
The Meredith J. Sprunger Archive

THE HISTORICITY OF *THE URANTIA BOOK*

1/21/86 Revised 1/21/98

The fact that *The Urantia Book* has won the appreciation of thousands of people with capable minds and balanced personalities within the Christian and Judaic traditions, and has sold over 300,000 copies with little organized promotional effort, attests to the attractiveness of its religious message. Years of experience, however, have demonstrated that the first thing people wish to know about *The Urantia Book* is its authorship and origin. This is a difficult question to answer because the book does not fit into conventional categories. It claims to be new revelation and to have been written by supermortal personalities!

In the middle and late 1950's a group of United Church of Christ ministers made a serious attempt to evaluate the book and answer the question of origin. Among the various resources consulted, we asked Dr. Robert V. Moss Jr., who was at that time Professor of New Testament Studies at Lancaster Theological Seminary and President of the United Church of Christ, to evaluate the book. We met with him in South Bend, Indiana, October 6, 1958, and engaged in a spirited and fruitful discussion. Dr. Moss, although he did not read the entire book, remarked that the treatment of biblical material in *The Urantia Book* was essentially in harmony with the best scholarship of the day and observed that the book had many inspiring passages. On October 13, 1958, he wrote saying:

"It occurs to me that we did not deal with one basic question. As you know, Christianity is an historical religion and because of that the bases of revelation can be tested by scholarship. It seems to me extremely important that the source of the Urantia "revelations" be set forth in any serious discussion of its claim. To say there is no historical basis for the "revelations" is to say that it differs radically from the biblical understanding of the way in which God acts."

Our group was already investigating this question, and we continued to thoroughly research the historicity of *The Urantia Book*. We had quickly discovered the papers were received by a small group of people in Chicago under the leadership of Dr. William S. Sadler. Dr. Sadler was a highly respected psychiatrist who is sometimes referred to as the father of American psychiatry. For many years he taught at the Post-graduate School of Medicine of Chicago University and for almost thirty years was a lecturer in Pastoral Counseling at McCormick Theological Seminary.

The Mind at Mischief

In researching books written by Dr. Sadler, we discovered relevant material in *The Mind at Mischief*, Funk & Wagnalls, 1929. The subtitle of the book is "Tricks and Deceptions of the Subconscious and How to Cope with Them." In the book Dr. Sadler presents his view of mediumistic phenomena. On the basis of considerable research, he maintains that all of the mediums that he studied were either fraudulent or self-deceived victims of subconscious mind activity in which their alter ego appeared to them as a source of knowledge from the spirit world. One case did not fit this classification. There is little doubt that this individual was the man whose superconscious mind *The Urantia Book* claims was used in some way in the materialization of the Urantia Papers. In the appendix of *The Mind at Mischief* Dr. Sadler describes this atypical case:

In the discussion of fraudulent mediums or self-deceived psychics, the reader of this book has several times encountered the statement that there were certain exceptions to the general indictments there made, and referred to this appendix. It now becomes my duty to explain what I had in mind when those footnotes were inserted....

"The...exception has to do with a rather peculiar case of psychic phenomena, one which I find myself unable to classify, and which I would like very much to narrate more fully; I cannot do so here, however, because of a promise which I feel under obligation to keep sacredly. In other words, I have promised not to publish this case during the lifetime of the individual. I hope sometime to secure a modification of that promise and to be able to report this case more fully because of its interesting features. I was brought in contact with it, in the summer of 1911, and I have had it under my observation more or less ever since, having been present at probably 250 of the night sessions, many of which have been attended by a stenographer who made voluminous notes.

"A thorough study of this case has convinced me that it is not one of ordinary trance. While the sleep seems to be quite of a natural order, it is very profound, and so far we have never been able to awaken the subject when in this state; but the body is never rigid, and the heart action is never modified, though respiration is sometimes markedly interfered with. This man is utterly unconscious, wholly oblivious to what takes place, and, unless told about it subsequently, never knows that he has been used as a sort of clearing house for the coming and going of alleged extra-planetary personalities. In fact, he is more or less indifferent to the whole proceedings, and shows a surprising lack of interest in these affairs as they occur from time to time.

"In no way are these night visitations like the seances associated with spiritualism. At no time during the period of eighteen years' observation has there been a communication from any source that claimed to be the spirit of a deceased human being. The communications which have been written, or which we have had the opportunity to hear spoken, are made by a vast order

of alleged beings who claim to come from other planets to visit this world, to stop here as student visitors for study and observation when they are in route from one universe to another or from one planet to another. These communications further arise in alleged spiritual beings who purport to have been assigned to this planet for duties of various sorts.

"Eighteen years of study and careful investigation have failed to reveal the psychic origin of these messages. I find myself at the present time just where I was when I started. Psychoanalysis, hypnotism, intensive comparison, fail to show that the written or spoken messages of this individual have origin in his own mind. Much of the material secured through this subject is quite contrary to his habits of thought, to the way in which he has been taught, and to his entire philosophy. In fact, of much that we have secured, we have failed to find anything of its nature in existence. Its philosophic content is quite new, and we are unable to find where very much of it has ever found human expression.

"Much as I would like to report details of this case, I am not in a position to do so at present. I can only say that I have found in these years of observation that all the information imparted through this source has proved to be consistent within itself. While there is considerable difference in the quality of the communications, this seems to be reasonably explained by a difference in the state of development and order of the personalities making the communications. Its philosophy is consistent. It is essentially Christian and is, on the whole, entirely harmonious with the scientific facts and truths of this age. In fact, the case is so unusual and extraordinary that it establishes itself immediately, as far as my experience goes, in a class by itself, one which has thus far resisted all my efforts to prove it to be of auto-psychic origin. Our investigations are being continued and, as I have intimated, I hope some time in the near future to secure permission for the more complete reporting of the phenomena connected with this interesting case." (Sadler, William S., *The Mind at Mischief*, New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1929. pp. 382-384)

Sadler Interview

On May 7, 1958, our group of ministers had an appointment with Dr. Sadler to discuss phenomena associated with the origin of *The Urantia Book*. When we arrived he had prepared a paper for us listing every imaginable form of subconscious mind or psychic activity. At the bottom of the outline he had a note saying, "The technique of the reception of *The Urantia Book* in English in no way parallels or impinges upon any of the above phenomena of the marginal consciousness." He went on to tell us that as nearly as he could determine, the appearance of the Urantia Papers was associated with some form of superconscious mind activity.

Dr. Sadler candidly discussed any questions we asked him, but he would not talk about two things: the name of the individual whose superconscious mind was used in some way

in the materialization of the Urantia Papers, and the details associated with this materialization. He said they were asked to take vows of secrecy regarding these two things. When we asked him why these restrictions were imposed on them, he gave the following reasons:

1. The main reason for not revealing the identity of the contact personality is that the revelators do not want any human being—any human name—ever to be associated with *The Urantia Book*. They want this revelation to stand on its own declarations and teachings. They are determined that future generations shall have the book wholly free from all mortal connections—they do not want a St. Peter, St. Paul, Luther, Calvin, or Wesley. The book does not even bear the imprint of the printer who brought the book into being.
2. There is much connected with the appearance of the Urantia Papers which no human being fully understands. No one really knows just how this phenomenon was executed. There are numerous missing links in the story of how this revelation came to appear in written English. If anyone should tell all he really knows about this technique and methods employed throughout the years of getting this revelation, such a narration would satisfy no one—there are too many missing links.

Various members of the Chicago group speculated that the revelators wished nothing “miraculous” associated with the book and intended that it be accepted or rejected entirely on the worth of its teachings. On numerous occasions Dr. Sadler told me that he really did not know how the materialization was accomplished, and that just about everything known about the origin of *The Urantia Book* is found in various places in the book.

We found that during Dr. Sadler’s investigation of this phenomenon he consulted with men like Howard Thurston, the renowned sleight of hand artist who devoted considerable time to exposing fraudulent mediums and psychics, and Sir Hubert Wilkens, the noted scientist and explorer who was interested in investigating psychic phenomena. All of them agreed that the phenomena connected with this individual could not be classified with other types of psychic phenomena such as automatic writing, telepathy, clairvoyance, trances, spirit mediumship, channeling, or split personality.

Since it was obvious that Dr. Sadler started as a professional researcher and skeptic and turned into a believer, I asked him why he changed his mind. He replied that as they read the early Urantia Papers he observed that many of the group known as the Forum—which Drs. William and Lena Sadler had started to discuss medical topics but was now engrossed in examining the Urantia Papers—were becoming highly impressed by their content. He was particularly concerned about his wife. So one Sunday he made a speech about the importance of objectivity and a critical approach to the material. The response he got was kind of a testimony meeting. The essence of their reaction was, “We don’t care who wrote the papers, they simply make more sense than anything we have read along this line.”

But Dr. Sadler thought his professional reputation was at stake. He had publicly declared there were no genuine mediumistic phenomena, and he wasn’t going to allow one baffling case to change his mind. As time went on, however, he was increasingly

impressed with the consistency and high quality of the material. He was satisfied in his own mind that the subject involved in the materializations could not have produced the material as he did not have the qualifications or abilities to do so. By this time he also was convinced that he was dealing with genuine phenomena and not some clever trickery. Finally, he told me, when the paper evaluating the personalities of the twelve apostles came through, he threw in his intellectual towel. He said, "I'm a psychiatrist, and I think I know my business, but this paper was a real blow to my pride. If I had a half-dozen of the world's best psychiatrists to help me and years to prepare it, I was convinced that I could not fabricate a paper with this ring of genuineness and insight. So I said to myself, 'I don't know what it is, but I do know that it is the highest quality of philosophical-religious material that I have ever read.'" From that time on, Dr. Sadler became not only the professional director of the group but also its dedicated leader.

Events surrounding the origin of *The Urantia Book* have little relevance in assessing the truth and spiritual quality of the book—these must be determined by evaluating its content. It is, however, an important area for research. The findings of such research lends a significant contribution to the critical evaluation of the text itself. The following story is the product of years of investigation and many hours of discussion with those associated with the origin of the Urantia Papers. It includes a personal knowledge and friendship with key people in the Urantia movement over the past forty years.

During this period I served pastorates in the United Church of Christ and joined the faculty of Indiana Institute of Technology, acting as head of the Department of Psychology, chair of the Division of Liberal Arts, and President. I have been especially careful to maintain academic objectivity and exercise critical evaluation of both *The Urantia Book* and the Urantia movement. The essential elements of the following narration have been cross-validated many times by numerous people who had first-hand experience in the events associated with the origin of *The Urantia Book*.

The Chicago Story

Dr. William S. Sadler (1875-1969), physician, surgeon, psychiatrist, professor, and author of forty-two books, was a man of unusual abilities. He was a popular lecturer on Chautauqua platforms and promoted modern medicine and mental health issues through talks, magazine articles, and books. As a result of this effective advocacy, he and his wife, Dr. Lena Sadler, were frequently asked by friends and acquaintances to host an informal group where medical and social issues could be discussed. Accordingly, the Sadlers started a Sunday afternoon tea in the mid 1920's, which became known as "The Forum," where such topics were examined and sometimes debated. In time the Forum came to be composed of professional people: doctors, lawyers, dentists, ministers, and teachers, along with individuals from all walks of life—housewives, secretaries, farmers, and common laborers.

One Sunday a Forum member asked Dr. Sadler what he thought about a psychic medium who was drawing large crowds in one of the local theaters. Dr. Sadler replied that he had investigated many such psychics and found they were either dishonest frauds or sincere but self-deceived people whose subconscious mind activity led them to believe they were getting knowledge from the spirit world. "Then," he added, "there is one that I haven't figured out yet." They, of course, wanted to know about this person, later called "the

contact personality,” and Dr. Sadler shared some of the information gathered since 1911. For a number of years he and a small group of associates, called “the contact commission,” had the opportunity of testing and verifying the content of unusual forms of distant communication. They were trained and familiarized with the technique of communication and information imparted by the alleged extra-planetary personalities, later known as “the revelators.” Through such a sharing of information, the agenda of the Forum was virtually taken over by the revelators.

Around this time, a personality who claimed to be a student visitor to the planet challenged the contact commission saying, “If you people realized what a high spiritual source you were associated with, you would stop making these puerile investigations to detect fraud and ask some significant questions about the nature of reality and the universe.” Dr. Sadler took this message to the Forum and suggested that they take up the challenge by writing questions which could be taken to the revelators. They agreed to do so, and the many questions submitted were organized by Dr. Sadler. The first question presented was, “Is there a God; and, if so, what is he like?” In response they received five papers which the revelators requested be read to the Forum and kept in Dr. Sadler’s office safe.

Soon after the first Urantia Papers were presented, the revelators requested that they form a closed group. Each member of the Forum was asked to sign a pledge which read: “We acknowledge our pledge of secrecy, renewing our promise not to discuss the Urantia revelations or their subject matter with anyone save active Forum members, and to take no notes of such matter as it is read or discussed at the Forum meetings, or make copies or notes of what we have personally read.” Membership tickets were issued and the charter membership numbered thirty. From time to time new members were received into the Forum after being interviewed by its officers and signing the pledge of secrecy. During the Forum’s existence its membership rose to a total of 486. Members of the Forum were permitted to come to 533 Diversey Parkway and read the papers, but they were never taken from the building.

The original papers were handwritten. Handwriting experts agreed that it was not the writing of the human individual whose superconscious mind was used in some way in the materialization of the papers. Dr. Sadler and his son, Bill, hypothesized that the papers were written by midwayers (who can operate in both the material and the spiritual realms) and placed in the reception area. They were requested to have these original papers typed and carefully checked by the members of the contact commission.

Whenever the original papers were typed and checked, the originals in the locked safe disappeared.

Occasionally, after papers were read and placed in the office safe, they disappeared. When the contact commission inquired about this disappearance, very little explanation was given beyond the fact that it was their decision to withdraw the paper. Other papers were altered after being read to the Forum. For instance, one of the papers stated that the apostle Nathaniel had “a good sense of humor for a Jew.” The members of the Forum chuckled at this comment. The next time they obtained this paper from the safe, they discovered the phrase “for a Jew” was deleted. The assumption was that they were required to read these papers to the Forum so that these higher beings could observe human reaction to the material presented. In this manner the papers composing *The*

Urantia Book were received in the mid 1930's.

All of the Urantia Papers were materialized by the revelators as completed papers. Dr. Sadler told me that he did not know how the materialization was accomplished; but he was close enough to the phenomena to know that it was not associated with channeling or mediumistic activity. The papers narrating the Life and Teachings of Jesus were the last papers received. The midwayers who were given the responsibility of composing the papers were afraid this directive, like the Lucifer rebellion, might be contrary to higher universe policy. They did not proceed with the project until they received confirmation from the high court of the Superuniverse. They were not only given permission to present an authentic Life and Teachings of Jesus, but were assigned a special priority for their work in our local universe.

In 1939 members of the Forum were asked for volunteers who would be willing to meet on Wednesday evenings to seriously and systematically study the Urantia Papers. Seventy persons expressed their desire to join this class, and they became known as "The Seventy." The seventy were trained through papers and by directives from the revelators and by Forum leaders up to the time of the publication of *The Urantia Book*. Special emphasis was placed on the evolutionary nature of the acceptance of new truth and the danger of using mass media and revolutionary methods in presenting the message of the Urantia Papers to our contemporary culture.

When permission to publish the Urantia Papers was given, the revelators stated that they regarded *The Urantia Book* as a feature of the progressive evolution of human society. The book belongs, they said, to the era immediately following the ideological struggle in which they saw our planet involved. Early publication was granted so that leaders and teachers might be trained and translations of the book could be published in other languages. Various instructions were given for the publication of the book including the procurement of an international copyright.

In preparation for the publication of *The Urantia Book*, the Urantia Foundation was established by a Declaration of Trust under the laws of the State of Illinois on January 11, 1950. The Foundation is managed by a five member Board of Trustees who are appointed for life terms. The trustees' duties and responsibilities are defined in the Declaration of Trust. Among the most important of these are the publication of *The Urantia Book* and preserving its text inviolate in perpetuity.

When the Foundation made an appeal to the Forum members for funds to cover the first printing of 10,000 copies, the response was immediate. The cost of the first edition was around \$75,000. The book is printed at the Crawfordsville, Indiana plant of R. R. Donnelly and Sons Company, and was published by the Urantia Foundation on October 12, 1955.

A French translation of *The Urantia Book* was published in 1961. Finnish and Spanish translations were published in 1993 and the Russian and Dutch translations were published in 1997. Korean, German, Swedish, Hungarian, and Italian translations are on the horizon.

Study Groups and Societies

Members of the Forum recognized that some sort of fraternal organization was sure to

grow out of the teachings of *The Urantia Book*. Accordingly they organized the Urantia Brotherhood on January 2, 1955, and the Urantia Brotherhood Corporation, which acts as the legal and fiscal agent of the Brotherhood, on October 21, 1955, under the laws of the State of Illinois. In December, 1959, the Internal Revenue Service of the United States ruled that the Urantia Foundation, the Urantia Brotherhood, and the Urantia Brotherhood Corporation were tax-exempt, not-for-profit organizations.

The organizational building blocks of the Urantia Brotherhood are local Societies which emerge from mature study groups, and they function with great autonomy. In 1989, as the result of a dispute over democratic control of the Brotherhood, the Brotherhood severed organic connection with the Urantia Foundation and changed its name to the Fifth Epochal Fellowship, now better known as **The Fellowship** for students and readers of *The Urantia Book*, with offices at 529 Wrightwood, Chicago, IL 60614. The Urantia Foundation, with offices at 533 Diversey Parkway, Chicago, IL 60614, is sponsoring a new fraternal organization entitled The International Urantia Association. These fraternal organizations are primarily interested in the spiritual stimulation and growth of people of all faiths and religions.

Future Development

Both the Urantia Foundation and The Fellowship have refrained from using mass media, believing that person to person contact and slow evolutionary growth is the most effective long term policy for introducing people to *The Urantia Book*. It is rather amazing that in a time when reporters are examining all kinds of cults and new religious movements, *The Urantia Book* has received little general publicity. The academic world is just beginning to discover its existence. In 1983, Dr. Jacques Rheume at the University of Ottawa wrote a doctoral thesis on the topic "An Analysis of a Revealed Text: *The Urantia Book*" (Analyse d'un Texte Revele: *The Urantia Book*). In 1985, there was an American Academy of Religion Consultation on the theme "*The Urantia Book* in Religious Studies."

The Urantia Book is one of the most promising sources of creative thought in philosophy, religion, and culture in our contemporary world. It has extremely broad ramifications. The authors' overarching grasp of the dynamics of civilization and culture shed wisdom in almost every area of human endeavor. Although we are confident the church will one day view *The Urantia Book* as an authentic and enlarged source of spiritual truth, it will only gain such recognition through critical evaluation by laypersons, ministers, and theologians.

A Service of
[The Urantia Book Fellowship](#)