

Some Thoughts on Protecting the Revelation

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In the first half-century of the Urantia movement there has been nothing more divisive than the string of plans put forth intended to "protect the revelation" and create "unity" within the readership. From Martin Myers' "Unity, not Uniformity," the infamous "Confirmatory Agreement," the recently defeated "Social Licensing Agreement" to the arguments presented in the currently controversial "Michael's Plan" -- the permutations of this same basic effort to create a belief-based ideological foundation for the community continue to present themselves.

Let's consider the two issues invariably addressed in these plans--protecting the revelation and creating unity.

1. Protecting the Revelation

Protecting it from what? We are most often warned about the possibility of some imagined nefarious author who will rewrite the revelation and publish it in greatly altered form, sabotaging the revelation itself. But how probable is such a scenario? There is absolutely no historic precedent for such an undertaking, even in the brutal totalitarian political states that emerged in the twentieth century. The Nazis did not try to destroy Judaism by rewriting the Torah. The Bolsheviks did not try to eliminate Orthodoxy by rewriting the Bible or the Lives of the Saints. As brutal as the Soviets were in attempting to deny access to sacred texts, there was no effort to sabotage religion by rewriting the texts and somehow replacing the originals in a manner which would go unnoticed by religionists. Can you imagine a group of fundamentalist Christians trying to combat Islam by publishing a re-written Koran?

Consider how scholars struggle to find original texts when studying the Bible. Appreciate how careful they are in their attempts to describe the sociological and religious contexts in which the meanings of those documents might be understood. Imagine if there had been 500,000 copies of the Dead Sea Scrolls scattered around the world in a dozen languages, clearly marked as to the dates of their publication and traceable to a known publishing enterprise. How probable would it be that someone could create a bogus copy that would cause confusion? Appreciate also the care that museums and educational institutions take to assure that the texts and artifacts they present are not forgeries.

I am unable to see any rational basis for these frequently expressed fears about someone rewriting a misleading version of The Urantia Book.

Fears have been expressed about the proliferation of multiple translations and editions of the book. Again, there is no evidence that multiple editions or translations lead to

confusion. In fact, if you go to any large bookstore you will find that the more highly acclaimed any piece of literature might be, the more translations there are available.

There is probably no better example than the Bible itself. There are children's editions, multiple translations from differing scholarly traditions, simplified editions, partial editions such as New Testaments, collections of Psalms, books containing only the Proverbs, illustrated editions, editions with internal cross-reference systems, and Gospels of John -- and all of this in multiple languages and translations created by different publishers and believer groups. Has all of this publishing activity and marketing of partial editions created confusion and caused the central text to become hopelessly lost? Hardly. This profusion of translations and editions has greatly facilitated the spread of this text into the lives of many more individuals and cultural groups than otherwise would have been possible.

Visit the Russian or French literature sections of your bookstore. You will find the same thing -- multiple translations in accord with the perceived value of the original text. You will also find abridged and annotated editions.

One of the most interesting study groups I ever attended was in Rio de Janeiro. This group consisted of some very well educated individuals and because there was no text in their native Portuguese language, they used Spanish, French, and English books. Whenever there was a controversy about a particular concept, they would look up the same passage in each translation and illuminate their discussion with the way different translators had chosen to express the concept in question. We should not underestimate the power of the fundamental human quest for truth.

I can find no rational basis for believing that there is danger lurking in the proliferation of multiple translations, multiple editions, or publications of selected portions of the primary text.

In the purpose statement on the "Michael's Plan" website we read, ". . . the fragmentation of the revelation into separate parts, and the birth of numerous socio-religious groups competing for reader allegiance would be an unfortunate legacy for future generations."

Ironically, a destructive change to the text could only happen if there was a centralized bureaucracy controlling it, a central authority of some sort which could declare that the revelators had spoken again and issued an update or some corrections. The more diversity there is in the community of revelation believers, the more groups there are, the more publishers there are creating separate editions--the more difficult it becomes for anyone to change the primary content of the revelation in a way that would be threatening to its integrity and long-term viability.

Our social challenge is not to prevent the formation of numerous groups, but rather to foster the spiritual qualities of enlightened social interaction through which we recognize and relate to each other as brothers and sisters in the Father's family, regardless of our individual beliefs or human social loyalties.

Our administrative challenge is not to "protect" the revelation, but rather to work for its wide acceptance in as many linguistic and cultural niches as possible. The more broadly it is established in the lives of individuals and localized believer communities, the more likely it is to continue spreading and securing a foothold in the philosophic and religious thought streams of the planet.

The wise stewardship of emerging diversity is one of the most important legacies we can provide for future generations.

The only threat from which we need to protect the revelation is the threat presented by groups who insist they have a plan for protecting it.

2. The Need for Unity

It is the desire to see the book translated and spread around the world is emerging as the primary unifying element in an increasingly diverse readership.

It is ironic that the greatest threat to the social unity of the readership and the greatest creator of conflict and dissent has been the effort to impose unity by some external means. Techniques employed have included everything from devastating lawsuits and appeals to apocryphal writings, to gentle persuasion based on out-of-context quotes from The Urantia Book. These plans are always presented in the context of fears that something dreadful will happen to the revelation if the plan is not ratified and supported by the reader community. Once again, in the present effort via "Michael's Plan" we see a litany of weaknesses and incomplete social processes within the community cited and attributed to a lack of ideological and belief-based uniformity.

My observation is that the community evolves toward social unity inversely relative to the amount of pressure being applied by groups and individuals to force unity. That is, as artificially contrived pressure to unify is reduced, the community naturally evolves toward more unity. Every time some group attempts to force unity through some administrative mechanism, division and conflict result and setbacks occur.

Over the past few years, as Urantia Foundation has reduced legal pressure on the readership, there has been a remarkable development of cooperative outreach efforts. It is only when something such as "Michael's Plan" shows up that there is regression into earlier social divisions and a re-emergence of conflict. The growing diversity which the reader community is enjoying as a result of the reduction of pressure for conformity has resulted in more reader groups being formed, more conferences, more publications, more international outreach, more contributions to dissemination projects, and more translations being created than ever before.

Can this really be considered an unfortunate legacy for future generations, as is claimed by the proponents of "Michael's Plan"?

Our reader community increasingly is being unified around goals, even though our individual beliefs vary widely. Virtually everyone wants to get the book translated and spread around the world. There is unity around the goal of establishing more reader groups, more study groups. There is no significant conflict at the core of our shared interests and goals. We are enjoying an emerging functional, cooperative unity that comes from within individuals who want to work together to achieve dissemination goals that are impossible for the lone worker to achieve; it is not a theoretical unity that is legislated or derived from an artificially imposed common set of beliefs about our apocryphal stories.

Proponents of these unity plans always go out of their way to insist that they have no intention of abrogating the spiritual freedom of the individual. In a post to the socadmin list last Sunday (January 13), George wrote, "The church accomplished this theft of spiritual freedom through its superior social organization. You may believe that this can never happen again, but all of human history shows such a belief to be naively idealistic. It was not the naïve idealism of Abner which carried the gospel of Jesus to the world, but the reality-based idealism of Paul. Abner also believed that the revelation given by Jesus needed no "protective institutions," and the gospel did not take firm hold to the east. Paul was the wiser of the two concerning human nature and social organization and the gospel conquered the west."

First of all, the book doesn't say anything about "protective institutions" in relation to Abner; a "protective institution" was not an issue in early Christianity.

But much more importantly, Paul didn't found an authoritarian institution -- he started worship communities of individuals who added his teachings to their existing Judaic beliefs. In addition, these early believers were based in synagogue communities which had a rich tradition of local autonomy. For the first three hundred years of its history, Christianity spread and took root in widely diverse communities spread around the shores of the Mediterranean Sea and extending into the differing regional cultures which formed the core of the Roman Empire.

It was Constantine in the fourth century who really founded what we refer to as "the church" and he did so in an attempt to create unity, eliminate diversity and defuse social conflict. And in the wake of Constantine's Nicean program for unity came the kind of religious and spiritual oppression which would be very nice for the Urantia movement to forego.

In other words, it wasn't until a protective institution was created for purposes of fostering unity that religious and spiritual freedom began to deteriorate under the burden of a self-sustaining bureaucracy which today is still headquartered in Rome. Today, its many programs for supporting unity--which range from providing standardized weekly sermons to dictating which books should or should not be read in order to maintain unity--have come to extend to virtually every country on the planet.

One of the great weaknesses of the plans created within the Urantia community is that they assume that spiritual development will proceed most effectively from a foundation of social unity. However, the opposite is true: Cosmically productive social order will proceed out of the spiritual transformation of the individual. And this concept is at the core of the teaching of The Urantia Book. It is only as a repercussion of the kingdom being established in the lives of men and women that genuine social order will evolve.

Instead of trying to foster a community based on shared beliefs, we should be fostering a community based on shared work, the work of revelation dissemination. It is this shared work and our shared goals that are the growing forces of unity in our community. We can best foster unity by fostering these naturally occurring unifiers and evolving our administrative systems to further facilitate their expression.

Working together is a much more powerful unifier than believing together.