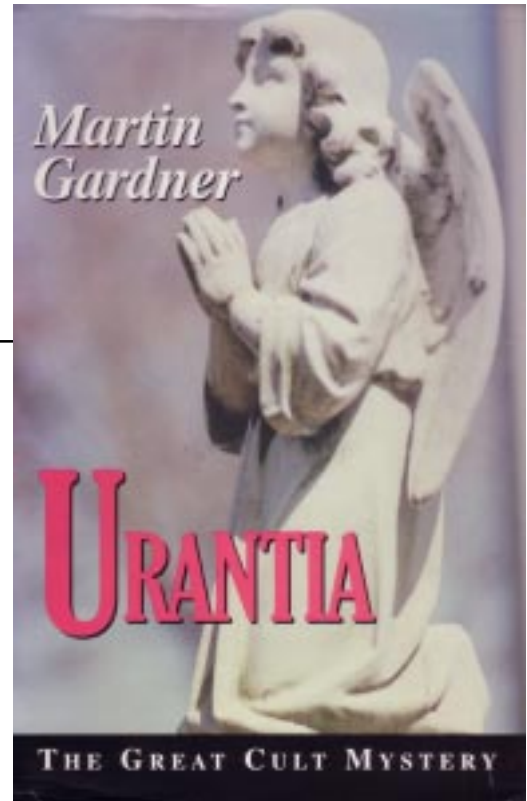


GARDNER, YORK AND BLOCK

Matthew Block responds to Michael York's *Journal of Contemporary Religion* review of Martin Gardner's *Urantia: The Great Cult Mystery*



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April 7, 1997

Mr. Michael York, Research Fellow
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Dear Mr. York:

As reader services correspondent at Fellowship headquarters, I would like to thank you for sending us your review article of Martin Gardner's *Urantia*. Of the half-dozen reviews we've read, yours is certainly the most serious, insightful and heartening. It was also gratifying to learn that you met your first *Urantia* Book believers during your visit to our information center at the 1993 Parliament of the World's Religions.

Perhaps we met there; I'm Matthew Block, the "hopelessly naive" Urantian who has gained notoriety for my discoveries of sources of *The Urantia Book*. I currently work full-time for the Fellowship, but manage to find time to continue my research. At last count, I've collected 75 books which, collectively, parallel portions of about 100 Papers.

I found your insights on the *Urantia* Book's affinities with other sects and belief systems most interesting. As someone who is also engaged in trying to place the teachings of The UB within the context of intellectual history, I thought I would offer some feedback to some of your observations. In doing so, however, I don't wish to burden you with the feeling that you need to reply. >

POLYTHEISM?

(1) First, I wonder if “polytheistic” accurately describes the UB’s theology. Polytheism, to my mind, connotes a host of nature gods often working at cross-purposes. I prefer to think that the revelators expound a sort of pluralistic trinitarianism. The relations between the three Persons of the Godhead—absolutely at one in the Trinity, but acting as separate Sources and Centers in the work of creation—lay the foundations for all reality. The revelators distinguish “Gods” from “gods,” giving no credence to the latter term. “Gods” denotes the three Persons of the Trinity, or, rarely, the Creator Sons, of which Jesus (Michael) is one. The Creator Sons spring from the Father and the Son, partake of the absolute divinity of their Trinity parents, and act in perfect harmony with one another (each Creator Son fostering a separate local universe) and with the Trinity. The first page of Paper 1, extolling the monotheistic insight that recognizes one Creator at the heart of reality, sets the tone for the rest of the book.

SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST INFLUENCE

(2) Re the incorporation of Seventh-day Adventist beliefs: There is indeed a recognizable legacy of themes from SDA scattered throughout the book. As well as the doctrines of soul sleep and annihilation of the wicked (which latter belief is held by many other denominations, including the Anglican Church), one shared element not mentioned by Gardner is the account of the rebellion of Satan (or, in the UB, Lucifer). Ellen White’s chapter “The Origin of Evil” in her *The Great Controversy*, reads like a rudimentary anticipation of the UB’s discussion of the Lucifer Rebellion, particularly in its focus on Lucifer’s resentments and motivations. The UB adds dimension to the scenario by explaining Lucifer’s position in the cosmic hierarchy, the proneness of the members of his order of Sonship to self-exaltation, and how his administrative superiors contained the rebellion by quarantining Urantia and the other planets whose superhuman administrators aligned with the rebels.

Interestingly, though, most of the incorporated insights or tenets from SDA are rather secondary, and many are shared with other denominations. Moreover, the shared beliefs are often modified. For instance, the UB does not uniformly prescribe soul sleep until the resurrection. We are told that spiritually advanced individuals, upon death, proceed directly to the “mansion worlds” and regain consciousness on the third day.

The dominant elements of the UB—i.e. the theological and cosmological primacy of the three Persons of the Trinity; evolution as a cosmic principle; novel ideas as to the real mission and meaning of the bestowal of Jesus; the evolution of the finite God (the Supreme) and our role in his progressive self-manifestation; the indwelling of a discrete fragment of God in each normal-minded human soul; our future career as “finaliters” and ministers to other types of created beings in the as-yet-

uninhabited universes, etc.—were not anticipated by SDA. Yet all of these themes are presented in the UB so meticulously and in such richness of detail, that it is difficult to account for them as having been concocted by Sadler (and/or Wilfred Kellogg, assuming—which I do not—that he was the “sleeping subject”) as a simple reaction against SDA. For this reason, it is misleading to describe the Urantia movement, as I believe Gardner does, as an offshoot of Seventh-day Adventism, created by a disillusioned Sadler while “on the rebound” from SDA. The UB is too distanced from the cardinal precepts of that church, calmly dismissing or ignoring such doctrines as the imminent return of Christ, the necessity of observing the seventh-day Sabbath, the “shut door” doctrine, the “Spirit of prophecy” operating through inspired modern-day prophets/prophetesses, the infallibility of the Bible, the atonement, original sin, non-evolutionary creationism, etc.

I have not found that SDA recognizes an indwelling portion of God in the human soul similar to the UB’s conception of the Thought Adjuster. SDAs interpret the “spirit” as the breath. As one of their books puts it, “The formula for a living soul is therefore the following: Dust plus breath = living soul.” Of course, SDAs recognize the indwelling Spirit of Christ; still, The UB’s conception of the Thought Adjuster has more affinity with Socrates’ daemon or the Quakers’ Inner Light, since it posits that each individual is endowed with a discrete, unique fragment of God operating as a divine guide and compass.

SDAs and Urantians both equate Jesus with Michael. However, Ellen White, seeing Jesus working ubiquitously throughout Old Testament history, also equates him with the I AM (of the burning bush) and Immanuel, which the UB does not. The UB identifies these last two with other divine personalities or manifestations of the Godhead. Thus, to SDA’s Michael is not the specific and exclusive “other name” of Jesus, unlike in the UB.

UB AS ARIAN?

(3) Re the UB being Arian: The UB posits an absolutely unified Trinity as well as the Creatorhood (not creaturehood) of

Jesus/Michael (who is not a member of the infinite Trinity but the divinely perfect Son of two of its members). Therefore it is inaccurate to describe the UB as Arian, since Arius rejected any sort of trinitarian Godhead. The UB is neither Arian nor strictly Athanasian but endorses and integrates insights from both views. Here is an instance of the UB’s ability to reconcile heretofore contradictory positions through its multi-levelled system of Deity and reality. (On p. 2070 the UB author lauds Athanasius for contending against the errors of Arius.)

GALACTIANISM

(4) Your discussion of galactianism was most informative. Since my research has centered on mainstream religious and ►

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academic literature of the early 20th century, I've not read carefully the galactian works you cite, but I see from your remarks that it would be instructive to do so.

Likewise I've not read much theosophy. But I tend to doubt that the similarities would be extensive or exclusive, since the UB disavows reincarnation, astrology, avatars and spiritualism. Nor, unlike Mormonism or the Unification Church, does the book posit a corporeal God. The UB does explain that "matter" may be constituted in ways radically different from what we know, and that divine administrators do reside on "architectural worlds". The Gods reside on the "timeless, spaceless Isle of Paradise", but their abode is described as "wholly spiritual" (p. 120).

The paper "Energy - Mind and Matter" offers a remarkable review of the sources, levels and manifestations of energy, which again allows for a reconciliation of heretofore conflicting apprehensions - in this case, of the relationship between matter and spirit.

SUPPRESSION OF "HYBRID" MATERIAL

(5) Re the suppression of material on "hybrids" alleged by Loose and Sherman: I find it impossible to believe, from reading the UB's rich and detailed description of the evolutionary process (see, for instance, the sensible if sometimes unorthodox account in the paper "The Overcontrol of Evolution"), that such material could ever have been part of the Urantia Papers. This secondhand story is undoubtedly a garbled recollection from Loose or Sherman, possibly reflecting a previous involvement of either or both with theosophy or some other related belief system. The only faint analogy with this in the UB is the account of the mating of some members of the Planetary Prince's humanized staff with humans. The offspring were called Nodites. The revelators describe the original generations of Nodites as being endowed with superior physique, mentality and spirituality, owing to their part-superhuman (but humanized) parentage. The Nodites later amalgamated with others, eventually disappearing as a distinct people.

Loose's garbled anecdote has not been attested to by any other Forum member, so far as I know. But apparently Gardner had no hesitation in including information from any source, provided it was bizarre and negative.

RACE AND RACIAL DIFFERENCES

(6) Re the UB's discussion of eugenics and racial differences: Yes, this is one part of the UB that embarrasses some believers. But in the days before cultural relativism, it was commonly recognized that peoples or races, living in isolation, are not equal in their capacity to create and foster civilizations. The Urantia Book endorses this view, using words like "inferior" and "superior" to characterize the original races based on their performances as civilization builders. Despite such race-linked differences, each of the original races produced at least one inspired genius who was later selected to serve on the Council of Four and Twenty

(see p. 513), an advisory panel wielding great influence in the local universe, and which rotates leadership on an equal basis.

The Urantia Book also uses outmoded terms such as "degenerate" and "defective" to describe sociopaths, warning of the dangers of allowing vicious, anti-social people (or those of grossly subnormal intelligence) to reproduce freely. Of course, in the early 20th century, when the Papers were being received, eugenics was considered legitimate. It was later discredited for being pseudo-scientific and driven by social prejudices. The UB's eugenic prescriptions, unlike Sadler's in his early writings, are mild and cautious. From p. 585: "The difficulty of executing such a radical program [of eliminating the unfit] on Urantia consists in the absence of competent judges to pass upon the biologic fitness or unfitness of the individuals of your world races. Notwithstanding this obstacle, it seems that you ought to be able to agree upon the biologic disfellowshipping of your more markedly unfit, defective, degenerate, and antisocial stocks."

Despite their assertion of hereditary inequalities amongst individuals (and formerly amongst races, before widespread intermixing made such differences impossible to discern accurately), the revelators do indeed emphasize our absolute equality in the

sight of God. Urantia Book believers are thus faced with the challenge of reconciling two value systems—one hereditarian, inequalitarian, and applicable to this life only; the other spiritual, equalitarian and applicable to this life and throughout eternity. But this challenge, as Gardner correctly points out, is not unique to Urantians. The denial of hereditary differences in mental aptitude is a very recent position, and one which is by no means universally accepted.

But notwithstanding pronounced differences among the early human races, the UB maintains that slavery is abolished early in the development of normal planets (see, for example, p.

587). Democracy is indeed the norm; however, we are told (p. 817) that on advanced planets, meritocracy is superimposed upon democracy, resulting in a weighted voting system which grants each person at least one vote, with extra votes given to "individuals who have rendered great service to society, or who have demonstrated extraordinary wisdom in government service."

A NEW URANTIAN CULT?

(7) Contrary to Gardner's claim, the UB nowhere "urges Urantians to replace [Christianity] with a 'new cult' destined to be the 'true religion' of the future." The pages cited by Gardner (p. 965-966) use the word "cult" as a synonym for "cultus" - meaning a system of shared religious symbolism and procedures that serves to bond believers together, strengthening their loyalties to spiritual values. The writer of these passages says that early Christianity *had an effective cult*, not that it *was* a cult. The "new cult" proposed by the revelator is meant to "facilitate spiritual progress, enhance cosmic meanings, augment moral values . . ." and, as such, can be incorporated into any existing religion.

Nowhere in the UB is it implied that Christianity must be overthrown before the Urantia revelation can make an impact, or that Christianity is bound to decline as the Urantia movement grows. Indeed, the book is meant to act as a revivifying influence upon all religions, although obviously the Urantia teachings may prove more amenable to some religions than others.

My research shows that, of all belief systems, the Urantia Book's religious and philosophical teachings have most in common with a type of liberal Protestantism that flourished in the early decades of the twentieth century in both England and America. The bulk of human sources comes from this corpus of Anglo-American liberal theists and philosophers, most of whom, like the Urantia Book, upheld the divinity of Christ but disavowed the atonement doctrine. Disavowal of atonement did not begin with the New Age movement but was rather a staple tenet of many respected, mainstream religionists since the mid 19th century. With the rise of modern Biblical criticism, Christians began to perceive the Pauline overlay of Christianity and wanted to get back to the "real religion of Jesus." Many such Christians came to conclusions very similar to the teachings of the Urantia Book regarding the miracles of Jesus, his divinity, the purpose of his bestowal and the heart of his message. Therefore Gardner is quite wrong in saying that the UB "insults humanists and liberal Christians by its elaborate polytheism and its acceptance of so many New Testament miracles..." In fact, the UB rejects most of these so-called miracles and endorses many of the time-honoured beliefs of liberal Christians.

True, the UB does introduce a novel theology and cosmology that may be baffling at first, but a sustained study would show that this system is neither gratuitously complex nor simply a phantasmagorical hotchpotch. It is logical and consistent, and provides an enlightening framework for answering many perplexing questions, including the nature and purpose of evil, the meaning of "Be you perfect even as the Father in heaven is perfect", the origin and destiny of the created universe and its relation to the plans and purposes of Deity, etc.

I prefer to believe that the teachings of the UB will speak appealingly to middle-of-the-roaders, those who are neither confirmed New Agers nor Fundamentalists, but who are looking for intellectually satisfying and spiritually inspiring modern answers to timeless questions.

PLAGIARISMS IN THE URANTIA BOOK?

(8) Re my work exposing the extent of literary borrowing in the UB: My original estimate that about one-third of Parts I and II and about two-thirds of Parts III and IV contain passages paralleling previously published material, is being generally borne out.

I'm now preparing my first book of a planned series which will explore how sources were used in various sections of the

UB. The book will begin with an introductory overview of my findings and will then focus on four papers (one paper from each Part), detailing how the source material used in each paper was revised and reinterpreted so as to harmonize with the original framework of the revelation. Since you found Gardner's review of parallels to be tedious, you would probably find my sentence-by-sentence comparative analyses all the more so! Nevertheless, this work needs to be done in order to show that the Urantia Book cannot be dismissed as a patchwork of plagiarisms or workmanlike paraphrasing.

I'm convinced that a sustained comparative analysis will persuade believers and non-believers alike that, regardless of who is responsible for it, this work of restatement (which was systematically carried out from the first to the last page of the UB, although certainly not on every page) is a masterpiece of creative literary borrowing, unparalleled in literature. My study of the previous cases of plagiarism or literary borrowing, including that of Ellen G. White, has reinforced this impression.

Gardner's treatment of "plagiarisms in the UB" barely gives a foretaste of my findings, since he generally sticks to examples of restatements of scientific and historical facts. And how much creative editing can be exercised in

restating the fact that a certain tribe worships stones? The genius of the revelators becomes especially apparent in their retuning of religious and cosmic insights.

Nevertheless, for all his snideness, distortions and sloppy scholarship, the Urantia movement has Gardner to thank for putting us on the map, and for breaking the path for future studies. Regardless of the fact that his book was published by Prometheus Press (the book-publishing arm of the sceptical movement in America, founded by atheist philosopher Paul Kurtz and dedicated to undermining theistic faith) and was barely edited (since Gardner, as the grandfather of the sceptics, gets *carte blanche* to publish anything he wants, in the way he wants), he has forced Urantia Book readers to see the Urantia Book and movement in historical perspective.

Now, hopefully, the time will soon be ripe for treatments of the Urantia Book/movement by both neutral observers and committed believers, who will cover the same ground as Gardner but from a more balanced and/or sympathetic angle. Surely more informed understandings will arise of the links between the Urantia Book and Sadler, Seventh-day Adventism, world literature, 20th century science, etc. Moreover, the unique and original elements of the book's synthesis of theology, philosophy and cosmology—whose systematic exposition Gardner completely ignores, although an appreciation of this systematicity is essential for a real understanding of the UB's achievement—should also become more apparent.

Thank you again for writing the review and sharing it with us. ■