

Religious dispute

Urantia readers fight copyright suit

By CLAY EVANS
Camera Staff Writer

The "Urantia Papers" are 2,097 pages of cosmic history, spiritual insights and an expanded history of the life of Jesus of Nazareth. Among the titles of the 196 papers: "The Nature of God," "Growth of the Trinity Concept" and "The Crucifixion."

Most commonly published as "The Urantia Book" by the Chicago-based Urantia Foundation (pronounced Yu-ranch-uh), the massive treatise purportedly was "authored" by supermortal, angel-like beings in 1934-35, transcribed by an unknown process and finally published in 1955. Since the first publication, some 300,000 copies of the papers have been printed and distributed across the globe.

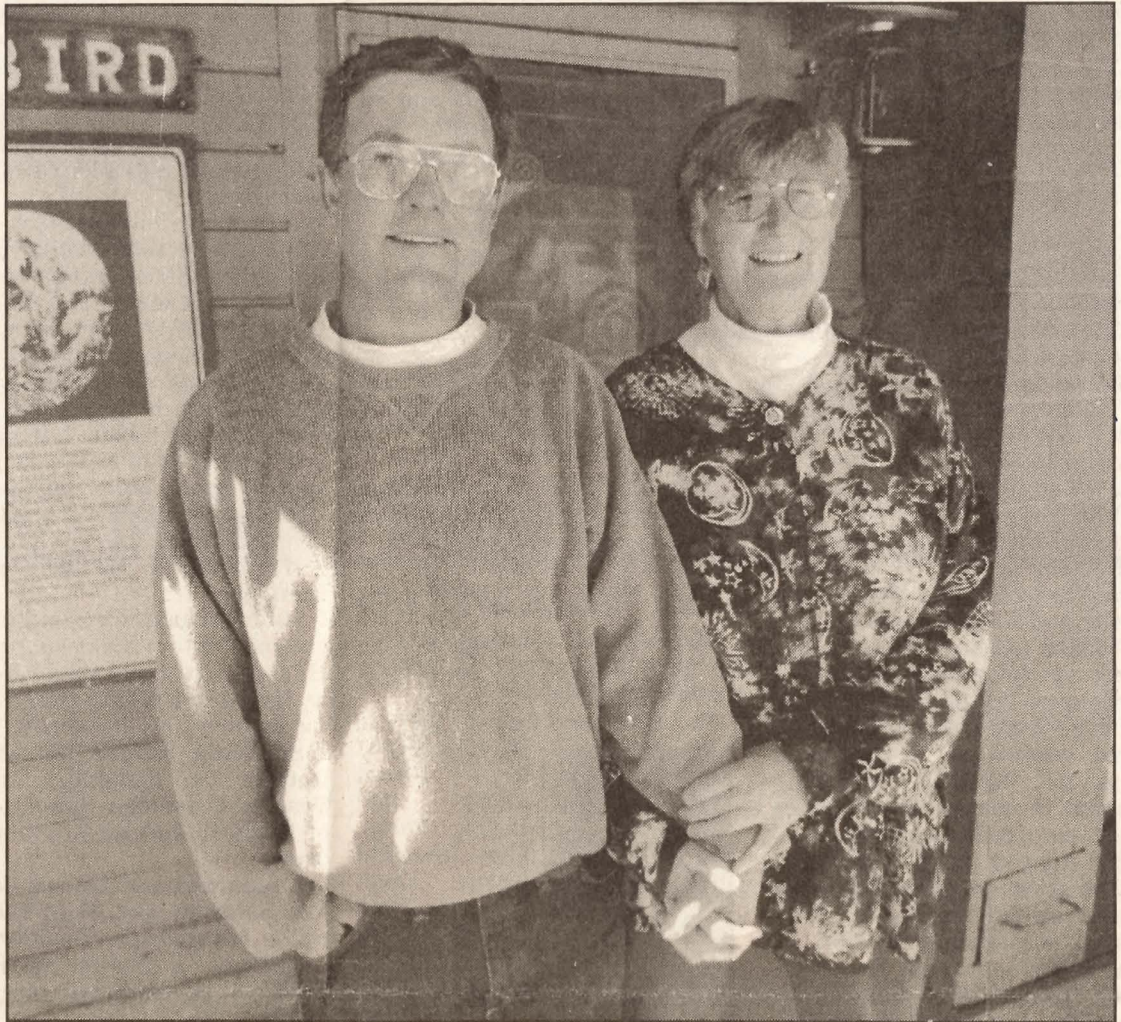
Boulder has become a Urantia Mecca of sorts: It's home to many readers as well as the Jesusonian Foundation, a non-profit organization to distribute secondary Urantia materials, funded by Celestial Seasonings tea magnate and Urantia reader Mo Siegel.

But is Urantia a religion?

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But Boulder County resident Kristen Maaherra, who is being sued by the Foundation for creating an index to the Urantia Papers, and scores of other readers say unequivocally that Urantia is their religion.

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MARTY CAIVANO / Daily Camera

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On Monday, the Urantia Foundation's lawyers will ask a U.S. District Court judge in Denver to uphold earlier rulings that it holds valid copyrights and trademarks on Urantia publications and symbols.

"A small minority of readers want to use the text and circles for religious reasons. But the Urantia Book is not a religious organization for just a few people," said Tonia Baney, executive director of the Chicago foundation. "It is meant to uplift people of all faiths, cultures and civilizations."

Counters Maaherra: "It absolutely is our religion. I do believe it is a revelation." She said the term "Urantia" can't be copyrighted: It's simply the term for "earth" used by Jesus, this planet's "local cre-



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Maaherra's lawyers will argue that granting trademark and copyrights to the foundation would be tantamount to handing the Catholic Church exclusive rights to use the cross as its symbol. They want Maaherra to get the chance to make that argument before a jury of her peers.

"It's like trademarking the cross, or the star of David, saying nobody can use it," said the 53-year-old Left Hand Canyon resident whose husband, Eric Schaveland, has been ordered not to use the Urantia symbol on his World Wide Web site. "I do not have a clue why they are suing us. Any sane leaders would have thanked us, come to us and said, 'Hey, we've seen your index, would you let us distribute it?'"

"You'd think they want the word out there. Anybody who

has even heard of the Urantia Papers has won the lottery," she said. "To get (the papers) out to a hungry world is the whole point." Maaherra and Schaveland only distributed their index to current readers of the Urantia Papers and gave them out for free, she said.

The conflict, which began 6½ years ago, has split "Urantia readers," as they call themselves, and brought them to a crossroads: Is Urantia a religion, or merely a secular organization and commercial opportunity?

U.S. courts generally have been reluctant to grant copyrights on clearly religious texts, said Boulder consultant and Urantia reader Phil Geiger.

Currently, the foundation holds valid copyrights and trademark rights. However, because of a court decision, a rival group known as The Fel-

lowship legally published its own edition of the papers during a 12-month window that closed in June 1996.

Maaherra and others who call Urantia their religion believe the material should be in the public domain, like the Bible. "It's clearly a religious book. There's no doubt in anybody's mind who reads it," said Paula Thompson, director of the Jesusonian Foundation in Boulder.

Some readers also have complained that the foundation's hardback "Urantia Book" is prohibitively expensive at \$65. The Fellowship's paperback edition, currently illegal to sell, went for less than \$20.

"This book was not meant to be a big cash cow. That's the way believers truly feel," said Boulder Urantia reader Donald Green.

Foundation head Baney (See **BOULDER**, Page 4B)

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said the Urantia Papers themselves make clear that readers are not to form a religion from the work.

"When you read the papers of Jesus, you understand we are constantly asked to live his teachings," she said. "But we are warned in several places not to organize. That's what (St.) Paul did, and we got the Catholic Church."

However, the Urantia Foundation's charter seems to make clear that it has a religious mandate: Under Article 2.1, the foun-

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dation is directed to disseminate essential teachings and doctrines "through the fostering of a religion, a philosophy, and a cosmol-

ogy," according to information published on the foundation's Web site.

Baney also said the foundation

had published an edition for \$19.95. (Thompson of The Jesusonian Foundation in Boulder confirmed that an inexpensive, vinyl-bound edition is available.)

Maaherra and her husband are "well intentioned, but they're being used by other people," Baney said, declining to elaborate.

With the fate of their religion in the hands of a judge, some Urantia devotees seem baffled that there is controversy over the document they feel has changed their lives.

"Believe me, I've tried to figure it out," said Maaherra. "I guess they just want to control it."