Why the Baha'i Faith Is Not Pluralist

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I nt r oduct ion

In his article "The Bahá'í Faith and Religious Pluralism," Seena Fazel — a Bahá'í, and psychologist by professional — argues that the Bahá'í response to religious diversity is a form of religious pluralism. 1 In this article, I will argue that the Bahá'í Faith is not pluralist. My argument will take the form of (1) a review and critique of Fazel's argument, and (2) an independent evaluation of the Bahá'í response to religious diversity in light of a concept of religious pluralism developed by, philosopher of religion, Paul Griffiths. 2 Both arguments will lead to the conclusion that the Bahá'í Faith is not pluralist. However, before proceeding to my main arguments I will provide some historical context to the debate on religious pluralism/diversity that has been taking place amongst western academics — mostly Christians — for the past twenty years or so. This may help us to understand, on one hand, why Fazel characterizes the Bahá'í Faith pluralist and, on the other, why Griffiths reinterprets the concept of religious pluralism.

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The contemporary academic debate on religious diversity has largely revolved around the question of whether or not non-Christians can be saved — and if so how? 3 Moreover, a dominant model, for organizing responses to this question, has emerged in the form of a threefold typology that includes exclusivist, inclusivist, and pluralist responses. 4 This typology was initially conceived by Alan Race in 1983, but has since been popularized through the work or John Hick, Gavin D'Costa, Dianna Eck and others.5 From a Christian point of view

exclusivists maintain that being a Christian is necessary for salvation, inclusivists maintain that non-Christian religions

may function as implicit channels for salvation that is, nonetheless, most adequately available in Christianity, and pluralists maintain that non-Christian religions can (like Christianity) lead their members to salvation. This typology, though developed within the Christian theology of religions, has been applied analogously to other traditions.6 Thus, for example, a Buddhist exclusivist will maintain that being a Buddhist is necessary for "salvation," and so on.

Although the threefold typology of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism has been used, primarily, to categorize responses to the question of salvation it has not been limited to this; indeed, it has also been used — less precisely — as a general typology for classifying responses to religious diversity altogether. 7 Accordingly, exclusivists have been characterized not only as those who maintain that their religion alone leads to salvation, but also as those who maintain that their religion alone is true, as those who are zealously committed to the absoluteness of their religion, and as those who are primarily concerned with aggressively converting others. 8 Most differently, pluralists have been characterized not only as those who maintain that many religions lead to salvation, but also as those who maintain that many religions are true, as those who are not fully committed to their religion (because they see truth in other religions), and as those who are tolerant of, and open to, other religions. Inclusivism is somewhere between these two positions, but pluralists and non-pluralists, alike, usually see inclusivism as a position that eventually collapses into exclusivism. 9 Consequently, the debate has polarized into two camps — with the advocates of the "pluralist paradigm" on one side and the advocates of the "exclusivist/inclusivist paradigm" on the other.

In the West — again, predominantly among those who identify themselves as Christians — the pluralist paradigm has become increasingly influential.10 One plausible reason for this is that it is most compatible with the predominant world-view of western democracies, wherein religion is increasingly viewed as a private affair and tolerance is an unsurpassable value.11 In this cultural circumstance, it is intolerable to identify with a

point of view that seems to support religious intolerance, and presumes that a particular religion has broad relevance for the generality of humankind; consequently, pluralism has become a more socially acceptable position than either exclusivism or inclusivism. And, of course, pluralists have contributed to this situation by frequently caricaturizing so-called exclusivists and inclusivists as closed-minded, proselytizing bigots who are

convinced that everyone else is destined for eternal damnation. 12

Arguably, Fazel's attempt to identify the Bahá'í Faith with pluralism has more to do with wanting to save it from the perception that it is religiously intolerant — since religious tolerance is a virtue in the Bahá'í Faith 13 — than with any deep compatibility between religious pluralism and the Bahá'í response to religious diversity. And, no doubt, Griffiths' work on religious diversity is motivated by his desire to change the increasingly high profile of religious pluralism by showing what it really stands for (in his eyes). Nonetheless, I will now make my two arguments for why the Bahá'í Faith is not pluralist.

Fazel's Argument that the Bahá'í Faith is Pluralist

In his article, "Religious Pluralism and the Bahá'í Faith," Seena Fazel attempts to characterize the Bahá'í approach to religious diversity using the influential threefold typology discussed above.

According to Fazel's reading of this typology, pluralism affirms that all of the world's religious traditions constitute varying perceptions and conceptions of, and responses to, one ultimate and mysterious Divine reality. In sharpest contrast to this perspective, exclusivism affirms that one particular tradition alone teaches the truth and provides the way to salvation or liberation. Finally, inclusivism affirms that while one particular tradition does present the final truth, other traditions may be seen as reflecting aspects of this truth or constituting approaches to it. Fazel argues that even though there are statements in the Bahá'í writings suggestive of an exclusivist or inclusivist approach, the Bahá'í response to religious diversity is most characteristically pluralist.

To rebut the idea that the Bahá'í Faith is exclusivist Fazel introduces two quotations by Shoghi Effendi, one stating that peoples of whatever religion derive their inspiration from one heavenly source and the other stating that it is not possible to call one world faith superior to another.

To rebut the idea that Bahá'ís are inclusivists Fazel discusses Bahá'u'lláh's critique of the Shi`i position that Mu?ammad delivered the final revelation, from God, in human history, and states that Bahá'ís do not claim finality for their own religion or revelation. He also deals with Shoghi Effendi's, seemingly inclusivist, claim that the Bahá'í social programme represents the "furthermost limits in the organization of society"14 by qualifying this with a further statement by Shoghi Effendi's wherein he says that this superiority should not be attributed

to the inherent superiority of the Bahá'í Faith but to the fact that it appears in a time when human beings are more advanced and more receptive to Divine guidance than in previous ages.
Having minimally disqualified the Bahá'í Faith as either exclusivist or inclusivist, Fazel then tries to identify it with the pluralist perspective, which involves some additional efforts to distance it from exclusivism and inclusivism. At this point, Fazel defines pluralism a little more fully by saying that it affirms that the different world faiths embody different perceptions and conceptions of "the Real" and that within each tradition salvation occurs. This position mirrors very closely the position of John Hick, a Christian and philosopher of religion, who has been one of the dominant leaders of the "pluralist movement" for over twenty years. 15
Fazel begins his argument that the Bahá'í Faith is pluralist by trying to disassociate a number of statements made by both Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá claiming that the world will eventually see one common faith from their exclusivist or inclusivist implications. He does this by saying that we must temper the face value of such statements with Shoghi Effendi's insight that from our present vantage point we can only get a glimpse of what the future religious landscape might look like. He adds to this that such statements about "one religion" might be better understood as symbolical affirmations of the belief that all religions come from God and, thus, there is only

one religion — the religion of God. Fazel is suggesting here that statements in the Bahá'í writings claiming that all the peoples of the world will embrace one common faith (i.e. the Bahá'í Faith) might simply be saying that in the future all the peoples of the world will realize that that there is, in a sense, one common faith since they all come from God.
Fazel continues his argument by claiming that the Bahá'í Faith will never become "imperialist" because it does not prejudice, or impose social sanctions, against non-Bahá'ís, and it encourages freedom of choice in religious matters. (Fazel is accepting, here, the conventional position that "imperialist" behaviour is characteristic of exclusivism and inclusivism.)
He then asks what unifies the various religious traditions and says that according to the Bahá'í view they are unified insofar as they are all "centred on the spiritual transformation of human beings." 16 (Again, Fazel is closely following Hick who defines religion as the transformation of human beings from self-centeredness to God centeredness.) In making this claim, Fazel is trying to root the commonality of religion in soteriology rather than theology — apparently because he thinks

it is less prone to dispute. Fazel then tries to flesh out this common soteriology by claiming that the focus of spiritual transformation in all traditions is “the adoption of spiritual and ethical values common to religious traditions, such as moderation, trustworthiness, justice, and compassion. ”17 And while he adds that there are other uniting features among religions — such as similarities in the lives of different religious founders, an apophatic (or negative) theology, and their “civilizing power” — he clearly stresses (as does John Hick) an ethics-based soteriology as the common feature of all religions.
At this point in his argument, Fazel moves in the direction of trying to construct a “Bahá’í theory of religious pluralism,” and he bases this theory on the Bahá’í principle that “religious truth is relative.” This theory is grounded in the claim that absolute knowledge of God by human beings is impossible, and Fazel draws on the following quotation from the founder of the Bahá’í Faith that clearly seems to support it: “Exalted, immeasurably exalted, art thou above the strivings of mortal

man to unravel Thy mystery, to describe Thy glory, or even hint at the nature of Thine Essence. ”18
Continuing to develop his Bahá’í theory of religious pluralism, Fazel discusses two (closely related) concepts in the Bahá’í writings that help to explain religious diversity, and are also based on “relativity.” One concept accounts for religious differences in terms of social evolution: Different social laws and ordinances are revealed by God at different times in keeping with the needs of human beings in different ages. The second concept accounts for religious differences in terms of the spiritual maturity and receptivity of humanity: As humanity becomes more spiritually mature and receptive to Divine revelation it is able to receive a more “intense” revelation.
Finally, Fazel argues that cognitive relativism (i.e. the relativism stating that human beings cannot know the Absolute) resolves the problem of the “seemingly contradictory ontological statement of monism and dualism. ” 19 His basic argument here is that these conceptions, to the extent they are meaningful, are about human beings and not an “exterior Absolute.”
I will now critique Fazel’s characterization of the Bahá’í Faith as pluralist and, so, argue that it is not pluralist.

A Cr it ique of F a ze l’ s Ar gume nt

I will begin this critique by showing where I think Fazel has either selectively or wrongly read Bahá’í sources in order to make his point that the Bahá’í Faith is pluralist. Following this I

will briefly present John Hick's concept of religious pluralism (which is, more or less, the concept of pluralism adopted by Fazel) in order to broaden the base for my general argument that the Bahá'í Faith is not pluralist. And, finally, I will present this general argument or critique against the idea that the Bahá'í Faith is pluralist.

In his initial efforts to distance the Bahá'í Faith from exclusivism, Fazel quotes Shoghi Effendi saying that "One cannot call one World Faith superior to another, as they all come from God. 20 The rest of this sentence reads as follows:

"they are progressive, each suited to certain needs of the time. "21 The relevant point here is that the Bahá'í position never claims that the different religious traditions of the world are without qualification equal as Fazel's selective quotation seems to suggest. The Bahá'í concept that religion is one is very strong but so is its correlated concept that religion or revelation is progressive meaning that more recent religions are more appropriate for humanity in the "present age."

In discussing inclusivism Fazel focuses primarily on finality, and rightly claims that Bahá'ís reject the concept that religious revelation can come to an end; thus, Bahá'ís believe that there will be further revelation from God in the future that will supersede even Bahá'u'lláh's revelation. What Fazel does not mention is that Bahá'ís also believe that there will be no further revelation from God for at lest one thousand years from the start of Bahá'u'lláh's revelation (dated from 1852). 22 Thus, Bahá'ís do not claim that Bahá'u'lláh's revelation represents the final revelation that humanity will ever see, but they do claim that it is the final revelation humanity will see for a relatively long period of time. Consequently, Bahá'ís reject a priori the religious legitimacy of any new religious movement such as Scientology or the Unification Church — in the Bahá'í view religious unity can only be seen concretely in the past .

Fazel quotes Shoghi Effendi in an effort to show that we can't really know what the future holds and so Bahá'í forecasts that the entire world will eventually become Bahá'í needs to be taken with a "grain of salt": "all we can reasonably venture to attempt is to strive to obtain a glimpse of the first streaks of the promised Dawn that must, in the fullness of time, chase away the gloom that has encircled humanity."23 Again, Fazel is being so selective here that I think he is distorting Shoghi Effendi's point of view. Shoghi Effendi often expressed reservation about "our" capacity to envision the exact details of the Bahá'í commonwealth that, he believed, will emerge in the fullness of time, but he never expressed doubt that a Bahá'í

world-commonwealth will, in fact, emerge when the masses of humanity embrace the Bahá'í Faith in the distant future. 24

As mentioned above, in support of the idea that human beings can never claim absolute knowledge about God, Fazel

quotes a passage from Bahá'u'lláh stating that God is beyond the grasp of mortals. There is, however, another very important part to the Bahá'í concept of God; namely, the concept of the Manifestation of God . Bahá'í doctrine does affirm that the Essence of God is entirely beyond the capacity of human beings to comprehend, but it also asserts that human beings have the capacity to know God by knowing God's Manifestation or the Manifestation of God's Names and Attributes. The Manifestation of God can be understood on two different levels — one pertaining to the Godhead and the other pertaining to the various worlds of created being. With respect to the Godhead, the Manifestation of God is the qualitative or manifest aspect of the Godhead which is also responsible for generating created being; with respect to the world of created being the Manifestation of God is a being who Manifests all of the Names and Attributes or God to the extent it is possible in any given realm of being. Thus, Bahá'ís believe that Bahá'u'lláh is, on one level, a Manifestation of God who reveals all of the Names and Attributes of God that can possibly be manifested in human form and, most ultimately, He is identified with the Manifest aspect of the Godhead.25 So, from the Bahá'í point of view one cannot ultimately know God, but one can know God by knowing God's Manifestation — and Bahá'ís believe that knowing and loving God by knowing and loving God's Manifestation is their primary purpose in life. In other words, the "ignorance" about the Absolute is not so complete, in the Bahá'í Faith, as Fazel makes it out to be.

The last point I will make before moving on to my brief presentation of Hick's pluralism and general argument against the view that the Bahá'í Faith is pluralist pertains to Fazel's reading that the statements in the Bahá'í writings, suggesting that the peoples of the world will embrace one common faith (i.e. the Bahá'í Faith), are better understood as symbolic ones "denoting the religion of God. " Fazel suggests that religious harmony will be achieved when the various religions of the world come to the realization that there is in fact only one religion, since all religions come from God. I think Fazel's position is incongruent because it ignores the progressive element in the Bahá'í concept of revelation which is always tied to its concept of religious unity.

According to Bahá'í doctrine, God has established a great covenant with all of humanity. In this covenant humanity has an obligation to recognize and obey God's Manifestation when He or She appears on earth, and to the extant that humanity fulfills its end of the bargain God will perpetually send guidance to humanity through further Manifestations of God. Implicit in this is an obligation for humanity to recognize and obey God's most recent Manifestation. In other words, Bahá'ís do believe that it is desirable for all human beings to recognize and obey God's most recent Manifestation. In fact, Bahá'í doctrine could probably be used to argue that it is not possible to recognize that there is "ultimately only one religion" without recognizing God's most recent Manifestation — unless from ignorance. 26 Let us now take a closer look at John Hick's pluralism.

John Hick was trained as a Presbyterian minister, but achieved prominence for his work in the philosophy of religion, particularly on the topic of religious diversity. Hick's theory of religious diversity is rooted in his philosophical theology. According to Hick, all of the world's great faiths distinguish between God as unknowable and God as knowable.27 And, he concludes from this that God, or the Real, is single and unknowable in essence, but conditionally known in many different forms on account of many different human attempts to grasp It. Hick argues that in the course of human history two major, culturally determined, concepts of the Real have emerged: One that conceives of the Real theistically, as a personal God, and the other that conceives of the Real non-theistically, as an impersonal Absolute. Of course, neither of these concepts is equated with perfect knowledge of the Real, and both remain on the level of human effort to know that which is essentially unknowable. Nonetheless, Hick claims that all of the world's great faiths provide an equally effective context for achieving salvation regardless of which concept of God they adhere to. In other words, Hick reduces religion to an effective context for achieving salvation — which he defines substantively (rather than formally) as the capacity to turn individuals from self-centeredness to God-centeredness. Hick argues that we can judge religions to be contexts for salvation insofar as we can is we can see in them "fruits of the spirit" — love, justice, happiness, and so forth — and his argument that

all of the world's great religions are on par, with respect to salvific efficacy, is based on his observation that "saintliness" or the "fruits of the spirit" seem to be, more or less, evenly distributed in all of these traditions.

I will now proceed to my general argument that the Bahá'í Faith is not pluralist, either by Fazel's standard or Hick's. According to Fazel's definition of pluralism, pluralism affirms that the different world faiths are different perceptions and conceptions of, and different responses to, "the Real" and that salvation — understood as ethical development — occurs in all religions. And, on the basis of what Fazel has argued we might also include that his version of pluralism affirms that no one religion's conceptions and perceptions of "the Real" are ultimately true or universally valid.

Even with respect to this most generic aspect of pluralist theory — the affirmation that different religions represent different conceptions and perceptions of "the Real" — the Bahá'í Faith is not clearly pluralist. From the Bahá'í perspective, religion is most fundamentally revelation from God and religious differences can be accounted for in terms of the differing spiritual capacities and differing social requirements of the people that receive God's revelation. Moreover, if we compare the Bahá'í understanding of religion with the understanding of religion in Hick's pluralist theory — that religion is only a human response to the Divine — then it is even less pluralist.

As for the claim made by both Fazel and Hick that salvation or spiritual/moral growth occurs in all religions, the Bahá'í teachings would concur — but not without qualification. As discussed above, Bahá'ís believe that there is only one religion and that the purposes of the seemingly different religions are fundamentally the same:

> …all the great religions of the world are divine in origin, that their basic principles are in complete harmony, that their aims and purposes are one and the same, that their teachings are but facets of one truth, that their functions are complementary, that they

> differ only in the non-essential aspects of their doctrines and that their missions represent successive stages in the spiritual evolution of human society. 28

Thus, we can say that "salvation" or moral development occurs in all religions. However, Bahá'ís do believe that it is better to recognize God's most recent Manifestation and, therefore, would have to qualify, in some way, any claim that "salvation" or moral development is equally effective in all religions. Again, the idea of progressive revelation implies that it would be more advantageous to one's spiritual development to align oneself with God's most recent Manifestation opposed to, for

example, a Manifestation of God whose teachings were more appropriate for human beings living 2000 years ago. This is quite different from what Hick's (and, perhaps, Fazel's) pluralist theory suggests.

Finally, Fazel's pluralist theory implicitly claims that no one religion's conceptions and perceptions of "the Real" are ultimately true. It is true that from the Bahá'í perspective it is impossible to know the Essence of God but, as discussed above, this does not mean that Bahá'ís accept the "relative" truth of all concepts of God. Again, Bahá'ís believe that God can be known though God's Manifestation, and that God's Manifestation reveals laws and ordinances that constitute normative behaviour for all human beings. Moreover, they believe that the teachings of each Manifestation of God are valid for a specific duration of time, or "dispensation," during which time there can be no further revelation from God. The concept of relativity in pluralist theory is tied to the idea that religion is human and therefore not universally relevant, the way Divine revelation is typically supposed to be. The Bahá'í concept of relativity as articulated by Shoghi Effendi is very different from this; it does not claim that religious truth is not Divine or not absolutely binding on humanity for a specific period of time, only that it is eventually subject to change as a result of a further revelation from God. Once again, pluralist theory and Bahá'í theory are out of step.

In conclusion, the Bahá'í teachings are too incompatible with either Fazel's or Hick's concept of religion pluralism to characterize it as pluralist; in other words, it is not pluralist. I

will now try to make the same point, more positively, by arguing that when evaluated against the concept of religious pluralism developed by Paul Griffiths, the Bahá'í Faith is, again, not pluralist.

Paul Griffiths' Concept of Religious Pluralism

Paul Griffiths is a philosopher of religion or philosophical theologian, and Schmitt Chair of Catholic Studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Griffith's book Problems of Religious Diversity is, on one level, an attempt to introduce the dominant questions that arise in the face of religious diversity, along with the dominant answers to these questions. However, on another level, his book is an attempt to reinterpret the exclusivist/inclusivist paradigm and the pluralist paradigm and, indeed, to defend exclusivism and inclusivism against pluralism.

In Problems of Religious Diversity, Griffiths makes the uncommon move of addressing the various problems, or

questions, that arise in the face of religious diversity separately. This allows him to address each question with a high degree of precision and, therefore, create a relatively realistic picture of the pluralist and exclusivist/inclusivist paradigms, insofar as these exist. Most generally, Griffiths addresses sets of questions related to the following four topics: (1) truth, (2) epistemic confidence, (3) the religious other, and (4) salvation — the last of which he sees (in part) as a combination of elements from the first three sets of questions. As said, Griffiths' work is somewhat apologetic, and this apology usually takes the form of him trying to show what he thinks the pluralist position on various issues really is, and what the exclusivist/inclusivist position on these same issues really is — in contrast to how they are conventionally understood within the popular threefold typology previously discussed.

On the issue of truth, it is conventionally understood that exclusivists maintain that truth is only found in their religion, inclusivists maintain that ultimate truth is found in their religion even though other religions may contain partial truth, and pluralists maintain that truth is to be found in all or many religions. In contrast, Griffiths begins his analysis of the

question of truth by distinguishing two types of response: (1) those that claim parity with respect to truth and (2) those that claim difference. As for making a parity response, Griffiths surveys three different perspectives: a Kantian, a Wittgensteinean, and a non-religious. Very basically, the Kantian view achieves parity with respect to truth by claiming that there is a single religious claim that defines religion as such, and that all religions make this same claim (even if they also make many false claims — and, amongst themselves, many contradictory claims). The Wittgensteinean view achieves parity by seeing that all religious claims are coherent within their own "form of life" and, so, all are true in this qualified sense. Finally, the non-religious view of parity, which is most commonly held by those involved with legislation in religiously neutral states, is achieved by limiting the scope of religious truth, for example, by saying that all religious claims are equally true insofar as they do not conflict with an overriding interest, or law, of the state.

As for responses that say religious claims are different with respect to truth, Griffiths identifies two: exclusivism and inclusivism. In discussing exclusivism Griffiths insightfully points out that no actual religious communities maintain this position because it amounts to saying that no religious community, except one's own, makes claims that are true.

(Most religions are open to the possibility that their rivals may have gotten a few things right and, so, are inclusivist with respect to truth.) Griffiths goes further by identifying different forms of inclusivism: “necessary inclusivism” that says other religions must make at least some true claims; “possibilist inclusivism” that says other religions may make religious claims that are true; “closed inclusivism” that says all true claims made by other religions are already explicitly made by one’s own religion; and, “open inclusivism” that says other religions may teach and understand truths not explicitly taught and understood by one’s own religion. Griffiths own view is that possibilist, open inclusivism is the best response to the truth claims of other religions. (Necessary inclusivism and possibilist inclusivism can be held together with either open or closed inclusivism.) Nonetheless, Griffiths’ main points here are (1) that exclusivism, with respect to truth, is a very uncommon view amongst religious people, and (2) that a parity

claim with respect to truth necessitates a circumscription (or limitation) of what truth means in one way of another.

Griffiths next question deals with what he calls “epistemic confidence” and here he asks whether one’s epistemic confidence in their religious beliefs (or to use Griffiths’ words “the religious assents they find themselves making”29) is, or should be, reduced or removed as a result coming to know about religious diversity.

Conventionally, it is believed that knowledge of diversity has virtually no effect on exclusivists and inclusivists because they are so dogmatically convinced about the absolute validity of their own religion. In contrast, pluralists characteristically recognize the non-absoluteness of their own religion when they encounter religious others who strike them as being highly religious.

Griffiths discusses this issue in terms of how it is dealt with by the religious and the non-religious. With respect to the religious he says that there are three factors that come into play: (1) the original degree of certainty that one has in their religious beliefs or the confidence one has in the religious claims they assents to and accept — this is the most important point; (2) the perceived trustworthiness or authority of those making religious claims incompatible with one’s own; and (3) the resources within one’s one religion to explain the existence of others.

Griffiths argues that religious diversity does not, usually, present a significant problem for religious people because their assents and acceptances of religious claims are made with a

very high degree of epistemic confidence. Indeed, this circumstance is built into the very fabric of religion which Griffiths defines as “a form of life that seems to those who belong to it to be comprehensive, incapable of abandonment, and of central importance.”30 Thus, the very level of commitment with which religious beliefs are held usually prevents religious people from losing confidence in them in the face of incompatible beliefs. However, Griffiths also argues that one’s epistemic confidence may be weakened, or even completely destroyed, if one encounters others who are making incompatible claims and still seem to be highly religious,

and/or if one’s one religion lacks resources for making sense of these claims. But, again, he maintains that this scenario is relatively anomalous for religious persons because they usually are able to find resources within their own tradition to explain the incompatible claims of other traditions or, possibly, to impugn the credibility of those teaching them.

As for the typical non-religious response to the question of whether an awareness of religious diversity should decrease the epistemic confidence that persons have in their religious claims, this is also a negative one — albeit of a very different kind. The non-religious view of religion maintains that religion belongs entirely to the private sphere, and that any religion admitted to this sphere is on par with any other religion admitted to it. Thus, on this account, religious differences are simply matters of personal preference of no particular consequence, similar to choosing a strawberry ice cream cone instead of a chocolate one.

Griffith’s own view is that an awareness of religious diversity should not cause religious persons to lose confidence in the truth of their own religious claims; however, he also does not advocate a simple and arrogant dismissal of the incompatible claims of others — or, of course, the solution offered by a privatized understanding of religion. Instead, he suggests that an awareness of diversity should create an “epistemic uneasiness” that will serve as a launch pad for creative conceptual developments within one’s own tradition. In other words, he believes that an awareness of diversity should lead to creative attempts to explain this diversity within the framework of one’s specific tradition. And, although he does not explicitly say it, Griffiths must clearly see the loss of epistemic confidence that characterizes pluralism, as a failure to maintain an authentic religious perspective.

Griffiths’ next question about the proper attitude towards, and the proper treatment of, the religious other (Griffiths uses

the word “alien”) is a natural follow up to his discussion about epistemic confidence. This is because the maintenance or lose of epistemic confidence in one’s religious assents and acceptances will certainly influence one’s religious state of being and, therefore, one’s relations with other beings —

religious or otherwise. Conventionally, it is understood that epistemic confidence in the claims of one’s own religion — or belief in the truth of one’s own religion — necessarily translates into an imperialistic and aggressive missionary impulse towards other religions. In contrast, it is believed that the weaker epistemic confidence of pluralists is conducive to a more open, tolerant, and dialogical approach to other religions.

Griffiths identifies three patterns of response to the religious other: (1) toleration or “enduring the religious alien”; (2) separation or “isolating the religious alien”; and (3) conversion or “domesticating the religious alien. 31

The principle idea of toleration is to simply let the religious alien be. In discussing toleration, Griffith’s tries to make the point that toleration really means putting up with, or not interfering with, something that one does not really like or value — such as one’s allergies (Griffiths’ example). Presumably, he does this to undermine the idea that tolerance is a noble value. However, the more important point he makes is that pure tolerance is practically impossible to effect politically. In other words, as much as a state may claim that it is tolerant of all religions it will, in reality, always support and permit certain religious proposals and discourage and prevent others. For example, in Ontario, the United Church of Canada (like other Churches) is permitted to marry gay and lesbian couples, but neither Muslims nor Mormons are allowed to practice polygamy.

As for isolation, Griffiths sees this as an extreme form of toleration, wherein one tries to let religious others be by staying away from them. Griffith’s main point, in connection with isolation, is that it is almost impossible to achieve in the modern world.

The principle idea of conversion is not to endure religious otherness, but to remove it by making the religious alien a religious kin. In his discussion of conversion Griffiths points out that attempts to make others more like ourselves is a not a unique religious phenomenon, but a phenomenon that is commonplace in all spheres of life — non-smokers try to convert smokers, liberals try to convert conservatives, and so

on. But, more importantly, he makes the point that a religion's teachings about the necessity of converting others is typically an integral part of a complex set of that religion's teachings, and that to reject the former would necessitate rejecting the latter. So, here again, Griffiths is suggesting that embracing the pluralist idea that missionary work should be abandoned is tantamount to rejecting one's religion. Griffiths, also makes another important point in this connection; namely, that one's treatment of others (be they religious or not) is not exclusively conditioned by attitudes developed in the face of religious diversity. In fact, it is normative for religions to inculcate an ethical and loving response to other human beings irrespective of their religious convictions. (The "golden rule" would be an example of this.) Moreover, it might even be argued that those with the highest degree of confidence in the truth of their religion would take these inculcations to treat others ethically most seriously.

Finally, Griffiths discusses the question of salvation. As already talked about, salvation has conventionally been discussed in terms of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. In his discussion of salvation Griffiths notes that there are two related, but separate, questions that can be addressed. The first asks how one is saved and the second asks who is saved , and it is this first question that he says can be coherently answered with the responses of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. Griffiths presents the exclusivist, inclusivist, and pluralist responses to the question of how one is saved with representatives of the three positions — Karl Barth, Karl Rahner, and John Hick respectively — but he is also very vigorous in distilling the formal responses. According to Griffiths, exclusivism boils down to claiming that belonging to the "home religion" is necessary for salvation (albeit not necessarily sufficient for it). In other words, if one wants to be saved one must belong to the home religion (even if belonging to the home religion won't necessarily guarantee one's salvation). Inclusivism is only a variation on this position because it is based on this same assumption that if one wants to be saved one must belong to the home religion; however, it is different from exclusivism in that it employs a looser sense of what it means to belong to the home religion. This view brings

into play the notion that one might be participating in the home religion while not aware of this fact, and seemingly participating in another religion. Pluralism, in marked contrast, rejects the basic premise of exclusivism and inclusivism — that one must belong to the home religion to be

saved — in order to assert the basic truth of pluralism that all religions are able to deliver salvation in and of themselves. But in rejecting the basic premise of exclusivism and inclusivism, pluralism finds itself bound to a problematic position; specifically, that belonging to the home religion is not necessary for salvation. Griffiths calls this form of pluralism, which cuts the connection between salvation and membership in a religion, negative pluralism and notes that it is rare for religious persons to hold this position. Instead, religious persons are more likely to adopt a positive form of pluralism that claims a positive connection between religious membership and salvation, and maintains that this connection, whatever it is, is equally present in all religions — despite the fact that this usually undermines the diversity that pluralism seeks to honour. More, specifically, the positive form of pluralism must define what is meant by religion and therefore must necessarily exclude some things from the category of religion. Consequently, Griffiths says that the sort or pluralism advanced by Hick is only quasi-pluralistic.

The other question, related to salvation, that Griffiths addresses is that of who is saved, and he identifies two responses: “restrictivism” and “universalism.” Restrictivism says all will not be saved which can be expressed differently as some will not be saved . Universalism, on the other hand, says that all will be saved or, expressed differently, that there is no one who will not be saved . Griffiths also discusses these two positions in the mode of necessity and the mode of possibility (where they merge into the same position); nonetheless, what I think is most valuable in this discussion is his point that exclusivism is not necessarily tied to restrictivism. In other worlds, it is possible to hold that belonging to the home religion is necessary for salvation, without holding that this means some or all people will suffer eternal damnation. Or, it is coherent to be an exclusivist, who says that all must belong to the home religion to be saved, while being a universalist, who says that all will be saved. This is significant because

exclusivism (in its Christian form) is often rejected on the ethical grounds that a loving God could not consign to hell human beings who had no chance of becoming Christian.

I will now end this discussion of Griffiths’ work by summarizing the main points in his critique of the pluralist paradigm, and then by summarizing the main points in his defence of the exclusivist/inclusivist paradigm.

Griffiths, makes four main points in his critique of the pluralism paradigm. First, he argues that parity claims with

respect to religious truth require a circumscription of truth that denudes it of its usual meaning. Second, he argues that the loss of epistemic confidence, characteristic of pluralists who encounter religious diversity, entails abandonment of one's religion — or of the central claims of one's religion. Third, he argues that the broad religious tolerance advocated by pluralists, is largely idealistic, insofar as it is almost impossible to effect politically. Fourth, and finally, he argues that pluralism is usually only quasi-pluralistic because it necessarily circumscribes the category of religion.

Griffiths also makes four main points in his defence of the exclusivism/inclusivism paradigm. First, he argues that no religions are actually exclusivist with respect to truth. Second, he argues knowledge of religious diversity need not lead to epistemic arrogance or a loss of epistemic confidence, but can lead to epistemic uneasiness that can serve as a basis for creative tradition-specific thought about religious diversity. Third, he argues that mission or teaching is in integral part of religion, which can't be rejected with the hope that the rest of it can be accepted. Fourth, and finally, he argues that exclusivism with respect to salvation does not necessarily entail a commitment to restrictivism — or it is possible to hold the position that it is necessary to belong to a particular religion in order to be saved and the position that all human beings will be saved.

Why the Bahá'í Faith is Not Pluralist — Again

Now, if we understand the pluralist paradigm and exclusivist/inclusivist paradigm in Griffiths' terms, I think the

Bahá'í approach to religious diversity is clearly exclusivist/inclusivist.

On the question of truth the Bahá'í teachings seem to promote a Kantian parity in claiming that all religions teach the same essential truths. However, unlike the Kantian view, Bahá'ís don't dismiss non-essential truth claims (or those that are emendable to change) as irrelevant with respect to being true. For example, the Kitáb-i-Aqdas (the Bahá'í equivalent of the Qur'án or Bible) contains a number of social laws that are seen as "non-essential" insofar as it is believed that these will be abrogated, in the future, on account of subsequent Divine revelation; however, Bahá'ís also believe that obedience to these laws is one of their highest religious duties,32 and so non-essential truths do not mean inconsequential truths as they do in the Kantian view.

Thus, I would classify the Bahá'í Faith as some form of inclusivism on the question of truth.

On the question of epistemic confidence, I would contend that Bahá'ís have a very high level of epistemic confidence in the religious claims they assent to and accept — because they believe these are grounded in Divine revelation. Moreover, this confidence is not significantly eroded by an awareness of religious diversity because Bahá'ís have excellent resources for explaining religious diversity within their religious tradition. Indeed, the Bahá'í explanation of religious diversity is one of the central doctrines of the Bahá'í Faith — and Bahá'ís have unparalleled confidence in this doctrine because (as above) they believe it has been Divinely revealed.33 In this respect they are not similar to pluralists who, according to Griffiths, typically lose confidence in the truth of their own tradition when they encounter religious diversity.

On the question of how to deal with the religious other I would say that Bahá'ís follow the conversion model. Bahá'ís believe that teaching their faith to others is, on one hand, a prime requisite for their own spiritual growth and, on the other, the most vital activity for bringing about the collective or social salvation of humanity. 34 This obligation to teach is, however, accompanied by a prohibition on conversion by violence or even aggressive proselytizing,35 and ethical

exhortations to relate to religious "aliens" in friendly and respectful ways. 36 The Bahá'í Faith, obviously, does not fit the isolation model but neither does it fit the toleration model; the Bahá'í Faith is not tolerant in the sense of holding what is, in Griffiths' view, an unrealistic ideal that society ought to tolerate all socio-religious practices and behaviours because, in principle, there can be no socio-religious norms. Once again, the Bahá'í Faith is most in line with the exclusivist/inclusivist paradigm.

On the question of salvation, Bahá'ís certainly believe that being a Bahá'í is advantageous to one's salvation, but they also believe that the soul's progress does not stop with death, and that the potential for spiritual growth in the afterlife is infinite. 37 Bahá'u'lláh also says that one of the bounties of the Bahá'í "dispensation" is that the kin of Bahá'ís, even though they may outwardly be non-believers, will be granted divine forgiveness and mercy 38 — suggesting that they may be in as good a shape as believers with respect to salvation in the afterlife. On this basis I would classify the Bahá'í Faith as inclusivist and universalist, again placing it in the exclusivism/inclusivism paradigm. It might also be noted that the question of salvation is relatively moot from a Bahá'í perspective because Bahá'ís deny the possibility of knowing

one's own, or another's, spiritual status and destiny. Nonetheless, with respect to each of Griffiths' four questions, the Bahá'í Faith belongs in the exclusivist/inclusivist paradigm and, so, it can once again be concluded that the Bahá'í Faith is not pluralist.

Conclus ion

I have now argued in two different ways that the Bahá'í Faith is not pluralist, which is not to say that it is any of the things that have frequently been ascribed to non-pluralists — religiously intolerant, imperialistic, aggressively oriented to mission, and so on. And this fact, despite Griffiths' attempts to defend exclusivism and inclusivism emphasizes the need for better theorizing about responses to religious diversity that are not pluralist, and even those that are.

NOTES

Seena Fazel, "Religious Pluralism and the Bahá'í Faith" Interreligious Insight 1, no.3 (2003): 42-49. For an argument similar to Fazel's see Dann J. May, "The Bahá'í Principle of Religious Unity: A Dynamic Perspectivism," in Revisioning the Sacred: New Perspectives on a Bahá'í Theology, ed. Jack McLean (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1997), 1-36.

Paul J. Griffiths, Problems of Religious Diversity (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001).

S. Mark Heim, The Depth of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 3.

Gavin D'Costa, The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2000), 1.

Alan Race, Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions (London: SCM Press, 1983); John Hick, Problems of Religious Pluralism (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), 28-45; Gavin D'Costa, Theology and Religious Pluralism (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1986); Dianna Eck, Encountering God (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 166-199.

Heim, The Depth of the Riches, 3; Eck, Encountering God, 169.

For a good account of how exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism have been constructed as paradigmatic, and somewhat "cartoonish," responses to religious diversity altogether, see Kate McCarthy. "Reckoning with Religious Difference: Models of Iterreligious Moral Dialogue," in Explorations in Global Ethics, eds. Sumner B. Twiss and Bruce Grelle. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998), 73-117.

For one example of this, see John Hick, "The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity," in The Myth of Christian Uniqueness, eds. John Hick and Paul F. Knitter (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1987), 16-36.

For a representative pluralist, see Hick, Problems of Religious Pluralism, 28-45; for a representative non-pluralist, see Griffith, Problems of

Religious Diversity, 138-169.
D'Costa, The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity, 1.
Griffiths, Problems of Religious Diversity, 101-11.
It should also be noted that non-pluralized have been involved in caricaturizing pluralists — typically as non-committed "relativists." Again, see McCarthy, Reckoning with Religious Difference , 73-117.
Bahá'u'lláh. Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, 36.
Shoghi Effendi, The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, 163.
For the fullest expression of Hick's philosophy of religious pluralism see, John Hick, An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

Fazel, "Religious Pluralism and the Bahá'í Faith," 3
Fazel, "Religious Pluralism and the Bahá'í Faith," 4
Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, 3.
Fazel, "Religious Pluralism and the Bahá'í Faith," 5.
Lights of Guidance: A Bahá'í Reference File , 494.
Lights of Guidance, 494.
Bahá'u'lláh. The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, 195-196.
Shoghi Effendi, The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, 35.
See, Shoghi Effendi, The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, 202-206.
Juan Cole, "The Concept of Manifestation in the Bahá'í Writings." Bahá'í Studies 9 (1982): 1-38; Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, 233-234.
Bahá'u'lláh's primary doctrinal text, the Kitáb-i-ˆqán, arguably makes
this point.
Hick is reluctant on this point to recognize that many religions who distinguish God as Unknowable and God as knowable also claim that it is possible to become perfectly identified with the Unknowable aspect of God, and that others religions transfer absoluteness to the knowable aspect of God which, as far as I can tell, is never thought of as a limited human understanding of the Unknowable Essence.
Shoghi Effendi, "The Faith of Bahá'u'lláh: A World Religion," 1947 http://bahai-library.com/?file=shoghieffendi_faith_bahaullah
Griffiths, Problems of Religious Diversity, 17.
Griffiths, Problems of Religious Diversity, XIV.
Griffiths, Problems of Religious Diversity, 101; 111; 119.
Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, 19.
See Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i- ˆqán.
Shoghi Effendi, Bahá'í Administration , 88.
Shoghi Effendi, Advent of Divine Justice , 66.
Bahá'u'lláh, Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, 22.
Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, "Memorandum: The Condition of Non-Bahá'ís After Death, 1991" on The Bahá'í Research Library (Downloaded from http://www.bahai-

education.org/ocean/), 4
Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, “Memorandum,” 1

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