

`saved' and those who are `not saved,' those on the `inside' and those on the `outside'" (Samartha, *One Christ* 102). Second, it limits the possibilities of interreligious dialogue and cooperation. A practical example of this is the experience of the Christian community in India. Stanley Samartha, a Christian theologian, has argued that it was the exclusivist claims of Christianity that contributed to their negligible participation in nation building. Furthermore,

This claim has isolated Christians from their neighbours of other faiths in India, led to their theological alienation and spiritual impoverishment, and in a religiously plural society has made it difficult, if not impossible, for Christians to cooperate with their neighbours for common social purposes. (*One Christ* 118)

Third, exclusive claims, combined with economic, political, and military power, lead to tensions and conflicts in society--tensions which can be internationalized and potentially threaten world peace. The Roman Catholic theologian, Hans Küng, has written that peace between the religions is an essential prerequisite for world peace (*Christianity* 440-3). "This is because the religions, with their claims to absolute truth and hence to unique superiority, function both to validate and to intensify human conflicts. In order to cease to do so, each must learn no longer to see itself as the one and only true faith" (Hick, *Pluralist* 10). `Abdu'l-Bahá contended that exclusivism--the belief that "their own form of religion is the only one pleasing to God, and that followers of other persuasion are condemned by the All-Loving Father and deprived of His Mercy and Grace"--is the "chief cause" of religious prejudice, and the related "contempt, disputes and hatred" between nations (*Paris Talks* 45-6). Finally, exclusive claims crystallize the major theological differences between the religions, thus making the various religions appear to be irreconcilable from the perspective of belief. Samartha believes that "no amount of intellectual juggling or sophisticated exegesis can resolve" the exclusivist claims of the different religions (*One Christ* 102).

I. Christian Exclusivist Texts

Christian claims in the exclusivity of Christ are founded in the two New Testament concepts of incarnation--God becoming physically incarnated in Jesus--and realized eschatology--that in Jesus sacred history came to an end (Coward, *Pluralism* 17). The New Testament states that Jesus is the "one mediator" between God and humanity (1 Tim 2:5), and there is "no other name" by which persons can be saved (Acts 4:12). Jesus is the "only begotten Son of God" (John 1:14). No one comes to the Father except through him (John 14:6). Just as all died in one man, Adam, so all will be brought to life in one man, Christ (1 Cor. 15:21-22). What took place in Christ was "once and for all" (epaphax) (Heb. 9:12). Jesus is thus the final prophet, providing the normative, final word for all who preceded or may follow (Knitter, *No Other* 182). The claim is that Jesus Christ is the one name under heaven by which all must be saved, that the cross of Jesus Christ is the universal means

of salvation, that Jesus is the unique incarnation of the divine, that the Christian revelation gives definitive access to the divine. There are various approaches that Christian theologians have outlined to these exclusivist texts.

a) Erroneous Texts

One approach to exclusivist texts is to question their authenticity and suggest that they are erroneous, not in the original scripture, but having been added afterwards. There is a simplicity about this which is appealing. John Hick, for instance, dismisses biblical claims regarding the exclusiveness of Jesus on the authority of New Testament criticism, as being additions of the early Christian community rather than the authentic words of Jesus. Marcus Braybrooke, another distinguished Protestant theologian, has also argued that modern critical scholarship has challenged the authenticity of the exclusivist texts in the New Testament. In relation to John 14:6 ["I am the light, the way and the truth. No man comes to the Father but by me"], Hick writes,

But it is no secret today, after more than a hundred years of the scholarly study of the scriptures, that very few New Testament experts now hold that the Jesus who actually lived ever spoke those words, or their Aramaic equivalents. They are much more probably words put into his mouth by a Christian writer who is expressing the view of Christ which had been arrived at in his part of the Church, probably two or three generations after Jesus's death. And it is likewise doubted whether the few sayings of the same kind in the other gospels are authentic words of Jesus. (Second Christianity 28)[1]

The disadvantages, however, possibly outweigh the advantages of this approach. Monica Hellwig, a professor of theology at Georgetown University, has argued against this method because of the difficulty in finding a convincing justification for claiming the authority to stand above and judge the accepted Christian tradition that accepts the authenticity of the New Testament. This sort of approach usually necessitates a sharp break, causing a schism with the community itself, as in the sixteenth-century Reformation. Moreover it tends not to cause a single split between conservative and liberal groups, but many different factions each claiming some higher authority for reinterpreting the traditional positions in their particular way. As an approach to dialogue between Christianity and the other religions it is unhelpful, "because it begins with an argument that takes a long time to soften into amicable conversation within the tradition before there can be any conversation with those outside the tradition that are other than individual or factional" (Hellwig, *Death* 52). It is also worth noting that recent New Testament scholarship does not uniformly support Hick's position (Coward, *Pluralism* 29).

The spirit of Bahá'í dialogue with Christianity does not lend itself to this approach. At the outset of a discussion with a group of Protestant priests in Paris, `Abdu'l-Bahá explores the meaning of the texts rather than their authenticity. He states, "Our belief in Christ is

exactly what is recorded in the Gospels; however, we elucidate this matter and do not speak literally" (Abdu'l-Bahá 8). "Here then the framework is set, a common ground automatically established--two believers in the Gospels discussing its interpretation" (Fazel, Introduction 1).

b) Erroneous Interpretations

Alternatively, some Christian scholars have argued that exclusivist claims are based on an incorrect interpretation of scripture. This is highlighted by discussions over the interpretation of John 14:6--the classic exclusivist New Testament verse. In this verse, Jesus states, "I am the light, the way and the truth. No man comes to Father but by me." Traditional Christians thought has understood this to refer specifically to the historical Jesus Christ.

However, modern Christian scholarship has examined the question of who the "I" of John 14:6 is referring to. The argument put forward is that it is the Johannine Jesus who is speaking who is different to the Jesus of the synoptic gospels: "The Jesus of John is the Jesus of faith, the Jesus of the imagination of the early church" (Cobb, Dialogue 16), "of spiritual reflection rather than reliable history" (Carpenter, Jesus 14), a "high" Christology. The structure of John's Gospel is significant in that it starts with the incarnation of the Word rather than the story of Jesus' birth. It describes the appearance in this world of the Word, the divine Logos, that had been with God from the beginning, "the Word was with God." John Cobb, a Protestant scholar of interreligious dialogue, has concluded that, "It is this Word that speaks as 'I' in the pages of the gospel."

It is affirmed, then, that the Word who is incarnate in Jesus is the Way, the Truth, the Life, and that no one comes to the Father except through that Word. This cannot mean that the Word is present and active only in Jesus; for in the prologue to the Gospel it is stated that in the Word that was from the beginning was life, that this life was also the true light that enlightens everyone (Jn 1:9). (Cobb, Death 16-7)

John Macquarrie, a professor of religious studies at Oxford, comments on John 14:6 in a similar way. "In John's gospel, let us remember, the words of Jesus are the words of the Logos, not just of the individual human being, Jesus of Nazareth. That Word or Logos enlightens every one who comes into the world" (Jesus Christ 422). Diana Eck writes that she believes that it is "a world-spanning Christ who speaks this 'I'. To see the Logos, the Word, is to see God. ... Christ is the Logos, the Word, the divine intention to speak, to disclose, to reveal." Thus, Eck argues that there is no "way" to God as "God is the Way, the Truth, the Life" (Eck, Encountering 95).

Relevant to this discussion is the nature of the distinction between Jesus and Christ that is made by a number of theologians. Such a distinction is helpful from a pluralist position as the focus of exclusivist claims shifts from the

historical Jesus of Nazareth to the eternal Christ who is manifested from age to age. Raimundo Pannikar, a professor of comparative religion, has long argued against the exclusive identification of Christ with Jesus. He has written that "The Christ we are speaking of is by no means the monopoly of Christians, or merely Jesus of Nazareth" (Unknown Christ 49). Pannikar's interpretation is that the Father is the Absolute, transcendent, beyond every name. Jesus taught us to name the unnameable Absolute "Father" and to know this Father through the Son. The Son is "the Mystery hidden since the world began, the Mystery of which the Scriptures speak, and which, according to Christians, was manifested in Christ" (Trinity 42). He adds that Christ stands for that centre of reality, and that Rama or Krishna are its other names (Unknown 27). The Report of the Archbishops' Conference on Christian Doctrine (1922) makes a similar distinction: "The coming of Jesus Christ ... is the manifestation in history of the Word who `was in the beginning with God and was God.' ... To assert the pre-existence of the human soul of Jesus, far from being required of orthodoxy, is inconsistent with it" (cited in Dewick, *The Christian Attitude* 94). The Buddhist scholar, Seiichi Yagi, has studied Jesus' use of "I" in the fourth Gospel and argues that "I" refers to the divine which was being manifested in Jesus: "The `I' in these words can be the `divine in him,' which spoke through the empirical ego of Jesus" (Myth 122).

The same interpretive approach can make sense of the statement of the Apostle Peter in Acts of the Apostles: "In none other name is there salvation" (Acts 4:12). Christian commentators have argued that it cannot refer to verbal form of the name as this varies from one language to another. Instead, the name can act as a symbol of the person named. Thus the name of Jesus is an alternative way of saying the word Jesus itself, which symbolises the qualities of that person. A related approach is to interpret the name as the word of God, and thus salvation mediated through "the Eternal Christ, the Word of God" (Dewick, *The Christian Attitude* 94). A variety of other names are used for Jesus Christ including Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace (Isa 9:6), Immanuel (Isa 7:14), Adam (1 Cor 15:45), Messiah (Mt 11:3), Amen (Rev 3:14). Of interest is the name of the eschatological saviour of Revelations; "his name is called The Word of God" (Rev 19:13).

As an approach in general, arguing for a fresh interpretation of exclusivist texts, is the Bahá'í method par excellence.

Bahá'u'lláh's polemic against "Leaders of religion, in every age" in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* (15) specifically attacks their erroneous literal interpretation of scripture:

As they have literally interpreted the Word of God, and the sayings and traditions of the Letters of Unity, and expounded them according to their own deficient understanding, they have therefore deprived themselves and all their people of the bountiful showers of the grace and mercies of God. (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 82)

This criticism is reiterated in "The Promise of World Peace" which rebukes religious leaders for imposing "on their votaries erroneous and conflicting

interpretations of the pronouncements of the Prophets of God" (5).

Bahá'í writers have therefore approached exclusivist texts by interpreting them non-literally. For example, Robert Stockman, in his paper "Jesus Christ in the Bahá'í Writings," has written that the "I" in John 14:6 refers to Jesus' reality as a manifestation of God. Knowledge of God is thus exclusively through the manifestations of God (Jesus 39-40). Another piece has argued for "the distinction between Jesus (the individual manifestation of God for his age) and the Christ (the Word of God, the divine Logos which 'lighteth every man that cometh into the world' [Jn 1:9] and is the 'same yesterday, today, and forever' [Heb 13:8])" (Fazel and Fananapazir, Bahá'í Approach 22).

c) Misrepresentative Texts

A third approach is to argue that exclusivist texts are misrepresentative of the rest of Christian scripture. Many Christian fundamentalists have extrapolated these texts over the entire Bible and presumed that the whole of scripture only contains sentences exactly of this type. Fundamentalism works, as most other Christian traditions do, by a process of selecting and grading biblical texts, or more precisely by perpetuating and accepting as definitive the results of such a selection which was carried out a long time ago. Some biblical aspects are stressed and up-graded, others are de-emphasized and made subsidiary or figurative. John Barr, professor emeritus of Hebrew at Oxford, exemplifies this by examining two quotes--the first, "the passage 'All scripture is inspired by God' (2 Tim 3:16) is over-interpreted and loaded with greatly exaggerated significance, while a comparable verse such as: 'And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it (Matt 16:18)' is correspondingly evacuated of all but the most limited content" (Barr, Escaping 114).

Bible commentaries demonstrate how some Christians emphasize the centrality of exclusivist texts. The Word Biblical Commentary states that John 3:16 ("only begotten Son") is "the fundamental summary of the message of this Gospel and should therefore be seen as the background of the canvas on which the rest of the Gospel is painted (Bearsley-Murray, John 51). Of John 14:6 ("I am the Way"), the Expositor's Bible Commentary states "Jesus' reply is the ultimate foundation for a satisfactory philosophy of life" (Expositor's 144).

A number of Christian scholars have identified non-exclusivist passages in the Bible and have concluded that these predominate over the exclusivist alternatives. The Jewish emphasis upon the God of Abraham as the sovereign God of all peoples is carried over into the New Testament: a loving God and Father of all people, "the true light which lighteth every man" (Jn 1:9), who desires "all men to be saved" (1 Tim 2:4), who "accepted" those who "worketh righteousness" (Acts 10:35). Furthermore, scholars have argued that Matthew sees Jesus more as a mediator than a full incarnation, and that Peter's

perspective focuses greatly upon God, the Father of all. There are many examples of when Jesus is described as portraying a non-exclusive and proto-pluralist worldview. Many of the exemplars of faith and recipients of loving mercy in the Gospels are those who might be called "people of other Faiths": the Roman centurion, the Syro-phoenician woman, the Greek Cornelius. Jesus told parables in which a man of another religion, a Samaritan, was the embodiment of true spirituality. His opposition to the Pharisees and Sadducees was directed not against their religion but against their legalistic and doctrinal approach to religion that he believed was insensitive to true spiritual life. He gave dignity and respect to sincere believers whose views differed from his own (Coward, Pluralism 17).

The Bahá'í writings would appear to endorse this approach. Bahá'u'lláh's polemic against the Islamic clergy includes a statement which criticises their selective reading of the Qur'án:

These people [who] with one hand cling to those verses of the Qur'án and those traditions of the people of certitude which they have found to accord with their inclinations and interests, and with the other reject those which are contrary to their selfish desires.
(Kitáb-i-Iqán 168-9)

From a Bahá'í perspective, this criticism is extended beyond Islam to other religions. Therefore, Christians who hold exclusivist beliefs have misrepresented the teachings of Jesus by selecting and grading a small number of scriptural passages, and ignoring texts which suggest otherwise. In order to enable Christians "to obtain a fuller understanding of the religion" with which they stand identified, the "primary purpose" of the Bahá'í Faith (Shoghi Effendi, World Order 58), Bahá'ís can focus on Jesus' interaction with other worldviews, his proto-pluralism, and consequently uncover a basis for Christian openness to other faiths.

d) Survival Language

This approach is to place exclusivist texts in the historical context of the early Christian community who was in the process of trying to establish its identity. The first centuries of early Christianity were characterized by precarious growth. The community faced the danger either of being overwhelmed by larger groups for whom it was a threat or a nuisance, or of being absorbed by an all-consuming syncretism. To defend itself against these dangers, the Christian community needed to arm itself with a clear identity and total commitment. It did this particularly through its beliefs, notably its exclusivist christological ones. Paul Knitter, a Catholic professor of interreligious dialogue, has termed the doctrinal language that arose out of this process "survival language," as it was necessary for the survival of the community. "By defining Jesus Christ in absolute terms, by announcing him as the one and only saviour, the early Christians cut out for themselves an identity different from that of all their opponents or competitors. Such

language also evoked a total commitment that would steel them in the face of persecution or ridicule" (Knitter, *No Other* 184). Thus, scholars have concluded that exclusivist beliefs tell us more about the social situation of the early Church than the ontological nature of Jesus. Wesley Ariarajah, who heads the dialogue section of the World Council of Churches, has written of the early Christians, "The community was under immense pressure to justify its faith in Jesus, the crucified master whom they now experienced as the risen Lord. As much by the logic of the circumstances as by the strength of their convictions they were led to make claims for Jesus for which he would not perhaps have made for himself" (Ariarajah, *The Bible* 24). The problem, however, came when "that minority language and exclusive claim got mixed up with the power and pomp of the Roman Empire under the Constantine, such attitudes lead to serious ethical consequences in a religiously plural world" (Samartha, *One Christ* 100).

The threats confronting the early Christian community have been outlined by Gerald Vallee. He has identified the following seven dangers:

Encounter with Judaism -- danger of remaining a sect, of losing its christological distinctiveness: "The excessive emphasis on only is part of the early Christian polemics against the Jewish people from whom the Christians were growing out as a separate community" (Ariarajah, *The Bible* 24);

Gentiles -- danger of losing its monotheistic distinctiveness;

Gnostic groups -- danger of losing its identity as a historical religion; danger of becoming elitist and esoteric;

Graeco-Roman cults -- danger of idolatry and syncretism;

Roman Empire -- danger of playing down its distinctive character; danger of overadaptation;

Hellenistic philosophy -- danger of being dissolved into philosophic doctrines; danger of losing its historical character;

Roman Law -- danger of losing its prophetic and eschatological character; danger of structural assimilation. (Vallee, *Study* 99)

The approach of "survival language" can be extended to analyzing Christian doctrine. For example, the Athanasian Creed, "Whoever wishes to be saved must first of all hold the Catholic faith, for anyone who does not maintain this whole and inviolate will surely be lost," was probably written in early sixth century when church of Arles was threatened by western Arians. This would not, however, explain the medieval fascination and emphasis on it when the Christian Church was the dominant religious institution in Europe. The Creed became part of the liturgy in medieval period, found a place in the Book of Common Prayer of the Anglican Church, as well as in modern Catholic worship each Sunday until the Second Vatican Council. It also recurs in Tridentine Profession of Faith set out by Pope Paul IV in 1564 and is demanded by the Council of Trent of all

church dignitaries.

Hellwig has argued that its medieval rediscovery can also be explained by the "survival language" perspective. The intention of the Creed was to reinforce the knowledge and belief of the traditional trinitarian teaching among the clergy. The Catholic clergy were primary targets because of the great fear of Church authorities that they would be seduced unwittingly by the teachings of the Reformers. In this case, therefore, the apparent declaration that outsiders cannot be saved is really a declaration that insiders who let themselves be seduced from the mainline church are being drawn away from the source of redemption, the church of Jesus Christ. The Creed also found favour because of the way in which it lends itself to choral recitation, and articulates much traditional doctrine (Hellwig, Dialogue 53-4).

There are aspects of Bahá'í thought that can be seen to endorse the idea of "survival language." Paramount among these is the concept that the social evolution of humanity which has passed through evolutionary stages analogous to the stages of infancy and childhood, and now is in its final period of adolescence before it reaches maturity. "Survival language" is the language of childhood and adolescence. In childhood, there is a well-documented phase of sexual differentiation that involves a contempt for members of the other sex. Boys go through a stage of proving that they are not "sissies," of not wanting to play with girls or even to acknowledge that they exist, and something similar happens with girls (Hellwig, Dialogue 52).[2] It is also a time of life in which absolutes dominate thinking processes. In adolescence, there is a strong tendency to club together into groups, gangs, and cliques and to show exclusivist behaviour to individuals not included. Thus, it could be argued that, from a Bahá'í perspective, "survival language" is a natural but preliminary stage in the social evolution of religions.

e) Apocalyptic Language

Related to the concept of "survival language" is Rosemary Reuther's work on the apocalyptic context of New Testament writing (Reuther, *To Change*). The world of the first Christians was one of Jewish apocalypticism--the end of the world was imminent, as was the "second coming." Palestine was "soaked in politico-religious apocalypticism" and many Palestinian Jews to some extent believed in a Messianic solution. Among the most influential groups were the Essenes, "members of an extremist apocalyptic-eschatological sect, who expected their triumph to come soon," (Johnson, *History* 19, 18) of which John the Baptist was a prominent member. Early Christians also believed that the reign of God that Jesus preached was about to be fulfilled in their lifetime through him. There could have been no consideration at all about other saviors; there was no time for them. But when the end of time did not happen, the finality of end-time was shifted to the centre of history: "Jesus as the final, eschatological prophet was simply moved to be the center of history: a shift from the apocalyptic to a classicist worldview" (Swidler, *Universal* 45). This research has

highlighted the influence of early apocalyptic ideas on exclusive statements about Jesus; statements which "should be recognized as time-conditioned and therefore in need of reinterpretation. Jesus need not be the absolutely final prophet, but a universally meaningful savior who gives promise and power for an eschatological future" (Knitter, No Other 184).

Both approaches of "survival" and "apocalyptic" language are based on the historicity of the texts; seeing them as statements that are partly explained by their circumstances and time. Bahá'í theology would appear to strongly corroborate this approach. `Abdu'l-Bahá's analysis of the two parts of religion, "essential" and "non-essential," explains that the non-essentials are relative to time and social circumstances: "These are subject to change and transformation in accordance with time, place and conditions" (Promulgation 97-98). Among these non-essentials are the dogmas of the Church, such as the doctrine of the Trinity which `Abdu'l-Bahá asserted to a group of Protestant theologians in 1913 (`Abdu'l-Bahá 12). Equally, from a Bahá'í perspective, the doctrine of the exclusivity of Christ is among these non-essential dogmas subject to the laws of change and decay, and the subsequent need for renewal.

Bahá'í scholars have suggested that John 14:6 ("I am the Way") can be viewed in its historical context. Stockman proposes a novel interpretation by interpreting at the word "am" in this verse. He proposes that the universal present interpretation of "am" is incorrect (as one would say about someone's name, i.e. "I am John"); rather it refers to a finite period of time. Therefore, Moses was the only way until Jesus, and Jesus the only way until Muhammad (Jesus 39-40). From a Bahá'í perspective, exclusivist statements from a Manifestation of God have both a historical and meta-historical meaning. From a historical perspective, exclusivist verses, such as in John 14:6, are true and valid until the end of the dispensation. The meta-historical or eternal meaning, when such words are spoken in the station of the divine Logos, the mouthpiece of God, is applicable to all time and to other manifestations of God (McLean, Dimensions 45).

In support of a historical reading of John 14:6 ("I am the Way") is the view that the primary audience was Jewish. In a recent study of the uses of "I am" in John's Gospel, Ball suggests that when taking the "I am" statements together, they identify Jesus with images and concepts from the Old Testament and Jewish expectation of the time. The Jesus proclaimed in the "I am" verses "must be understood in the light of the Old Testament and Judaism" and is presented as the one who fulfils and embodies various Old Testament concepts ("I am" 270, 272). Moreover, the framework for understanding of salvation in John is "self-confessedly Jewish": such salvation is "from the Jews" (Jn 4:22). Thus, it is possible to argue that the exclusivist text has is polemical language implying as it does that Judaism as traditionally understood and practised is obsolete (Ball, "I am" 282, 273).

f) Confessional Language

The study of how religious language is used in the New Testament has enabled Christian theologians to reinterpret the exclusivist texts in a number of new and interesting ways. Prominent among these scholars is Knitter who has argued that much of the exclusivist writing in the New Testament belongs not to the language of philosophy or science but rather to the language of confession and testimony. "In talking about Jesus, the New Testament authors use the language not of analytic philosophers but of enthusiastic believers, not of scientists but of lovers. In describing Jesus as 'the only,' Christians were not trying to elaborate a metaphysical principle but a personal relationship and a commitment that defined what it meant to belong to this community" (No Other 185).

An analogous use of language is that which a husband would use of his wife when saying, for instance, that, "You are the most beautiful woman in the world, you are the only woman for me." Such statements are true in the context of their marital relationship and in intimate moments, but lose their relevance if they were understood to mean that there is absolutely no other woman in the world as beautiful as this particular husband's wife or that there is no other woman that he could possibly love and marry. This would be transforming love language into scientific or philosophical language. Knitter argues that Christian exclusivist attitudes, in the way they have been understood and used, have perhaps done just that to the love language of the early church. "The languages of the heart and the head are not necessarily contradictory, but they are different and their differences must be respected" (Knitter, No Other 185). Hick has also argued that Christian exclusivist claims have misused the language of personal commitment and "turned living religion into dogmatic exclusiveness" (Second Christianity 32).

Knitter tests this hypothesis on some of the classic exclusivist New Testament texts. In reading them as confessional statements rather than philosophical ones, he argues that they sound different, and take on a more spiritually challenging character to the individual believer. The following is a summary of Knitter's reinterpretation of three exclusivist texts:

"there is none other name under heaven by which men can be saved"
(Acts 4:12).

Knitter argues that the context of this passage suggests a confessional interpretation. The apostles have just cured the lame man in the name of Jesus, and cry out "there is no other name by which we can be saved," not to rule out the possibility of other saviours, but to proclaim that this Lord Jesus was still alive and that it was he, not they, who are working such wonders in the community. The text, therefore, is abused when used as a starting point for evaluating other religions (No Other 185). In support, Paul Robinson has written that the question at issue in this passage was "not one of comparative religions but of faith-healing":

that is, in whose power had Peter and John just healed the crippled man, and more broadly, in whose power had the disciples undergone the transformation that was so evident to their Jews? The passage delivers a clear

answer: not Peter and John's own power, but the power contained in the name and reality of Jesus the Christ. (Robinson, Truth 105)

"The only begotten Son" (John 1:14, 3:16).

Knitter suggests that the texts that present Jesus as "the only begotten Son" will also be heard differently. Their primary intent will not be to exclude anyone else as a possible son or daughter of God, but to challenge all hearers to take Jesus seriously, as authoritative. These texts are indicating that just as any son can tell us much about his father, so Jesus is a reliable revelation of God. The original Greek of these quotes would appear to support this view. In translating the Greek, *uios tou Theou* ("son of God"), there is nothing to suggest that the definite article "the" needs to be included; it does not appear in the original Greek and the phrase could as well be translated "a son of God." The descriptive qualifier "only begotten" would be better rendered according to its Hebrew usage as "firstborn" or "beloved" (as it is Mark 1:11, 9:7; Matt. 17:5; Luke 9:35). It could then be understood not to affirm the exclusivity but the reliability and urgency of Jesus' role as God's instrument. In this sense Israel is also called the "firstborn" of God (Exodus 4:22; Sirach 36:12; Jer. 31:9) (Knitter, No Other 185).[3]

"The one mediator between God and humankind" (1 Tim 2:5).

Here, the adjective "one" should be heard not to imply "absolutely the only," but "the one whom we must take seriously," to whom all persons must listen, if they are truly to understand the God who, as the previous verse reminds us, "wants all people to be saved and come to know the truth." Like all Christians, the author of this passage was excited about Jesus; his principal concern was that all others experience the truth and salvation of this Jesus. The author was not out to condemn all other mediators or those who did not know Jesus (Knitter, No Other 186).

"No man cometh to the Father but by me" (Jn 14:6).

Eck comes to a confessional reading of this passage by focusing on the question and questioner. It is "the poor uncertain" Thomas who asked that question on the last night that Jesus spent with his disciples. After he washed their feet, he spoke to them words of farewell: "I am going where you cannot follow, not just now. I am going to God's house of many rooms to prepare a place for you, and you know the way I am going". This is what prompted Thomas to ask his question:

And what did Thomas ask? Did he ask, Lord, are Hindus to have a room in God's heavenly household? Did he ask, Lord, will Buddhists make it across the sea of sorrow on the raft of the Dharma? Lord, when Muhammad comes six hundred years from now, will he hear God's word? No, on that night of uncomprehending uncertainty he asked, "Lord, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way? And Christ answered, "I am the Way, ..." It was a pastoral answer, not a polemical one. It was an expression of comfort, not

condemnation. (Eck, Encountering 94)

g) Action Language

A related approach to religious language is its ability to motivate actions--the performative role of language. Knitter has argued in later works that the intent of the language of Acts 4:12 ["For there is no other name . . ."] "is clearly praxic, performative--to call others to recognize and accept the power that is available to them in Jesus" (Death 41). He contends that the biblical context of this passage suggests this interpretation. Earlier verses state, "In the power of that name this man stands before you perfectly sound" (Acts 4:10) and "It is his name and trust in this name that has strengthened the limbs of this man" (Acts 3:16). Knitter asserts that the implication is evident: if we can trust in the power of Jesus' name, our limbs can also be strengthened for tasks that presently seem impossible, as impossible as a crippled man being enabled to walk. Acts 3:23 makes it even clearer that Peter was talking about the power of Jesus: "Anyone who does not listen to that prophet [foretold by Moses] shall be ruthlessly cut off from the people."

"No other name", as performative, action language, is really a positive statement in negative couching: it tells us that all peoples must listen to this Jesus; it does not tell us that no one else should be listened to or learned from. The stress, then, is on the saving power mediated by the name of Jesus, not on the exclusivity of the name. (Knitter, Death 41-2)

Related are views of Ball who sees the point of exclusivist language to encourage believers: "That some of the promises in the sub-clauses of the 'I am' sayings are made to believers may suggest that the words of the Johannine Jesus are addressed to members of the believing community who need to be encouraged in their Faith" ("I am" 275). Borg believes that their voice is "invitational rather than imperative": "'Consider the lilies of the field' functions very differently from 'these are God's requirements for salvation'" (Jesus 145-6).

There are number of passages in Bahá'í scripture to the nature of religious language that would seem to endorse the importance of "confessional" and "action" language in understanding religious texts. One of the major themes of the Bahá'í writings is the power of the "Word of God." The Bahá'í writings state that the "Word of God" is "endowed with such regenerative power" (Bahá'u'lláh, cited in Shoghi Effendi, World Order 107), "creative power" (Shoghi Effendi, Deepening 34-35), "penetrative power" (Abdu'l-Bahá, Selections 292), "supreme animating power" (Bahá'u'lláh, Tablets 73), "compelling power" (Shoghi Effendi, World Order 103), "a power above and beyond the powers of nature" (Abdu'l-Bahá, Selections 53). It acts as "the divine magnet" (Abdu'l-Bahá, Tablets 358), "the most potent elixir, the greatest and mightiest

talisman" (‘Abdu'l-Bahá, Tablets 200), to convert "satanic strength into heavenly power" (Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings 200), to cause "the heart of every righteous man to throb" (Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings 295):

Every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God is endowed with such potency as can instil new life into every human frame, if ye be of them that comprehend this truth. . . . Through the mere revelation of the word 'Fashioner,' issuing forth from His lips and proclaiming His attribute to mankind, such power is released as can generate, through successive ages, all the manifold arts which the hands of man can produce. (Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings 141-2)

Every single letter proceeding from Our mouth is endowed with such regenerative power as to enable it to bring into existence a new creation--a creation the magnitude of which is inscrutable to all save God. (Bahá'u'lláh, cited in Shoghi Effendi, World Order 107)

The words of Bahá'u'lláh and the Master [‘Abdu'l-Bahá], however, have a creative power and are sure to awaken in the reader the undying fire of the love of God. (Shoghi Effendi, Deepening 34-35)

It would appear that these Bahá'í quotes strongly support the idea that language has a performative role, the idea of "action language." Religious texts, from a Bahá'í viewpoint, are revealed to transform the character of individuals and society, and to release "the potentialities in the station of man" (Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings 340) in expression through art, science, scholarship and service to society. Exclusivist texts are part of this process. They are performative, challenging and urging believers to strive for their own spiritual development and that of others.

h) Hyperbolic Language

For the early Christians, the religious experience of encountering Jesus was so different to everyday experience that they used what Leonard Swidler, a professor of interreligious dialogue, has called "hyperbolic language". This type of language is metaphorical and poetic, and is used to express extraordinary feelings and emotions that transcend everyday language. Hence, Christians began to speak of Jesus of Nazareth as the meeting point of the divine and the human, and later, in the fourth and fifth centuries, when Christianity had become the state religion of the Roman empire and had largely embraced the terminology and thinking of the Hellenistic world, orthodox Christians began to speak of the God-man. The problem, according to Swidler, is that this language was no longer understood to be hyperbolic and poetic but as encapsulating definitive and absolute scientific truths about the nature of Jesus:

Unfortunately for subsequent Christians, and for the rest of

the world, the profound insight that the first Christians had in their liberating encounter with Jesus of Nazareth was now translated out of its poetic, metaphorical language into Hellenistic empirical, ontological language in a manner that took the original language to also be empirical, ontological. Not to perceive that almost all the original language of the first Christians as expressed in the NT was in fact poetic, metaphorical, when speaking in its most ecstatic terms about the significance and meaning of Jesus of Nazareth, was a profound misjudgement. (Swidler, Universal 42-3).

A clear endorsement of "hyperbolic language" has come from the Universal House of Justice. In answering a question about the meaning of one of its statements, it has written that the manifestations of God speak in a language replete with "poetry, analogy, hyperbole and paradox": "we must accept that they are realities that cannot be defined in a rigorous manner, as one would attempt to define the terms of mathematics or even of philosophy. This is a realm of knowledge in which poetry, analogy, hyperbole and paradox are to be expected; a realm in which the Manifestations themselves speak with many voices" (From a letter on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated 15 October 1992). The Bahá'í writings themselves are no exception. Shoghi Effendi, to take one example, has written that `Abdu'l-Bahá "uses the method of exaggerated emphasis" in order to explain how individuals know God through the instrument of the manifestations of God:

The Master uses the term "the Divine Reality is sanctified from singleness" in order to forcibly impress us with the fact that the Godhead is unknowable and that to define It is impossible; we cannot contain It in such concepts as singleness and plurality which we apply to things we know and can experience. He uses the method of exaggerated emphasis in order to drive home His thought that we know the sun directly through its rays, the Godhead indirectly through the Manifestations of God. (From a letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, dated 20 February 1950 cited in Bahá'í Canada Supplement 6)

II. Bahá'í Texts

To what extent are these approaches relevant to Bahá'í texts? Although, there is no doctrine of Bahá'í exclusivity, there are a number of Bahá'í scriptural texts which assert the uniqueness of the Bahá'í Faith (Stockman, Uniqueness). It is not impossible to imagine that these texts could rise in prominence in the Bahá'í dialogue with other religions, as a consequence to the growing strength and confidence of the Bahá'í community as it continues to expand and consolidate worldwide, and partly as a reaction to the theological uncertainties that will be created through a deeper interreligious dialogue.[4] A notable and recent example is the experience of the current President of the World Congress of Faiths, Edward Carpenter, who at an interview said that, "it disturbs me when on occasion I hear a well-meaning Bahá'í taking the view that it is God's will

that all religions will be absorbed, ultimately, into the Bahá'í Faith. This is a form of imperialism which, I think, we need to guard ourselves against" (Gouvion, Gardeners 169). The transition from what Carpenter calls "imperialism" to exclusivism is a small one. The Bahá'í community will need to guard itself from both these tendencies which run diametrically counter to Bahá'í belief.[5]

In the following section, I will analyse some apparently exclusivist texts in the Bahá'í writings from the approaches outlined in the first part of this paper.

a) Erroneous Interpretations

Bahá'u'lláh's statement in the Súriy-i-Haykal, "The Holy Spirit Itself hath been generated through the agency of a single letter revealed by this Most Great Spirit, if ye be of them that comprehend" (Bahá'u'lláh, cited in Shoghi Effendi, World Order 109), has been interpreted to assert Bahá'u'lláh's superiority over other manifestations of God. Adib Taherzadeh has written that the 'Most Great Spirit' "was manifested on this planet for the first time through Bahá'u'lláh" (Covenant 43), and that in "past Dispensations God's Revelation had been indirect through the intermediary of the Holy Spirit" (Revelation IV:134). He concludes that "Never before had God sent a Manifestation of His 'Most Great Spirit' to mankind, His supreme Manifestation . . ." (Revelation IV:134-5).

I would contend that this would appear to be an example of an erroneous interpretation as it contradicts the authoritative interpretation of Shoghi Effendi. Shoghi Effendi has written that the "same" 'Most Great Spirit' manifested itself in previous revelations and is not unique to the Bahá'í Faith:

It was on that occasion [Síyáh-Chál] that the 'Most Great Spirit,' as designated by Bahá'u'lláh Himself, revealed itself to Him, in the form of a 'Maiden,' and bade Him 'lift up' His 'voice between earth and heaven,' - that same Spirit which, in the Zoroastrian, the Mosaic, the Christian, and the Muhammadan Dispensations, had been respectively symbolized by the 'Sacred Fire,' the 'Burning Bush,' the 'Dove,' and the 'Angel Gabriel.' (Messages to America 100)

The other problem with the assertion that the "Most Great Spirit" is unique to the Bahá'í revelation is that it does not take into account the background and semantic history of the term. There is much discussion of the term in Sufi texts, particularly emanating from the school of Ibn Arabi. In such literature, the "Most Great Spirit" [Ar. al-rúh al-azam] corresponds to the Muhammadan reality or Logos (Affifi, Mystical 66).

It is noteworthy that there are a number of places in the Bahá'í interpretive literature where prophylactic measures have been taken to remove

an exclusivist slant on some Bahá'í scriptural statements. These interpretations are similar to Bahá'í interpretations of John 14:6 ("I am the Way") where the subject of the verse is universalised and not understood to refer to person of Bahá'u'lláh. For instance, the verse, "But for Him [Bahá'u'lláh] no Divine Messenger would have been invested with the robe of Prophethood" is interpreted by Shoghi Effendi as referring "to the reality of God found in Him and not to His person " (From a letter written on his behalf, dated 17 July 1937). Consequently Taherzadeh writes of this passage, "They represent the Voice of God which speaks to us through the instrumentality of a human being" (Revelation 134). When Bahá'u'lláh refers to himself as the voice in the Burning Bush, Shoghi Effendi explains that "Bahá'u'lláh identifies the glory of the God-head on that occasion with Himself" (Unfolding 448). Thus "statements referring to Bahá'u'lláh in such exalted terms as 'the Heavenly Father', 'Jehovah', 'the Speaker on Sinai', 'the One through Whom all Revelations were sent down', all refer to the Holy Spirit or the Most Great Spirit which animated Bahá'u'lláh, and not to His Person" (From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated 24 May 1992).

An alternative approach is to attribute any implied superiority to Bahá'u'lláh's revelation, itself a consequence of the unique age in which we live (Shoghi Effendi, World Order 60). Thus, in celebrating Bahá'u'lláh as "the most precious Being" ever to have lived, the House of Justice write that this is "as a consequence of being the vehicle of a Revelation the splendour and magnitude of which eclipses all previous Revelations" (From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated 11 December 1992).

b) Misrepresentative Texts

The Bahá'í writings prescribe a balanced interpretation of scripture. Shoghi Effendi, in letters written on his behalf, writes:

We must take the teachings as a great, balanced whole, not seek out and oppose to each other two strong statements that have different meanings; somewhere in between there are links uniting the two. (19 March 1945)

One may liken Bahá'u'lláh's teachings to a sphere; there are points poles apart, and in between the thoughts and doctrines that unite them. We believe in balance in all things; we believe in moderation in all things... (5 July 1949)

In addition, the House of Justice have noted that, "Bahá'ís, like other human beings, sometimes have a tendency to cling tenaciously to one Text or one understanding of the Texts and to overlook the significance of other passages of the Writings" (From a letter written on their behalf, 24 May 1992).

The texts which appear most exclusivist are those that imply that the

Bahá'í Faith provides the only route to salvation must be tempered with explicit statements that suggest otherwise. For instance, the verse, "No man can obtain everlasting life, unless he embraceth the truth of this inestimable, this wondrous, and sublime Revelation" (Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings 183), if interpreted literally, would imply that salvation is dependent on recognition of Bahá'u'lláh. However, in the context of Bahá'u'lláh's other writings, this interpretation would be misrepresentative. How could be such an exclusivist stance be reconciled with other statements in the Bahá'í writings that state other religionist are saved:

"Blessed is the man who . . . hath turned towards Him [Christ]"

(Bahá'u'lláh, cited in Shoghi Effendi, World Order 186);

Muhammad is "the Ark of Salvation" (Abdu'l-Bahá, Secret 53); the

Qur'án "the Way of God unto all who are in the heavens and all who are on earth" (Gleanings 44)? A fascinating passage from `Abdu'l-Bahá might be used to start an "anonymous Bahá'ís" theology:

Then as to what thou hast asked me for pious people who died before they heard the Voice of this Manifestation. Listen: Those who have mounted to God before hearing the Voice, if they followed the rules of conduct as laid down by Jesus and always walked in the straight path, they have obtained this Dazzling Light after their rising to the Kingdom of God. (TAB II, 478)[6]

Cole has argued that the Bahá'í writings suggest that salvation is a "spiritual

velocity" rather than a state.[7] Belief in the

most recent Manifestation of God provides a "boost" to one's velocity, an accelerating impulse. Thus from a Bahá'í position, the question is not whether

non-Bahá'ís are "saved" or not. The question is whether any particular person has a high spiritual velocity or a low one. The fact that salvation is not a state that can be attained is clear from the Bahá'í writings which state that the soul does not stop progressing at death[8]

and that there is no original sin. To emphasise the processual nature of salvation, Bahá'u'lláh states that the "sinner" can be saved at his last breath

and the "devout believer" "fall to the nethermost fire"

(Íqán 194-5).

The Bahá'í writings also suggest that there are hierarchies of salvation. All previous religions and spiritual traditions have offered salvation, but some more than others. Therefore, Christianity compared to Islam is lower in the hierarchy of salvation, but Christians in absolute terms have attained salvation. In a commentary by `Abdu'l-Bahá on monist and dualist concepts of reality, Cole concludes that `Abdu'l-Bahá appears to be recognising theological positions as different language games in the

Wittgensteinian sense, each of which is internally coherent. But as Cole states, "his position is not the entirely relativist one that each of these languages-games is equally valid, but that there is a hierarchy, with some coming closer to the truth than others (Cole, Concept 27). Thus, the Bahá'í position is relativist and hierarchical at the same time.

Another feature of soteriological language in the Bahá'í texts is that collective salvation is the main emphasis. A civilisation is saved or not based on the recognition of the representative of the Godhead in the form that It assumes in their culture. The question of salvation is reframed as a communal one. Thus, Shoghi Effendi interprets Bahá'u'lláh as the "Savior of the whole human race", "in Whose Faith all nations can alone, and must eventually, seek their true salvation", and whose "aim is the salvation, through unification, of the entire planet" (Promised Day 114, 111, 116). Bahá'u'lláh states that his mission is "the salvation of the peoples and kindreds of the earth" (Tablets 223, cf. Gleanings 243), and writes to collective Christendom that he has "borne the misfortunes of the world for your salvation" (Tablets 10). The argument I am presenting is that Bahá'u'lláh has no exclusive claim to individual salvation, but that the social salvation of humankind does exclusively depend on the adoption of the principles of the Bahá'í Faith, which is "humanity's unique and most effective ark of salvation"

(From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, dated 10 September 1933 cited in Compilation of Compilations 1:219).

c) Apocalyptic Language

Shoghi Effendi presents a number of Bahá'í texts in apocalyptic terms in his extended letter entitled *The Promised Day is Come*. The urgency of the message is all the more relevant as it was written in 1941 during the Second World War. The apocalyptic language is used to warn people of the dangers that beset the world due to its ignorance of the "healing, the saving, the pregnant truths proclaimed by Bahá'u'lláh, the Divine Organizer and Savior of the whole human race" (Shoghi Effendi, *Promised Day* 114), specifically not acting on the principle of the oneness of humanity.[9] The consequences of "irreligion and its monstrous offspring" are delineated as are the "three false gods" of nationalism, racialism and communism (ibid. 113-4) in language that is vivid and charged.

d) Confessional Language

A clear example of confessional language is in the writings of Shoghi Effendi who, on the sixty-fifth anniversary of the passing of Bahá'u'lláh, "With feelings of profound joy, exultation and thankfulness" as the Israeli government decreed that the Covenant Breakers should hand over the outer portion of the Qiblih, describes Bahá'u'lláh's remains as "the holiest dust the earth ever received into its bosom" (*Messages to the Bahá'í World*

122). Similarly, in their tribute to Bahá'u'lláh on the occasion of the centenary commemoration of his ascension, the Universal House of Justice assert that, "He, the Most Great Manifestation, appeared in the Most Great Name and endured the greatest suffering in authoring the Most Great Revelation, which is the well-spring of the Most Great Peace" (A Wider Horizon 239).[10] Both of these are confessional statements which are not intended to describe Bahá'u'lláh's ontological status compared to the founders of other religions, but in solemn commemoration of his remarkable influence on the world.

e) Action Language

The most important collection of quotations on the uniqueness of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh is found in Shoghi Effendi's letter entitled Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh (World Order 100-112). Shoghi Effendi explains that the purpose of this compilation is to assist the Bahá'ís "in the effective prosecution of their mighty enterprise" of constructing the Administrative Order. Furthermore, he explains that this letter was written to "powerfully reinforce the vigour of our spiritual life and greatly assist in counteracting the machinations of an implacable enemy" and so that Bahá'ís "can derive fresh inspiration and added sustenance" in propagating the Faith (World Order 99, 100). Thus, the primary texts in the first section of the Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh on the sublimity of Bahá'u'lláh's revelation can be seen as an example of "action language" that is intended to deepen the spiritual life of Bahá'ís and inspire them to promote their Faith through building up the Bahá'í administration and propagating it.

Many other examples of "action language" exist in the Bahá'í literature. A recent one is the challenging statement of the Universal House of Justice that Bahá'u'lláh is "the most precious Being ever to have drawn breath on this planet" (From a letter to the Bahá'í world, Ridván 1990). The context of this letter was to inspire Bahá'ís to "emblazon His name" as a preliminary measure in preparation for the various activities planned for the celebration of the centenary of his passing in 1992. Thus, the passage is "action language" with the emblazoning of Bahá'u'lláh's name as its intention. Arguably an exclusive commitment is being called for. This is important for a small community, in the face of persecution and ridicule, as it emerges from obscurity.

Three Difficult Texts

Among the most important texts in the corpus of Bahá'í scripture that are relevant to this discussion is the first verse of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, Bahá'u'lláh's Most Holy Book: "The first duty prescribed by God for His servants is the recognition of Him Who is the Day spring of His Revelation and the Fountain of His laws ...

Whoso achieveth this duty hath attained unto all good; and whoso is deprived thereof hath gone astray, though he be the author of every righteous deed (K1)."

An important element in understanding this verse is the nature of the "recognition" that is called for. The Arabic for "recognition" is *`irfán*, a term with rich mystical connotations, implying a knowledge with a strong experiential and existential content. Juan Cole has written that it might be best glossed as "mystical insight". He contends that it is not a prosaic recognition, but a primal recognition in the soul, a "re-cognition." It might be compared to the Buddhist concept of enlightenment. Thus, the first duty is not a legal one, not a formulaic creed like "There is no God but God and Muhammad is His Prophet" of Islam (the shahada or affirmation). It is not a confession of outward faith but rather "the attainment of mystical insight into the Manifestation of God." The use of *`irfán* is paralleled in the Short Obligatory Prayer, "I bear witness, O my God, that Thou hast created me to know [li *`irfánika*] Thee and to worship Thee" (Bahá'í Prayers 4).[11] In this context, *`irfán* is the meaning and purpose of life, not a simple affirmation of belief that leads to salvation, from a static to a dynamic concept of recognition.

The historical context suggests alternative meanings to a literalist one. After the death of the Báb, there was an important strain of Bábí antinomianism. Bahá'u'lláh was arguably attempting to forestall any similar Bahá'í antinomianism by asserting that justification by faith alone is insufficient and insisting on works. But he was also attempting to bring the rest of the Bábís into the Bahá'í Faith by insisting on recognition of himself as the fount of revelation. Thus the question remains as to who the verse is addressed. If it is the Bábís, then it indicates only the prerequisites of Bahá'í identity. However, if it is the Bahá'í community that is being addressed, then it is the minimum standards of Bahá'í identity that are being delineated. It is difficult to see where the implication is that non-Bahá'ís are damned.

The phrase "hath gone astray" can also be read in different ways. Jack McLean suggests that the principle of the relativity of religious truth implies a non-exclusivist meaning. He uses the analogy of archery. An arrow goes astray if it misses the target, but, relatively speaking, it goes astray if it misses the bull's eye. As long as the archer continues to fire, there remains the possibility that the target will be hit (McLean, *Dimensions* 47). Of interest is the original Greek for the word "sin" in the New Testament, which is hamartia, is a term from archery meaning "missing the mark". As one Christian scholar notes, "The very word itself implies a much more optimistic view of human volition than `sin' does. With hamartia we are talking

about something essentially correct in human nature, a part of us that want to do what is good and right, but misses the bull's eye. Our goal is the right one; but somehow we miss it" (Witterschein, Preface xiv). This is consistent with the Bahá'í view which rejects the concept of original sin. So it appears that the phrase "hath gone astray" does not mean "is not saved" but rather suggests that relative to a continuum, an individual must continue to grow spiritually.

A personal view is that this verse of the Aqdas is action language. Like Acts 4:12 ("there is no other name"), it says something positive in negative terms: the eternal challenge of recognition or mystical insight into the manifestation is that which will lead to spiritual progress, not right action ("though he be the author of every righteous deed"). In a sense, Bahá'u'lláh has transcended the right action/right belief dichotomy, and challenged believers to "right being" as the mode of salvation.

Bahá'u'lláh's Tablet of Ahmad states, "Be thou assured in thyself that verily, he who turns away from this Beauty hath also turned away from the Messengers of the past and showeth pride toward God from all eternity to all eternity" (Bahá'í Prayers 212).

I would argue that this verse uses a number of languages simultaneously. There is a "survival language" element to it--Bahá'u'lláh, speaking through Ahmad to all the followers of the Báb, is urging them to remain steadfast after the martyrdom of the Báb, the heavy persecution of his followers, and the apparent lack of leadership among their ranks. On another level, there is a confessional quality--Bahá'u'lláh expressing his loyalty to the Báb's Cause: "He is the King of the Messengers and His Book is the Mother Book did ye but know" (Bahá'í Prayers 210). . But perhaps, its strongest voice is "action language". Bahá'u'lláh calls the Bábí community to follow the laws of the Báb at a time when it was "in such a state of deprivation and perversity" (Taherzadeh, Revelation II:114): "O people be obedient to the ordinances of God, which have been enjoined in the Bayán" (Bahá'í Prayers 210). On another level, it calls Ahmad to proclaim Bahá'u'lláh as "Him Whom God shall make manifest" to the Bábís. It clearly worked as it is chronicled that Ahmad changed his plans from attaining the presence of Bahá'u'lláh in Adrianople so that he could return to Persia. He travelled extensively and through his efforts, "a great many recognized the station of Bahá'u'lláh and became His ardent followers" (Revelation II:114). In addition, it issues a challenge to believers to strive to be "steadfast", so much so that "thy heart should be waver, even if ... all the heavens and the earth arise against thee" (Bahá'í Prayers 211). The arabic for "turning away," i'rád, implies wilful rejection. On this level, it remains applicable to Bahá'ís who are reminded of the dynamic of belief in Bahá'u'lláh, the lifelong challenge of mystical insight, `irfán, into the

manifestation. Thus, the verse would be misinterpreted if understood to refer to the salvation of non-Bahá'ís.

The phrase "he who turns away from this Beauty" can be interpreted in the light of progressive revelation as a statement that applies to all the manifestations of God. The rejection of any one manifestation is tantamount to a rejection of them all from a Bahá'í perspective. Thus this statement is applicable to Bahá'ís, as it is to followers of other religions.

It is a way of saying that the latest Manifestation of God embodies "within His Revelation the essence of all past Revelations" (Taherzadeh, Revelation II:126). From a historical perspective, it is aimed at the Bábís whose rejection of Bahá'u'lláh would undermine a primary goal of the Báb's mission. Of interest is how Bahá'u'lláh, in this verse, echoes the Persian Bayán of the Báb which states of "Him whom God shall make manifest", "he who believeth not (even though he believe in God, and what God hath commanded in former times), it is as though he had not believed", and "if he has believed in all the previous ones, and not in this, it is as naught (scattered dust)" (Browne, Summary 347). Thus, Bahá'u'lláh, by recalling the Bayán, is using a rhetorical device to challenge the Bábís to turn their allegiance to him.

In Bahá'u'lláh's last work, The Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, it states, "He that entereth therein is saved, and he that turneth away perisheth" (139). Again this verse resonates with many meanings. From a historical viewpoint, it has a "survival language" quality to it in that its intended recipient, Shaykh Muhammad Taqir-i-Najafi, was a persecutor of Bahá'ís. It has confessional quality to it--"Great is the Cause, and great the Announcement!" (Epistle 144). But perhaps the performative nature of the verse is its strongest voice. It aims to bring "that rapacious priest to repent of his acts" (God Passes By 219), to call people of the Bayán to accept Bahá'u'lláh, to steel Bahá'ís in the face of persecution, and to challenge them to transform themselves spiritually.

Conclusion

A ground-breaking study by Juan Cole is the first to explore the literary qualities of Bahá'u'lláh's writings. He presents the view that there are a number of rhetorical techniques that Bahá'u'lláh's texts use to make the pluralist religious doctrines of the Bahá'í Faith immediate and plausible to readers. He argues that Bahá'u'lláh's use of presentation and narrative, of point of view, and techniques such as apostrophe, metaphor and allegory, fulfil these goals (Cole, "Poetics" 451). This paper has attempted to build on this by exploring other "language games" of the Bahá'í writings from a study of those texts which appear exclusivist in tenor. The polysemous nature of language, its pluriformity of meanings, is striking in these texts, and the Bahá'í religion is explicit in this hermeneutic. Beyond these multiple meanings are the languages of survival, confession and action. I

contend that there is little here which would suggest that they can be used to develop an exclusivist theology of salvation.

A Bahá'í scholar identifies the challenge with which language confronts Bahá'í theology: "It is this richer understanding of language that we should be examining ... to experience those aspects of language which open us up, as individuals, to new personal and corporate opportunities - the Bahá'í life" (Parry, "Philosophical Theology" 90). Parry calls for a theology that is "responsive to a better appreciation of its raw-materials; namely Language. And behind, above, below and within Language, the speaker of Language" (Ibid., 91). Uncovering the language of exclusivism has hopefully made a contribution to this enterprise.

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Notes

[1] In support of this view, Marcus Braybrooke, also discussing John 14:6, writes that, "Critical scholarship has made it clear that the words of John in the fourth Gospel should not be treated as his words" (Time to Meet 89), and Marcus Borg, a professor of religion at Oregon State University, states that "Jesus did not speak of himself with the exalted titles of John's gospels, now did he speak the great 'one way' verse of John 14:6" (Jesus 145). The "Jesus Seminar" of 74 seminary professors, college teachers and theologians have come to this conclusion (The Five Gospels: What did Jesus Really Say. NY: MacMillan, 1993).

[2] A stronger comparison can be made with patriotism which tends to involve a certain contempt and even hatred for people of other nations.

[3] Cf. Eck, Encountering 96.

[4] For the challenges of interreligious dialogue for the Bahá'í community, see Fazel, "Interreligious Dialogue".

[5] For Bahá'í views on religious pluralism, see Momen, "Relativism" and Cole, "Poetics".

[6] I am grateful to Christopher Buck for bringing this quote to my attention.

[7] Juan Cole, posting to Irfan internet listserv, August 1996.

[8] On the eternal challenge of salvation, see the Báb, Selections 85; Bahá'u'lláh, Prayers and Meditations 251 and K163.

[9] The Báb, having proclaimed himself to be the centre of the Islamic apocalypse in 1844, wrote in a style that has a number of features common to apocalyptic literature (Lawson, "Structure" 8). Allied to the expectation in the short-term of a further messianic figure (termed Man-yuzhiruhu'lláh or "He whom God shall make manifest"), this would explain some of the exclusivist elements in Bábí

doctrine, such as the destruction of non-Bábí books, forbidding marriage to non-believers, and the ban on non-believers living in Bábí states (apart from merchants and others engaged in useful professions).

[10] Cf. Shoghi Effendi, *Promised Day* 5-6 where he writes of the "Most Great Justice", "Most Great Peace", "Most Great Civilization" and "Most Great Name."

[11] Juan Cole, posting to Talisman internet listserv, April 1995.

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