

One label
does not
fit all

Religion, Philosophy or Metaphysics?

THE TERM *religion* can be a kind of Rorschach test. For some, it's a dark blot on spirituality, considered by some to be a purer form. For others, it conveys legitimacy and authority. That's why some belief systems responding to spiritual questions and yearnings choose to describe themselves as a "religion," while others do not. But all metaphysical/spiritual schools of thought and practice can agree on one thing: books help spread the word.

Urantia: Not a Religion

Tonia Baney, executive director of the Chicago-based Urantia Foundation, is emphatic about what Urantia is not. "We're not out to start another church. It's not that kind of thing at all." Yet Urantia does teach something for people to believe in. "It's a personal belief system," she says. "It does not compete with any other religious thought or theology or philosophy."

This belief system, which some turn to for the kinds of answers that religion has historically provided, is based on

The Urantia Book, a single text that the Urantia Foundation exists to advance. Like many important texts central to belief systems, the book is considered to be authored by celestial beings. And it, too, teaches humanity about God, the life of Jesus and other timeless questions that have been the subjects of religion and philosophy.

"*The Urantia Book* answers many basic questions that human beings ask themselves when they're looking for more spiritual facts and realities in their lives," Baney says. She compares the teachings of Urantia to those of Alcoholics Anonymous; the latter describes itself as "spiritual but not religious," so it is compatible with any organized religious system. More than 70 percent of Urantia readers attend some kind of church. "The point of the book is to give mankind additional information to have a per-

sonal relationship with God," Baney explains.

The book has been published in English since 1955 and publicized through a circle of Chicago-area people associated with a psychologist and a physician. The Urantia Foundation doesn't even like to name the originators to avoid any veneration of founders. "What happened is quite a story," Baney says. She promises that an authoritative history will be written at some future date.

Readership of the book is rising. Baney estimates that perhaps half a million people around the world have purchased, read and studied the text since its original publication. The book sold 40,000 copies last year, a 38% increase over the previous year. Baney attributes the increase to an improved distribution network, since the foundation does very little advertising. In the U.S., the book is a stock item at major bookstores. Relatively new international markets are also growing: Mexico is a new market, and sales are so good in Russia the foundation is doing a second printing of that edition. In several other countries, some churches are adopting the book as a text. A sister organization, the International Urantia Association, organizes conferences and encourages the formation of study groups, further promoting use of the text.

Eckankar: Religion of Light & Sound

Calling itself the "religion of the light and sound of God," Eckankar embraces the term *religion*. Eckankar was introduced in 1965 as a modern religion with roots in ancient wisdom. Its first leader, Paul Twitchell, studied with teachers in a variety of spiritual traditions and began propagating ECK teachings by offering Soul Travel Workshops as a way of advancing human consciousness. Practices within Eckankar include worship services, annual festivals on significant holidays, individual spiritual exercises and initiations. The current leader of Eckankar, known as the Mahanta or Living ECK Master, is Harold Klemp; the nonprofit religious organization is headquartered in Minneapolis.



Wild success, thanks to Oprah.