Karlberg's Notion of Consultation and Bahá'í Consultation: Ontological Truths, Knowledge, and Ethics

in memory of Glen Eyford[1]

By Filip Boicu

4 May 2022

In his book "Constructing Social Reality. An Inquiry into the Normative Foundations of Social Change" (2020) Michael Karlberg proposes a particular "consultative epistemology" as central to the Bahá'í methdology for social change. This "consultative epistemology" constitutes the main argument of the book, its backbone, and its most significant claim. Karlberg's key contention is that this 'consultative epistemology' manages to finally reconcile the tensions between "truth and relativity, knowledge and power, science and religion" (p.VIII) and thus transcend the main crises and fault lines of modernity. The claim, therefore, is that a new model for civilization building has thus been born, one that transcends previous limitations.

The section you will read is a revised short fragment from an article entitled "Strong Foundationalism in the Bahá'í Faith? With an Analysis of Michael Karlberg's 'Ontological Foundationalism.'"[2] For a full and detailed analysis of Karlberg's "consultative epistemology" please refer to the second part of that article entitled "Second Answer."

Many of the difficulties with Karlberg's[3] consultative epistemology occur because, from the very start, Karlberg interprets the notion of Bahá'í consultation through the prism of ontological foundationalism.[4] The notion of consultation he proposes is more clearly outlined in a 2017 book chapter on normative foundations in media and public discourse:

---

[1] I am amazed at how essential and valid his points in this piece are even today: Eyford, Glen. *Social and Economic Development: A Bahá'í Approach, by Holly Hanson Vick*. 1990, https://bahai-library.com/eyford_vick_social_economic.

[2] Available at: https://www.academia.edu/77126110/Strong_Foundationalism_in_the_Bah%C3%A1%C3%AD_Faith_With_an_Analysis_of_Michael_Karlbergs_Ontological_Foundationalism

[3] Karlberg, Michael. *Constructing Social Reality. An Inquiry into the Normative Foundations of Social Change*. Association for Bahá'í Studies, 2020.

[4] "Ontological foundationalism refers to the view that reality is characterized by foundational truths, or laws, or properties, or indelible features of existence that exist independently of whether human minds are aware of them and independently of the degree to which we comprehend them." Idem, p.3

"The normative principles outlined in this chapter suggest that religion can make significant contributions to the advancement of knowledge about the construction of social realities – if religious voices meet certain conditions. To understand this potential, it is important to return to the issue of relativism. Within consultation, diverse perspectives are viewed as a means of arriving at a more comprehensive understanding of multifaceted realities in the pursuit of unity and justice. In the absence of these foundational normative commitments, diversity results in extreme relativism. And extreme relativism leads to a normative impasse that makes social progress impossible, as mentioned at the outset of this chapter. This impasse cannot be avoided unless one assumes the existence of foundational normative truths, or what Bahá'ís refer to as spiritual principles, which underlie and inform the construction of social realities."[5]

Let us reflect on this passage. Do the Bahá'í Writings anywhere mention that consultative consensus cannot be reached without prior acceptance of normative foundational truths that should 'underlie and inform the construction of social realities'? Do they state anywhere that consultation should only proceed after certain key ontological principles regarding the aspects of social reality under consideration have been accepted as such? If certain normative principles such as love, fellowship, unity, and the independent investigation of truth are invoked this is only to guarantee that the mechanism of consultation is functional and maintained over time. Consultation should have as its aim the independent investigation of truth and not the expression of self-interest and the gaining of power by either blocking or eliciting consent. Likewise, supporting an erroneous outcome is preferable to disruptive disagreement if that preserves the unity of the consultative process which, over time, will readjust its findings. These are clearly procedural considerations rather than objective truths that arbitrate between knowledge claims. Karlberg is right to indicate that a certain aspiration for justice and unity (and I would add, first and foremost, for truth) is necessary for the process of Bahá'í consultation but that does not mean 1) that the prior acceptance of the foundational normative principles of the Bahá'í faith is a must or 2) that such foundational normative principles should be employed from the above as objective truths arbitrating between knowledge claims. The other key issue here is who identifies what such foundational

[5] Karlberg, Michael. 'Media and Public Discourse: Normative Foundations'. Cameron, Geoffrey, and Benjamin Schewel (Eds). *Religion and Public Discourse in an Age of Transition. Reflections on Bahá'í Practice and Thought*, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2017, p.85.

normative principles are and what their conceptual content is and through what methodology this is this being achieved. After all, isn't the emergence of normative principles and conceptual models precisely the point of ongoing scholarly work, practice or community work, and, in particular, of consultation – of course, in close relation to existing religious texts and the guidance from the Center of the Covenant? If certain normative principles are as foundational as Karlberg claims, shouldn't we trust that the method of consultation will eventually lead in their direction? We read in his attempt to impose normative foundational principles as objective values or truths specified in advance "a proclivity to totalize":

"The second proclivity, to totalize, refers to the penchant to systematically explain the world, or as many perceivable aspects of it as possible, within an increasingly regimented worldview – to grapple with and explain more and more of what is perceived in terms of a single overarching logic. This tendency also has value: conceptually mapping reality in order to make sense of it is both natural and helpful. In practice, however, whatever does not fit neatly within the parameters of the resulting paradigm is typically explained away, dismissed as absurd or senseless, or even repudiated as deviant or antagonistic. The extreme manifestation of this tendency is totalitarianism, but it also takes on other forms such as scientism, reductionist materialism, and religious dogmatism." (Smith and Ghaemmaghami)[6]

This 'proclivity to totalize' is conspicuous both in the 'consultative epistemology' of Karlberg and in how he envisages the transposition of ontological truths into the frameworks of science, philosophy, and of other fields of practice (development, social change, and social transformation). In my current understanding, the Bahá'í notion of consultation is completely opposed to this reinterpretation of consultation as operating in such manner under the shadow of a normative ontology:

"Let us also remember that at the very root of the Cause lies the principle of the undoubted right of the individual to self-expression, his freedom to declare his conscience and set forth his views. …Let us also bear in mind that the keynote of the Cause of God is not dictatorial

[6] Smith, Todd and Ghaemmaghami, Omid. 'Consultation'. Stockman, Robert H., editor. *The World of the Bahá'í Faith*, Routledge, 2022, p.451.

authority but humble fellowship, not arbitrary power, but the spirit of frank and loving consultation." (Shoghi Effendi)[7]

It is nonetheless undeniable that Karlberg's argument holds huge temptation for someone from a religious background. To such an audience it seems to provide a quick, short, and easy answer to very difficult problems. We would all like to start from a position of knowing the essential truths of life rather than from one of searching for them. Without such a shortcut, one must accept that complex questions cannot be easily settled: What are the religious principles of the Bahá'í Faith? More importantly, how should these be defined? Should they be understood as normative foundational truths, as simple normative principles, or just as thematic areas for further investigation? If all apply, how and in what proportion? Or maybe we should just treat them as spiritual principles, without assigning them a precise character in the manner indicated above? How should ethics relate to such religious principles? What is the mode of relation we should have with spiritual principles? How should the practice of consultation relate to such spiritual principles, to ethics, and to the process of generating and applying knowledge? And, in even larger terms, how do I think of the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith in relation to my academic field, or in relation to a social issue, or to a field of practice and what kind of interpretative frameworks and conceptual models can I derive from them or in relation to them? And probably most importantly, how do I think of the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith in relation to the unique circumstances of my life?

Karlberg's position induces us into assuming these normative foundational truths are a 'given' and, to an important extent, also 'known.' He also seems to suggest that independent thinking is allowed for in consultation, but mostly at the level of implementation.

If more people accept these normative foundational truths through intuition as Karlberg suggests should be possible, we could say that agreement on key principles widens. Therefore, in the short-term, great gains seem to be made. However, does this not tend to happen at the loss of substance? And does it not tend to lead to the creation of a frozen, inert, and maybe even dogmatic culture over the long-term?

---

[7] Effendi, Shoghi. *Bahá'í Reference Library - Bahá'í Administration, Pages 63-64.* https://reference.bahai.org/en/t/se/BA/ba-55.html. Accessed 24 Mar. 2022.

It seems important here to highlight certain tendencies which might emerge from this conceptual approach that could inhibit rather than stimulate the pursuit of knowledge, moral and ethical formation, and processes of community-building.

1. The Pursuit of Knowledge

1.a. Potential Tendencies: The Crystallization of Dogma

It is interesting to note here that the 'consultative epistemology' and ontological foundationalism of Karlberg mirror similar and prior tendencies in Catholic conservative thought. One can observe, for example, the arguments of Catholic theologian R. R. Reno. Reno is the editor of the popular Conservative Christian journal "First Things." During Reno's stewardship, "First Things" has transitioned from a position combining ecumenical dialogue with neoconservatism towards more extreme versions of neoconservatism, laden sometimes with accents of Trumpism. Clearly a very important thinker on the Christian right, Reno believes the world is passing through "an ontological crisis, about whether there is really anything true, anything stable" and that we might be living "in a kind of Dark Ages where the churches actually carry the cultural memory of the west to the next generation."[8] There is a sense here that the Academia and our forms of public knowledge are dragging us into unreality and that "a crazy society where men can be women" is "a sign of our profound alienation from the real as a society."[9] In a 2006 review[10] of Thomas Guarino's *Foundations of Systematic Theology* (with the perspective of which it largely identifies), Reno associates the crisis of our age with "the weakening of the idea of truth" of Vattimo and with the "nonfoundationalism" of figures such as "Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard, Baudrillard and Rorty." From Heidegger to Hegel and Vico, this tradition of nonfoundationalism is then extended by Reno to continental philosophy as a whole. Not only do such figures "contribute to the dehumanizing nihilism of contemporary culture," Reno argues, but "**they also provide little**

---

[8] Mohler, Albert, and R. R. Reno. *Facing the Intersection of Culture, Politics, and Religion in the Secular Age: A Conversation with R. R. Reno, Editor of First Things*. 2021, https://albertmohler.com/2021/04/07/r-r-reno. Accessed 31 Mar. 2022.
[9] Idem.
[10] Reno, R. R. 'Theology's Continental Captivity | R. R. Reno'. *First Things*. 2006, https://www.firstthings.com/article/2006/04/theologys-continental-captivity. Accessed 31 Mar. 2022.

other than resistance to the work of any theology committed to the truth of doctrine."[11]
What is of interest to us here are three of the suggestions Reno makes for how a Catholic theology should respond to this ontological crisis of our age.

1) First, Reno argues that one should follow the example of W. V. Quine. Quine is presented as "nonfoundationalist in epistemology" but "an unrepentant foundationalist" when it comes to ontology. From this standpoint, even though we might not be able to philosophically verify or prove what we know we can still have confidence and certainty in our knowledge of the mind, the world, and truth. David Opderbeck[12] correctly interprets this viewpoint as suggesting that Catholic theology should orient itself towards combining a foundationalist ontology with a non-foundationalist epistemology. This, I would argue, is also the standpoint of Karlberg and of Karlberg and Smith.[13] The question, however, is how this union, or combination, is to be achieved; or more essentially, if such different ways of thinking can be reconciled. The next two points relate to this dilemma.

2) Reno advocates for a return to a period when the relationship between religion and philosophy was of a different kind, with religion setting out the key ontological truths and philosophy adopting a subordinate, scholastic role:

"The Church supplied the crucial doctrines about ultimate truth, as well as disciplines to cure the soul. In this context, philosophy took on a more modest role. It provided logical training and a conceptually precise vocabulary for Christian thought, expressed the perennial longing of the human heart for the infinite, and served as a clearinghouse for natural knowledge. This subordinate role is the essence of scholasticism."[14]

Here, Reno heavily advocates that Catholic theology turn away from continental philosophy and embrace analytical philosophy, inasmuch as the latter constitutes "the main form of contemporary philosophical scholasticism." This type of realignment, I would argue, is also

---

[11] Idem.
[12] Opderbeck, David. 'Foundationalist Ontology, Nonfoundationalist Epistemology'. *Through a Glass Darkly*, 24 Mar. 2006, http://davidopderbeck.com/tgdarkly/2006/03/23/foundationalist-ontology-nonfoundationalist-epistemology/.
[13] Todd Smith and Michael Karlberg. *Articulating a Consultative Epistemology*. 2009, https://bahai-library.com/smith_karlberg_consultative_epistemology. Accessed 15 Mar. 2022.
[14] Reno, R. R. 'Theology's Continental Captivity | R. R. Reno'. *First Things*. 2006, https://www.firstthings.com/article/2006/04/theologys-continental-captivity. Accessed 31 Mar. 2022.

present in the work of Karlberg and other advocates of strong foundationalism in the Bahá'í community. This is how Reno explains the reasons for such a choice:

"But I do think it crushingly obvious that in contemporary Western culture the English-speaking, analytic tradition in philosophy holds out the most promise as a suitable partner for theology in the crucial jobs of **strengthening the doctrinal backbone of theology** and restoring a culture of truth. Today, postmodern continental philosophy is dominated by rhetoric that urges us not to make the move toward something so threatening as truth. All is to be kept plastic and open so that we might play on the surfaces. In the terminology of Guarino and John Paul II, postmodern philosophy is more than nonfoundational: **It is antifoundational and antidogmatic at its core**. …

I do not doubt that there are many long, complex, and obscure arguments that must be made in order to shape analytic philosophy into a truly Christian project. **But the crucial point is not that analytic philosophy provides a useful array of doctrines and a handy set of principles for theology. What matters most is the underlying loyalty to truth that it encourages**. No analytic philosopher, however antagonistic toward Christianity, wrote anything that provided support for the way of thinking that informs my local UCC pastor and his call for '**religion without dogma**' indeed, for life without truth."[15]

In short, continental philosophy is antifoundational and therefore antidogmatic while analytic philosophy's commitment to foundationalism and to notions of objective truth can strengthen the doctrinal backbone of Catholic theology. The dogmas of the Catholic Church can thus be reinserted into society or at least kept alive through the subordinate role of analytic philosophy, but not through the branches of Continental philosophy (where postmodernist philosophy poses the most direct threat of nihilism).

3) The question that we must ask is how we would know for certain things about the world, the mind, and truth when philosophical or scientific reasoning cannot verify or prove such knowledge. And the answer that Guarino and Reno provide is the universe of Catholic dogma at the center of which stands the Nicene–Constantinopolitan Creed: "At minimum, affirming the Nicene Creed entails at least tacit commitments to truths both universal ('for us and for

---

[15] Idem.

our salvation') and particular ('crucified under Pontius Pilate')."[16] I will remind here the reader of the Nicene–Constantinopolitan Creed:

"I believe in One God,

the Father Almighty,

Maker of Heaven and Earth,

and of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ,

the Son of God,

the Only-Begotten, begotten of the Father before all ages;

Light of Light;

True God of True God;

begotten, not made;

of one essence with the Father,

by Whom all things were made;

Who for us men and for our salvation

came down from Heaven,

and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary,

and became man.

And He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate,

and suffered, and was buried.

And the third day He arose again,

according to the Scriptures,

and ascended into Heaven,

and sits at the right hand of the Father;

and He shall come again with glory to judge the living and the dead;

Whose Kingdom shall have no end.

And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life,

Who proceeds from the Father;

---

[16] Idem.

Who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified;

Who spoke by the prophets.

And in One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church.

I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins.
I look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come."[17]

As much as we might like its provisions and general line of thought, would we accept the provisions of the Nicene–Constantinopolitan Creed as ontological truth? More importantly, can we consider that such ontological truths have brought unity, agreement, and peace in the world since they have been promulgated at Nicene on 19 June 325 AD? Have such ontological truths made consultation and universal agreement possible? Would the Nicene–Constantinopolitan Creed be able to unite the world today as Christians on the Right hope, even if bolstered by analytical philosophy? Alternatively, could maybe someone extract from the New Testament its ontological truths in a new form and how? If yes, why has it not happened all this time?

The reason for this entire discussion surrounding the thinking of Reno is to make evident the following conclusion: the natural and perennial tendency of strong foundationalism is to select certain themes and assert them and their conceptual content as ontological truths, thus effectively producing dogma. This tendency is there because strong foundationalism believes ontological truths are available to us in clear form (they are transparent to us) and that their assertion (ideally, universal) and acceptance (ideally, also universal) is the solution to all the main issues of the day. Obviously, the point of such universal dogma would be the development of a universal society on its foundations.

How does this apply to our current Bahá'í topic? If the 'consultative epistemology' and 'ontological foundationalism' of Karlberg are variants of strong foundationalism, then their natural tendency will be to assign to the elements of the conceptual framework and their content the status of ontological truths. By adopting his 'consultative epistemology' and

---

[17] *The Creed of Nicea and Constantinople*. http://web.mit.edu/ocf/www/nicene_creed.html. Accessed 1 Apr. 2022.

'ontological foundationalism' we, therefore, potentially open the door to the crystallization of dogma within the structure of our Bahá'í conceptual framework.

Let it be mentioned here that Steven Phelps has recently argued[18] that the solution of the Bahá'í Writings to the diversity of human thought and opinion is not "the reduction to a single dogma."[19] (min.39) In his view "harmony is established not by Fiat and not by a universal acceptance of a single dogma," but rather, through kindness, tolerance, and dialogue from which a certain level of "consistency" emerges as "a basis for consensus and for collective action."[20] (mins.39-41)

1.b. Potential Tendencies: Limiting the Advancement of Knowledge

In a study from 1958, Thomas O'Dea[21] analyzes the reasons for the extremely unproductive record of the American Catholic institutions in almost all fields of study until that point. His analysis of the history of the Catholic Church points to the existence of "a certain permanent tension – a perennial strain – between the Christian faith and its demands, on the one hand, and the requirements of the intellectual life, on the other – or, to use more conventional terms, between faith and reason." (p.58) At the extremes, this tension might result in moments of true synthesis and harmony or in the exacerbation of conflict between science and religion, with each age responsible for which outcome ensues:

---

[18] This argument is based on the following passage from Bahá'u'lláh: "[S]ince all do not possess the same degree of spiritual understanding, certain statements will inevitably be made, and there shall arise, as a consequence, as many differing opinions as there are human minds and as many divergent beliefs as there are created things. This is certain and settled, and can in no wise be averted. . . . Our aim is that thou shouldst urge all the believers to show forth kindness and mercy and to overlook certain shortcomings among them, that differences may be dispelled; true harmony be established; and the censure and reproach, the hatred and dissension, seen among the peoples of former times may not arise anew." *From the Letter Bá' to the Letter Há'* in *"The Call of the Divine Beloved: Selected Mystical Works of Bahá'u'lláh."* Bahá'í World Center, 2018, pp.60-61)

[19] *Baha'is of Austin. Steven Phelps Fireside – 'What Is Real?' 2021. YouTube,* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ltTiMQiTzHY.

[20] Idem.

[21] O'Dea, Thomas. *American Catholic Dilemma. A Sociologist Challenges the Attitude of His Fellow Catholics toward the Intellectual in Today's Society.* Sheed & Ward, Inc., 1958.

"This tension may in certain situations be the source of great intellectual creativity, as in the case of St. Thomas, in whom it issued to the advantage of both faith and reason; or it may in other circumstances result in the kind of serious alienation seen in the Galileo case. It may deepen faith or it may frustrate creativity; it may also lead to heresy and unbelief." (pp.58-59)

This tension can be a profound source for creativity and deeper faith because it requires us to face the unknown. Developing the intellectual life of the community requires living with such ambivalence, but fear of ambivalence and the unknown leads to a defensive attitude which undermines intellectual life and reason in favour of an emphasis on faith and dogma:

"We must ask ourselves why some Catholics are afraid of the differences of opinion demanded by a genuine pluralism. Why is the unusual by that very token sometimes suspect? Is it not that there is a tendency to fear the very ambiguities which we have analyzed in the previous section? Is it not that conformity and uniformity are sought as a kind of insurance to create and maintain an illusion of universality which hides uncertainty? Is it that we are at times too eager for a comfortable, customary Catholicism? Is it that in fact our faith does not overcome the world? That we need sociological props – conformity and uniformity – to assure us on the natural level that God is in His heaven, and that in spite of the nasty modern situation all is really right with the world?

Does our Catholic education form us in the intellectual virtues, and does it make clear to our intelligent youth that the risk, and the consequent anxiety, involved in the intellectual life can be an important factor in human growth to natural and spiritual maturity?" (pp.44-45)

"What does Christian formation in the intellectual virtues mean?" O'Dea asks. "Certainly," he answers, "it involves an appreciation of the point made by A. N. Whitehead, 'The worship of God is not a rule of safety – it is an adventure of the spirit.'" (p.62) He then cites Father Walter Ong: "Maturity is not achieved until a person has the ability to face with some equanimity into the unknown." (p.44) This, however, is not the type of education that Catholic educational institutions have provided: "the attitude cultivated in the seminarian appears at times to be characterised to a high degree by a kind of passive receptivity; the impression is given that Christian learning is something 'finished,' and that education is a formation to be accepted from established authority with a minimum of individual initiative

and critical activity on the part of the student." (p.65) "Many Catholics," O'Dea adds, "tend to identify critical analysis of Catholic affairs with disloyalty." (p.25)

At the end, O'Dea highlights a key pedagogical issue:

"If we fail to engage our students in such a central intellectual quest as religion, how can they develop a genuinely open attitude toward other fields of knowledge? … If we make the most vital of subjects lacking in vitality, what are we doing to young minds?" (p.64)

O'Dea's analysis of the failures of American Catholic intellectual life deserves a lot of attention. What is important to us here, however, is his emphasis on the notion of maturity as involving acknowledgment a) of the unknown, b) of the ambivalence between faith and reason, and c) of living with the anxiety that ensues from that and from critical thought. This observation is of significance to us because it mirrors the words of Bahá'u'lláh:

"Consider the rational faculty with which God hath endowed the essence of man. … Having recognized thy powerlessness to attain to an adequate understanding of that Reality which abideth within thee, thou wilt readily admit the futility of such efforts as may be attempted by thee, or by any of the created things, to fathom the mystery of the Living God, the Day Star of unfading glory, the Ancient of everlasting days. This confession of helplessness which mature contemplation must eventually impel every mind to make is in itself the acme of human understanding, and marketh the culmination of man's development."[22]

What is the lesson here? Because of their emphasis on ontological truths as a given, the 'consultative epistemology' and ontological foundationalism of Karlberg contain a potential tendency to undermine the development of mature forms of intellectual life.

Several themes merit emphasis here as a way of zooming in on how the tendency to assign the status of ontological truth to aspects of knowledge can undermine the very process of understanding them.

---

[22] Bahá'u'lláh. *Bahá'í Reference Library - Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, Pages 164-166*. https://reference.bahai.org/en/t/b/GWB/gwb-83.html. Accessed 1 Apr. 2022.

The more religions assume they contain objective and foundational truths in transparent form, the more reluctant they are to open real channels of communications with philosophy, science, the academic disciplines, and other religions. When it is realized that even the key religious teachings themselves require much more sophisticated forms of interpretation and application, then interactions and contact with other forms of knowledge and practice begin to be rigorously pursued.

Processes of knowledge formation where key values have been specified in advance tend to exhibit bias in relation to those values. What is worse, this tends to happen in ways that block even the understanding of those initial values. This is so because static forms of knowledge demand and elicit passive acceptance or obedience and not careful analysis, investigation, and experimentation. The assertion of ontological truths usually comes with the implied prescription that they are not to be challenged, altered, questioned, or interfered with in any way. But questioning is a key part of the process of knowledge. Indoctrination, itself a complex process to define or identify, is a process of knowledge acquisition in which values are specified in advance, thus bypassing critical deliberation: "Indoctrination means infiltrating (drilling, inculcating etc.) concepts, attitudes, beliefs and theories into a student's mind by passing her free and critical deliberation." (Huttunen, p.1)[23] This problematic is most obvious in curriculum building, which is why it is considered good practice to design curricula in such a way as to allow for values to emerge as independent outcomes of the process of knowledge. It would seem to me of potential benefit to apply the same perspective to consultation.

Sometimes, religious scholarship involuntarily adopts a scheme of thought as if it had been assigned the status of ontological truth. Such has been the case, for example, with the definition of the human psyche or soul as consisting of three qualities: love, will, and knowledge. From at least the early 1990s to the present day, Bahá'í scholarship on psychology, human nature and pedagogy has not advanced beyond this standpoint. Some of the greatest minds in the Bahá'í Faith have ardently debated with each other about which one comes first: love, will, or knowledge? Today, we are in deep need of more complex conceptual models of the human psyche, human nature, and moral development. Such models

---

[23] Huttunen, Rauno. 'Habermas and the Problem of Indoctrination'. *Encyclopedia of Educational Philosophy and Theory*, edited by Michael A. Peters, Springer Singapore, 2016, pp. 1–11, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-287-532-7_325-1.

are essential if a Bahá'í inspired epistemology and pedagogy are to be derived from notions of human nature. Because of taking this tripartite definition of human nature as somehow foundational, other alternative formulations in the Bahá'í Writings have not been explored. An alternative route, for example, would have been the notion that each human soul is a particular combination of the Names and Attributes of God, in which one Name shines the brightest:

"Know thou, O lover of the All-Glorious Beauty, that differences between the statements of the saints is on account of differences in the effulgences of the Names of the Absolute and variations in Their places of manifestation. For in the being of every one of the mirrors of the Attributes of the Absolute and in the reality of each locus of the manifestation of Absolute Self-Sufficiency, one of the Names of the Absolute is King over the rest of the Names. … But humanity is the dawning of light, which is to say that it is the beginning of the Day of Oneness and Guidance and the end of the night of plurality and loss. It is the mirror with the disposition to reflect all of the conflicting and opposing Names and is the source of the revelation of all of the Attributes of Divinity and Lordship. For the world of humanity is the world of the perfection of the words. Thus it is that it has been said: 'God created Adam in His image' [48a]; that is to say in the form of His Names and Attributes. However although he is the dawning-place of the manifestation of all the Names and Attributes, one of the Divine Names is manifested most strongly and appears most intensely [in each person]. Thus his being originates from this Name and returns to it."[24]

One of the most important spiritual principles in Western theological thought and in the Bahá'í Faith is the oneness of God. Steven Phelps has, nonetheless, cast a very interesting light on this concept and others like it:

"and various of Bahá'u'lláh's statements and those of 'Abdu'l-Bahá as well I think suggest that even these kinds of, what we might take to be the rock bottom fundamentals that we should all agree on, you know, 'oneness of God,' even that is conditioned by culture, is conditioned by time and space. 'Abdu'l-Bahá himself in 'Some Answered Questions'[25] says

---

[24] 'Abdu'l-Bahá. *Commentary on the Islamic Tradition 'I Was a Hidden Treasure...'* https://bahai-library.com/abdul-baha_kuntu_kanzan_makhfiyyan. Accessed 1 Apr. 2022.
[25] The statement in question is "The reality of the Divinity is sanctified above singleness, then how much more above plurality." 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and Laura Clifford Barney. Some Answered Questions. Newly revised, Bahá'í World Centre, 2014, 'The Trinity,' p.127.

the reality of God is sanctified beyond singleness, then how much more beyond plurality. And it's statements like that which I think can be highlighted as signaling a kind of theological posture which takes it outside of the orbit of, certainly of Shia Islam and outside of the orbit of Western theological thinking. And through this idea of the relativity of religious truth and the relative validity of radically different perspectives on the Divine it offers I think a kind of sandbox[26], a kind of theological sandbox within which all the traditions on the planet can come together."[27] (mins.57-59)

While there can be no doubt that the oneness of God is a key spiritual principle, can we ascribe to it the status of ontological foundational truth? What happens if we do and that is not the case? What are the implications?

Let us now consider a key element of the current Bahá'í conceptual framework: the principle of the harmony of science and religion. In the last few decades, as part of the conceptual framework, the principle of the harmony of science and religion has been interpreted on dualistic lines as the principle of the compatibility of science and religion. However, Steven Phelps is only the latest in a tradition of Bahá'í scholarship to also emphasize the validity of non-dualistic approaches with different levels of relatedness, from closeness to integration:

"While the consequences of the rich metaphors of 'mind', 'emanation', and related ideas for the conception of the essential unity of science and religion, as cast through the lens of the Bahá'í teachings, are far-reaching, the Bahá'í Writings nowhere propose that differing conceptions of the divine and its relationship with the world can somehow be reduced to a single correct dogmatic formulation. They rather acknowledge that diversity of viewpoint, even in matters of ultimate theological import, is a feature of the human condition, for religious truth is relative— in time, between one era of human civilization and the next, but also between different people at the same point in time:
'[S]ince all do not possess the same degree of spiritual understanding, certain statements will inevitably be made, and there shall arise, as a consequence, as many differing opinions as there are human minds and as many divergent beliefs as there are created things. This is

[26] The terms sandbox also refers to "a testing environment in a computer system in which new or untested software or coding can be run securely." Oxford Languages Dictionary.
[27] *Baha'is of Austin. Steven Phelps Fireside – 'What Is Real?' 2021. YouTube,*
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ltTiMQiTzHY.

certain and settled, and can in no wise be averted. … Our aim is that thou shouldst urge all the believers to show forth kindness and mercy and to overlook certain shortcomings among them, that differences may be dispelled; true harmony be established; and the censure and reproach, the hatred and dissension, seen among the peoples of former times may not arise anew.' (Bahá'u'lláh, Call 3.6–7)

Therefore, a diversity of views about science and religion can be expected to persist into the future, from those who, informed by metaphysical dualism, present science and religion as essentially separate domains of knowledge to those who pursue more non-dualistic themes that stress the unity that lies behind the world of ever-changing appearances. These views are able to coexist within the community through a shared conviction that a greater harmony underlies its differences, through mutual love and respect, and through a consultative framework that ensures that action is taken in unity even when differences persist."[28]

This illustrates another significant issue with Karlberg's 'consultative epistemology.' If a normative foundational truth (let's take the notion as a given) can be legitimately expressed through several diverse viewpoints, such as in the case of the principle of the harmony of science and religion (and I would argue that more than two views are possible and legitimate), how would then the notion of a normative foundational truth guarantee consensus between such differing perspectives? For a minimum degree of consensus to even be established, the notion of a spiritual principle would have to be reconstituted as an interpretative grid with multiple perspectives that cannot be reconciled in any other way but by placing them alongside each other. However, such a redefinition could not be ascribed the status of normative foundational truth in a manner reflective of ontological foundationalism. For the character of normative foundational truth to still be assigned, it would have to be assigned as an unknown and hidden aspect approximated by different perspectives (otherwise one perspective would have to be considered the most advanced, or certain and objective). Even if such a revised notion of normative foundational truths could be employed to contribute to the development of consensus between different viewpoints in a consultation, this would not proceed according to the stipulations of ontological foundationalism or Karlberg's notion of a 'consultative epistemology.'

---

[28] Phelps, Steven. 'The Harmony of Science and Religion' Stockman, Robert H., editor. *The World of the Bahá'í Faith*, Routledge, 2022, pp.215-216.

The important lesson to acknowledge here is that such complexities befall each spiritual principle of the Bahá'í Faith and in different ways. This is the reason why theoretical and methodological approaches reflecting a strong foundationalism tend to severely narrow down the intellectual space for engagement with the spiritual principles of the Bahá'í Faith. In which direction the conceptual framework will evolve from here in relation to the principle of the harmony of science and religion, and through what processes, it remains to be seen.

2. Moral and Ethical Formation

The Bahá'í principle of the independent investigation of truth suggests that "we are each individually responsible for seeking out the Real."[29] (Phelps, min.37) This would imply that the nature of truth and the identification of ontological truths are issues open to examination for each and all. Phelps interprets this principle as follows:

"We cannot and must not simply take on faith what other people tell us, through whatever position of authority they tell us. This is central to the Bahá'í teachings, it enables the seeker after reality to break free of the restricted dogma of the past." (min.37)

That Bahá'u'lláh links the concept of justice to this notion that each of us is individually responsible for seeking out the Real suggests that this principle operates not only at the individual, but also at the collective level:

"The essence of all that We have revealed for thee is Justice, is for man to free himself from idle fancy and imitation, discern with the eye of oneness His glorious handiwork, and look into all things with a searching eye."[30]

Thus, justice manifests itself not only at the individual level, when an individual thinks for himself, but also, at the collective level, when each and every individual forming that collective is allowed to see reality through their own eyes. Such an interpretation has

---

[29] *Baha'is of Austin. Steven Phelps Fireside – 'What Is Real?' 2021. YouTube,*
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ltTiMQiTzHY.
[30] Bahá'u'lláh. *Bahá'í Reference Library – Words of Wisdom. Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed After the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, Pages 155-157.* https://reference.bahai.org/en/t/b/TB/tb-11.html. Accessed 1 Apr. 2022.

significant implications for how consultative and educational processes should be set up. To suggest that consultation should start with the acceptance of certain normative foundational truths or ontological truths seems therefore incompatible with both the principle of the independent investigation of truth and the notion of justice. A just consultation is one in which each and every individual is free to think for himself, in which each can individually seek out the Real and deliberate independently on ontological matters. Randy T.'s take on how the concept of unity in diversity should inform our consultation processes is of note here:

"It's one thing to have lofty theories, but they're worth nothing till the rubber hits the road, and that's where institutions and individuals are shaped. … It's not arid and empty talk and concepts, it's the daily reality of self-management, group dynamics and institutional forms that validate rather than stifle variety, it's polycentrism on steroids, hyped up and singing as loud and happily as possible in every musical style on the planet, it's a riotous blend of every flower that can possibly be thriving in every corner of the garden of humanity, and it's every opinion and character finding its place in the mixing bowl of consultation and collaborative decision-making." (Randy T, cited in Van den Hoonard, 2005, p.252)

Neglecting such key aspects erodes the very development of moral thought and moral character which, above all else, implies the independent development of normative discernment, meaning, of the capacity to identify normative principles and decide how to relate to them. However, this is not the only problem.

Karlberg's argument holds huge temptation for someone from a religious background because it is convenient to assume we have found a clear and easy way to relate to religious principles. Through the notion of normative foundational truths an ethical regime of utmost simplicity becomes available: to be ethical we just need to insert these given ontological truths at the beginning of consultation or at the start of any other knowledge-based activity. The mechanism is faith. If you have accepted these normative ontological truths, then you are ethical. To solve the problems of the world we simply need to promote these normative foundational truths until they have become generally accepted. Such an orientation assumes that moral development and social change are processes triggered by the acceptance of certain normative foundational truths as a given. Once triggered, it is further assumed, such processes will automatically unfold to their completion. The key aspect of the Bahá'í

approach to moral transformation and social change, therefore, becomes the promotion, recognition, and acceptance of Bahá'í ontological truths.

This is extremely unhelpful in many ways. First, it leads to the false assessment that we as individuals are ethical enough. We also take it for granted that our communities are deeply ethical which blocks potential scrutiny and self-reflexivity at individual, institutional, and community levels. Our confidence is in our principles and their divine status, rather than in the horizon of their meaning and the sphere of their application, meaning, our ethics. In effect, we pay scant attention to the deeper meanings of the principles we invoke (particularly when ambiguity, unknowns, questioning, or a diversity of perspectives enter the picture) and stop being concerned with doing ethical work on ourselves. We fail to develop the capacity for normative discernment, and we also fail to develop dynamic forms of ethical living. Consequently, when moral issues permeate the Bahá'í community we assume they have come from the outside world. The problem, however, is internal. It concerns our mode of relation to ethical principles, our moral education. One that has been framed through the internalization and retention of 'given' ontological truths and of their abstract but simplified definitions akin to a list of instructions in a training manual (similar with the banking model of education, a notion partly rehabilitated by Sona Farid-Arbab[31]). This approach leads to imposition and aims at imitation; namely, for such 'truths' and their provisions to be taken for granted and copied at the level of consciousness because of their ontological status.

There is an assumption here that acceptance of normative foundational truths at the level of consciousness will translate effectively into patterns of ethical behaviour. Some examples of ideal behaviour are provided but concrete and deep analyses of how such morality would look in action, particularly when facing complexity, ambiguity, diversity of perspectives and the unknown, are largely missing. All in all, such an approach fails "to communicate religious knowledge in such a way that it becomes part of the student's very being."[32] (p.64) It constitutes a static rather than dynamic approach to knowledge which fails to trigger those essential processes of personal transformation necessary for the formation of moral character. In addition, engaging other moral traditions does not happen because we believe all that is needed, at least in this initial phase, is the universal recognition of our ontological truths as

---

[31] Farid-Arbab, Sona. *Moral Empowerment: In Quest of a Pedagogy*. Bahá'í Publishing, 2016, pp.277-287.
[32] O'Dea, Thomas. *American Catholic Dilemma. A Sociologist Challenges the Attitude of His Fellow Catholics toward the Intellectual in Today's Society*. Sheed & Ward, Inc., 1958.

we currently understand them. With the introduction of normative foundational truths in the manner of ontological foundationalism what is being lost, therefore, is the dynamic mode of relation to virtues.

The overall approach described above is also problematic for two other reasons. Besides manifesting a 'proclivity to totalize' such an approach is potentially dangerous for a religion because it exposes its believers to a huge gap between moral rhetoric and actual ethical thought and practice. If you are heavily promoting key moral principles in the wider society the expectation is that such moral principles will be strongly reflected in your patterns of individual and community life.

The other issue is that the cultural strategy of promoting one's normative foundational truths at global scale and in all areas of life could be read as a Gramscian strategy: the strategy of extending 'counter-hegemony' to challenge capitalist or autocratic power and the ruling-elites. Gramsci viewed the extension of 'counter-hegemony' in very conflictual terms, as a 'war of position' to be later followed by a 'war of manouevre' (the revolutionary capture of political power and of the state). Clearly the Bahá'í methodology of social change has nothing in common with 'the war of manouevre,' and seems largely incompatible with the Gramscian notion of 'counter-hegemony.' The imposition of values, cultural perspectives, ideologies, or worldviews, is to my mind completely incompatible with the Bahá'í methodology for social change. Bahá'í approaches to social change must be based on a politics of friendship to all, not on one of distinction between friends and enemies.[33] They must be based on the principle of the independent investigation of truth and not on the spread of ideology or dogma. This seems to me incompatible with the Gramscian notion of 'counter-hegemony', which is a form of war by cultural means. Nonetheless, Gramsci is one of the key sources of FUNDAEC from the 1970s to the early 2000s, an aspect that has been widely neglected in Bahá'í scholarship. Whether or not Gramsci's thought connects, and how, with current approaches to social change that emphasize the promotion of normative foundational truths, such as ontological foundationalism, is a topic that deserves examination. To state this is not to undermine the importance of Gramsci and his theories.

---

[33] Abizadeh, Arash. 'Review: Politics beyond War: Ulrich Gollmer's Contribution to Bahá'í Political Thought'. *Arash*, 20 Dec. 2004, https://abizadeh.wixsite.com/arash/post-1/2004/12/20/review-politics-beyond-war-ulrich-gollmers-contribution-to-bahai-political-thought.

In conclusion, the more widely we promote our normative foundational truths in this unreflective manner, the more liable we seem to become to legitimate outside criticism. The promotion of normative foundational truths described above, however, constitutes an intrinsic aspect of ontological foundationalism and of any type of strong foundationalism. This is so because in such a perspective the direct assertion of ontological truths is seen as the solution to any given problem. We must, therefore, be acutely concerned with how strong foundationalism impacts our regimes of ethics and our ethical conduct. My observations so far indicate that the more we assign priority to the promotion of religious principles as normative foundational truths (or ontological truths) the more the intellectual investigation of such truths and the formation of dynamic forms of ethical living (or regimes of ethics) in relation to them are being impaired. This is not to say that we should not engage the normative dimensions of religious principles (on the contrary, this remains essential), but simply to suggest that treating them as normative ontological truths from a perspective of strong foundationalism might be self-defeating. Other more dynamic and democratic ways to engage the normative dimensions of religious teachings, from foundational ones ('modest foundationalism' and 'weak foundationalism'[34] are general options but many more specific options can be imagined) to nonfoundational, or even anti-foundational ones, can and should be explored.

---

[34] Poston, Ted. Foundationalism | Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. https://iep.utm.edu/found-ep/ . Accessed 11 Mar. 2022.