself bears witness to the activity of God outside the history of the old covenant. He also reminds us of New Testament witness to the fact of the continuous activity of God's Grace and the Holy Spirit outside the boundaries of special revelation. He makes the important point that the purpose of historical revelation is not simply to pass on narratives, but to keep alive the transcendental experience of God.

Avery Dulles offers a well-developed overview of thinking about the topic of revelation. In his *Revelation Theology* as well as in his *Models of Revelation*, Dulles not only outlines the changes in thinking about revelation over time, but he also identifies key issues related to verification and examines some of the implications for fundamental theology.^{[xiii] [xiv]}

Dulles points out that prior to the sixteenth century, revelation was rarely considered a component of theological exposition. Not until Christians had to defend themselves against the claims of the Deists in the seventeenth century did ideas about revelation begin to be articulated. The amount of thought given to the topic has increased to the point that in our own century there is hardly a recognized theologian who has not written at least a chapter on the topic, and the range of complete books devoted to revelation alone covers the spectrum from the traditional position of the Roman church^[xv] articulated in Rene Latourelle's *Theology of Revelation* to the existential insights offered by H.R. Niebuhr in his classic, *The Meaning of Revelation*.^[xvi]

Dulles describes the development of nine historically conditioned views of revelation in Christian thought:^[xvii]

- 1. Old Testament: The "Word of God," addressed to Israel through his chosen messengers, reveals a covenant between Yahweh and his chosen people.

- 2. New Testament: The covenant-notion of revelation is extended and transformed. Revelation now takes the form of the manifestation of the new and definitive covenant in Jesus as Messiah and Lord.
- 3. Patristic era and Medieval Monasticism: Revelation is primarily envisaged as the action of God inwardly enlightening the soul.
- 4. Medieval Scholasticism: Revelation takes the form of a body of divine doctrine furnishing answers to important questions about God, man, and the universe.
- 5. Protestant Reformation: With a certain collapse of confidence in medieval forms and structures, revelation is seen as the response to man's anxious quest for a gracious God, the good news that God offers salvation to sinners through the merits of Jesus Christ.
- 6. Catholic Counter Reformation: The medieval view of revelation as a body of doctrine is reinforced with redoubled insistence on the role of the Church as authoritative teacher.
- 7. Evolutionary Idealism of the nineteenth century: Revelation is identified with the emergence of the Absolute Spirit in history. Theologically concerned Idealists tend to look upon the appearance of Jesus Christ, the God-man, as the crucial moment of this emergence.
- 8. Liberal-Modernist view: Religious experience is viewed as a substitute for authoritative doctrine. Revelation and faith are telescoped in such a way that both are equated with a vivid interior sense of the loving Fatherhood of God and an ethical commitment to the brotherhood of all men.
- 9. In the early twentieth century, the doctrine of revelation was powerfully affected by existentialism and the atrocities of the first world war. In an intellectual climate of growing absurdity and despair, as well as in recognition of how naively optimistic theology had become, neo-orthodoxy signaled a return to scripture as revelation out of a need to find an authoritative center of meaning and value.

In addition to these nine forms, Dulles lists some basic views of revelation: ^[xviii]

- 1. The positive or factual view—Revelation is a concrete event, generally meaning the crucial events of Biblical history.
- 2. The conceptual or abstractive view—Revelation is a body of doctrine.
- 3. The intuitive or mystical view—Revelation is an ineffable encounter with the divine.

- 4. The eschatological view—A fuller revelation is yet to come associated with the eschaton.

From the foregoing one can see that the concept of revelation not only has a dynamic history of meaning within the Christian tradition, but is seen in substantially different ways within Christian communities today. Perhaps the most notable contrast is that between the increasing claims to ecclesiastical authority over revelation exhibited by the Roman church, particularly in the pronouncements of Vatican II contained in *Dei Verbum*, and the more open view in Protestant theology towards the revelatory action of God's grace within the experience of individuals and their communities.

But what do the Urantia Papers say about themselves in terms of being revelatory? How do we place them in this array of views? Let us attempt to answer these questions by considering some of the statements about revelation contained within them.

Consider the following comments from The Urantia Book:

- "Let it be made clear that revelations are not necessarily inspired. The cosmology of these revelations is *not inspired*. It is limited by our permission for the co-ordination and sorting of present-day knowledge. While divine or spiritual insight is a gift, human wisdom must evolve." [xix]
- "...we shall, in all our efforts to reveal truth and co-ordinate essential knowledge, give preference to the highest existing human concepts pertaining to the subjects to be presented. We may resort to pure revelation only when the concept of presentation has had no adequate previous expression by the human mind." [xx]
- "Successive planetary revelations of divine truth invariably embrace the highest existing concepts of spiritual values as a part of the new and enhanced co-ordination of planetary knowledge. Accordingly, in making these presentations about God and his universe associates, we have selected as the basis of these papers more than one thousand human concepts representing the highest and most advanced planetary knowledge of spiritual values and universe meanings. Wherein these human concepts, assembled from the God-knowing mortals of the past and the present, are inadequate to portray the truth as we are directed to reveal it, we will unhesitatingly supplement them, for this purpose drawing upon our own superior knowledge of the reality and divinity of the Paradise Deities and their transcendent residential universe." [xxi]

The foregoing suggests a view of revelation which includes a significant coordination and sorting of existing collective knowledge for the purpose of illuminating meanings and enhancing the grasp of values by the individual. Truly new material is provided only as needed for

clarification of fact and expansion of meanings. Consider this in light of one of H.R. Niebuhr's views of revelation:

"Revelation is that which illuminates our history and makes it intelligible. Revelation is the discovery of rational pattern in the factors of our existence and our history." [xxii]

This concept of "discovery" seems to play an important role in the view expressed in the Urantia papers related to the personal apprehension of revelation.

"Religion lives and prospers, then, not by sight and feeling, but rather by faith and insight. It consists not in the discovery of new facts or in the finding of a unique experience, but rather in the discovery of new and spiritual meanings in facts already well known to mankind." [xxiii]

This process of discovery has been well articulated by Michael Buckley, professor of systematic theology at the University of Notre Dame.

"Discovery can only light upon what is hidden within the given, while a tradition can possess significance . . . only if that which is past is continually made present, changed, reinterpreted, and transposed. Discovery is the grasp of new meaning; tradition is its mediation, posing the elements and the problematic situation which enables new disclosures. Discovery and tradition are not opposed; they are coordinated. They constitute the rhythm and the unity of inquiry. Tradition embodies an evolving history, symbolic continuities and resonances with varied human experiences. Discovery seizes upon a newness of meaning or a retrieval of significance, but the matter of discovery is tradition." [xxiv]

The Urantia papers, an authoritative sorting and coordination of over 2,000 years of the primary theological, philosophical and scientific ideas of Western civilization, provide the means for a rediscovery of essential meanings. They also provide a conceptual basis for a grasp of higher moral and spiritual values and lead to a revitalization of the fundamental Christian symbols within the experience of the individual.

Criteria for Validation

In any consideration of the claims of a text to be revelatory in nature, the question of validation of this claim quickly becomes an issue. Let's review some of the criteria for such validation which have been set forth by contemporary theologians.

Avery Dulles provides the following criteria: [xxv]

- 1. Continuity—Does it stand in continuity with what believers of previous generations have recognized as leading them into a richer experience of God's presence?

- 2. Internal Coherence—Is it capable of being conceptually formulated in an intelligible manner free from internal self-contradiction?
- 3. Plausibility—Does it run counter to what is generally thought to be true in other areas of life? If so, is it capable of providing an alternative explanation of the phenomena responsible for the general state of opinion?
- 4. Adequacy to experience—Does it illuminate the deeper dimensions of secular and religious experience both within and beyond the Christian community?
- 5. Practical fruitfulness—If once accepted, will it help its adherents to sustain moral effort, reinforce Christian commitment and enhance the life of the community?
- 6. Theoretical fruitfulness—Will it satisfy the quest for religious understanding and thus be of assistance to the theological enterprise?
- 7. Value for Dialog—Will it assist in the exchange of insights with Christians of other schools and traditions, with adherents of other religions, and with adherents of the great secular faiths?

Richard Swinburne lists some additional criteria: ^[xxvi]

- 1. The content must be relevant for the deepest levels of human well-being.
- 2. It should include details of life beyond this one, to the end that we be encouraged in our pursuit of the good and to help us in our character formation.
- 3. While we may be unable to directly prove the truth of what is given, the content must, as far as we can tell, be incapable of being proven false.
- 4. Evidence for or against the truth claims of the revelation must be weighed in the same way as evidence for and against the truth of any other body of claims.

Richard Niebuhr gives us some additional criteria: ^[xxvii]

- "Revelation proves itself to be revelation of reality by its ability to guide us to many other truths."
- "A revelation which furnishes us with a starting point for the interpretation of past, present and future history is inherently subject to progressive validation."

Karl Rahner points us to our personal experience with Christ as a means of validating supposed revelation. He says,

". . . it is only in Christ that we Christians have the possibility of making a radical distinction between the categorical history of revelation in the full sense and in its purity, and the formation of human substitutes for it and misinterpretations of it." [xxviii]

Indeed, it is the presentation of the life and teachings of Jesus in "The Urantia Book" which seems to be driving the growth of readership. The intimate details of Jesus' life which are portrayed in this narrative in addition to the restatement of his actual discourses and conversations, bring the reader into a deeper personal relationship with the Master—with the earlier sections of the book forming a background for a spiritually compelling christology. It is this enhancement of Christian spiritual life which virtually guarantees that this text will be a significant element in the Christianity of the emerging century. As Rahner points out, it is through the spiritual aspect of our relationship with Christ that real validation of revelation occurs.

The Urantia Book: A Brief Overview

The Urantia Book provides a unique synthesis of the highest ideas, ideals and values found in Christian thought with an authoritative presentation of fundamental concepts of the universe into which we are being born. The text itself indicates that its expression is based upon the best thought of over one thousand human beings. A focus of current scholarship is the attempt to locate the sources of these ideas. Current research into this matter is turning up authors which include Charles Hartshorne, Auguste Sabatier, Rufus Jones, E. Washburn Hopkins and other thinkers from the first half of the twentieth century. [xxx]

The text is divided into four distinct parts. The first two provide an explication of Trinitarian cosmology, describing in considerable detail the functional relationship of the Trinity to the finite, as well as the derivation of the finite from Trinity sources and its response to Trinity overcontrol. The resultant cosmology describes a universe consisting of matter, mind and spirit which, on the level of the developing finite, are progressively integrating under the dominance of spirit.

The third part of the book provides an evolutionary anthropology which describes a biological foundation for life under the control of mind for the purposes of spirit. It expands the Old Testament witness to the development of monotheism amongst the Hebrew peoples. The activity of divine agency in human history is made relevant to the contemporary mind by juxtaposing a twentieth century understanding of history and evolutionary anthropology with revealed concepts of spiritual overcontrol. Its portrayal of human destiny expands the horizon of Christian eschatological hopes.

Perhaps the most ambitious theological reach in the Urantia papers is the integration of emergent twentieth century process theology with traditional Trinitarian thought. A representation of the mechanism of process is developed, with similarities to the philosophical theology of Charles

Hartshorne, and A.N. Whitehead's metaphysics. The integration with Trinitarian theology is further developed in the portrayal of the Son of God functioning as the human Jesus of Nazareth.

Rather than constructing a definitive Christology in the traditional sense, the authors have provided, as the fourth and final part of the book, a detailed account of the life and teachings of Jesus, and a description of the cosmological context in which his mission to our world has been undertaken. As was mentioned earlier, this presentation of the life and teachings of Jesus may be the single most significant aspect of the text in terms of its acceptance and spread throughout the Christian world.

The concluding paper contains a significant challenge to contemporary Christianity. Consider the following:

- "If Christianity could only grasp more of Jesus' teachings, it could do so much more in helping modern man to solve his new and increasingly complex problems.
- "Christianity suffers under a great handicap because it has become identified in the minds of all the world as a part of the social system, the industrial life, and the moral standards of Western civilization; and thus has Christianity unwittingly seemed to sponsor a society which staggers under the guilt of tolerating science without idealism, politics without principles, wealth without work, pleasure without restraint, knowledge without character, power without conscience, and industry without morality.
- "The hope of modern Christianity is that it should cease to sponsor the social systems and industrial policies of Western civilization while it humbly bows itself before the cross it so valiantly extols, there to learn anew from Jesus of Nazareth the greatest truths mortal man can ever hear--the living gospel of the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man." [xxxii]

It has been my purpose merely to outline a context in which The Urantia Book may be considered an important contribution to Christian literature and a significant event in the history of God's self-disclosure to humanity. I have done so by attempting to relate The Urantia Book to contemporary thought on the topic of revelation. The reader of this article is strongly encouraged to personally investigate the book and to consider not only the probability of its validity but its potential for enhancing the spiritual life of individuals and Christian communities. It is only then that the reader will perhaps be able to begin formulating some personal answers to the questions initially posed herein.

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