A Growing Presence Among Scholars

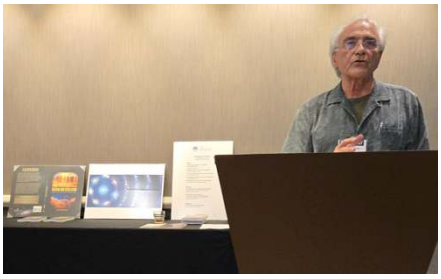
Bringing the Revelation to the American Academy of Religion

Byron Belitsos

Just before Thanksgiving of this year (2024), and thanks to the Fellowship's Outreach Committee, I had the thrill of presenting a booth at the American Academy of Religion (AAR), along with the generous support of veteran students of *The Urantia Book*, including Stephen Finlan and Zchonette Reed, pictured below. This important meeting in San Diego was the second such effort I have led, the other being an AAR booth in Denver in 2022 where I was blessed with help from advanced *UB* students who joined me from nearby Boulder.

These huge AAR conferences, which meet concurrently with the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL), are attended by thousands of scholars. To reach this influential audience, I have formed a new entity called Urantia Book Academy (UrantiaBookAcademy.org)—a long-term initiative of the Rodan Institute focused on building bridges to today's scholarly community. Our purpose is to offer easy access to *The Urantia Book* and advanced secondary works, and to provide open-minded academics an opportunity for an edifying conversation and ongoing engagement.

This year, increased funding allowed us to go further than in 2022. We not only mounted a more professional booth with better floor location, graphics, and flyers; we also hosted for the first time a special evening reception in which we introduced our roster of *UB* scholars—a rather rare commodity. At this break-out event, short introductory papers were read by Stephen Finlan, PhD, Zchonette Reed, JD, and Phil Calabrese, PhD. Dr. Finlan's original new essay, "Christology, Atonement, and *Theosis*," was the lead paper presented. (Pictured to the right, Phil Calabrese speaks on cosmology.) We also launched two publications targeted at academics: the scholarly anthology funded by the Fellowship called *Reason and Revelation* (Origin Press/Academic, 2024), and the brand new *International Journal of Urantia Book Studies*, or iJUBS, whose first issue is due out in June 2025.



And there was more: To my surprise, an academic paper I submitted to the "floor" of AAR was accepted, against odds. It was a pleasure to read this paper about the sociology of the Urantia

movement at one of the several hundred academic sessions held there over the event's four days. About thirty scholars were in attendance, and I was one of three who presented on a panel hosted by the New Religious Movements Unit. Many questions were addressed to me after my 25-minute presentation, and some of these professors offered my their cards and best wishes.

Seeking Name Recognition Among Scholars

Each year, AAR/SBL is attended by approximately ten thousand scholars who specialize in over 100 categories of study called "Units." Our own presence this year advanced the name recognition of the revelation another incremental step, thus furthering our specialized mission of outreach. Especial helping at the booth were Zchonette Reed and Phil Calabrese, along with a one-day assist by Pato Banton and Antoinette Hall.

This year's appearance at AAR confirms that we have a long way to go toward catalyzing independent scholarly study of the *UB*—a highly desirable end in itself that could one day enable a more distant goal: the teaching of the *UB* text or its secondary works in seminaries and university courses. As far as I know, there are no such courses on any campus in North American, and (sad to say) no scholarly articles on the revelation can be found in the world's huge online databases of academic literature in religion, biblical studies, and theology, at least in English. It's clearly high time for scholars and deep researchers focused on the *UB* to begin filling this serious gap.

This year, as in 2022, our ambitious effort had mixed results. For unknown reasons, our booth was somewhat better attended in 2022 than in 2024. In 2022, about fifteen professors engaged us in conversation, and some asked us to mail them free books. While only a few did so this year, at least our name and literature was out there on a row of booths that included prestigious university presses. On the bright side, I believe our scholar's reception was more worthwhile—and now sets an important precedent. Five professors attended, including two influential scholars: Ted Peters, a world leader in the study of theologian and science, and theologian Catherine Keller, one of the world's most creative theologians today, who in 2022 also sat on my committee when I wrote my M.A. thesis at Union Theological Seminary. (This thesis later became the book entitled *Truths about Evil, Sin, and the Demonic*, published by Wipf & Stock in 2023 and on display at our booth because it covers the *UB* in several chapters.)

Support Our Growing Community of Scholars

The burgeoning field of scholarship of new religious movements (known as the New Religious Movements Unit) may become the first to give long overdue scholarly scrutiny to our revelation; and yet, this particular area of scholarship was not my first choice at AAR. I also submitted a paper in my own field of training, systematic theology—but it was turned down. Nevertheless, we shall go wherever doors of opportunity are opened by the Spirit of Truth and our ministering angels.

If you feel called to travel with us on this fascinating journey into the dawn of *UB*-inspired scholarship by credentialed scholars and the teaching of revelation topics in higher educational settings, please sign up for updates at https://urantiabookacademy.org (scroll down to bottom of the home page). You will receive, in mid-2025, the first edition of iJUBS, our online scholarly journal, along with periodic lectures, papers, podcasts, reviews, and events that will soon be forthcoming. Advanced students of the revelation are encouraged to submit papers or book reviews that meet basic scholarly standards. And, stay tuned for two milestones: a call for papers for the inaugural issue of iJUBS, and the next AAR/SBL to held in Boston on November 21-25, 2025.

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