"The Knowledge Game" and the Bahá'í Faith – Ten Perspectives from Bahá'í Scholarship

Mar-2026 **by Filip Boicu**

In the 21st century, the development of religion cannot avoid engagement with a fundamental dual question: What does the Revelation have to contribute to the modern system of knowledge, its main branches of knowledge, and its academic disciplines and, vice versa, to what extent does the understanding of the Revelation depend on the modern system of knowledge? Such a problematique constitutes an essential part of what I prefer to refer to as "the knowledge game" of religion. In our case, this knowledge game spans the positionings assumed by the Bahá'í Faith in the field of knowledge and the processes and intellectual contributions resulting therefrom. Some might even argue that several games of religion could be conceptualized as interacting in a broader dynamic or in isolation from one another: a game of knowledge, a game of social change, a game of growth, a game of ethics etc. (see "Games of Religion and the Game of Knowledge").

One way to conceptualize the knowledge game of the Bahá'í Faith, I would suggest, is to weigh current perspectives in light of a particular philosophical query[1]: Is religion a system of propositional truths or of factual knowledge of the world on the model of the sciences? This is a broad question that attempts to capture modern knowledge both in philosophical and scientific form, but which does not always constitute a sharp enough investigative tool. For example, its phrasing might leave out forms of modern academic knowledge that are neither scientific nor based on propositional truths, supposing such forms exist. Even so, while this question should not be rigidly employed to judge current views, it remains useful because it

[1] Although it lies beyond the scope of this article to examine how each perspective might imply a distinct model of scholarship, this consideration should remain in the reader's mind.

quickly highlights a broader epistemological issue. While this problematique might not be perfectly named or defined its domain clearly spans a nexus of concerns from 'What is the contribution of religion to knowledge?', 'To what extent is religion based on knowledge and reason and to what extent on something else?', 'To what extent does religion rely on current modern knowledge or is knowledge-based'?, 'What kind of knowledge is religion?' to the query at hand, about whether or not religion is a system of knowledge in the manner in which we understand modern knowledge to be, and to even more specific subsets of that question such as 'Is the knowledge of religion specifically mystical knowledge about God ('irfán) or is it knowledge about all things, including in the general sense of the sciences ('ulúm)?', 'Is the truth of religion the same as the truth of modern academic disciplines?', 'Is the method of truth of religion the same as the scientific method of modern academic disciplines?' or 'Is the Neoplatonism of the Bahá'í Faith compatible with modern academic knowledge and if yes, under what conditions?' and so on.

Few clarifications should be added here. My intent is not to provide a systematic study of Baha'i perspectives on knowledge but just to make the case that such studies are needed. Likewise, the focus is not on evaluating specific authors (all of whom I respect, appreciate and critique in ways not necessarily expressed here) or classifying them (since, as we know, their views evolve), but on capturing particular perspectives[2] tied to their intellectual contributions at a given time. The authors considered here, and this partly explains their selection, have shown a sustained commitment to the topic and have demonstrated cultural force in shaping discourses in the Bahá'í community during my lifetime. Nevertheless, the list is subjective and had I had more time, I would have included many other names, even

[2] Two further perspectives have appeared recently that I was unable to include in this article: Joshua Hall's philosophical rationalism, rooted in Avicenna and Neoplatonism (see "Bahá'í Philosophy: Its Rational Basis"), and Steven Phelps's cosmological-philosophical approach (see "Games of Religion and the Games of Knowledge"), which may share some affinities with panpsychism.

within just a subdiscipline of the Humanities such as that of philosophy/theology (for example, Todd Lawson, Joshua Hall and Steven Phelps). Clearly, should there be interest others could develop wider and more serious philosophical investigations and systematic studies in relation to the views of scientists, social scientists and members of institutions of the Bahá'í Administrative Order. I am only mentioning this to highlight the limited scope of the current exercise, which has no such ambitions and does not take diversity into account very well.

Essentially, this contribution should not be taken as a systematic sociological study (rather, it is a humanities essay intended to generate interest in the topic) nor as an attempt to organize existing perspectives into a unified, coherent system of truth or discourse, which I believe is impossible given that these positions are not fully reducible to one another, each also being quite imperfect and incomplete. Rather, this exercise simply aims to highlight a diversity of perspectives that have surfaced on this topic in different pieces of Bahá'í scholarship and which I would argue, have never been considered together. What do we do from here about this diversity of views remains an open question requiring decisions with long-term advantages and disadvantages, each always at a cost. In that sense, we might have to learn to give up assumed ideas and ideals of perfection and embrace the facing of dilemmas and of dialogue.

In general, I have organized this essay[3] in two parts: the first examines perspectives that appear to answer the central question in the negative, and the second considers those that

[3] I must thank the organizers of the Shaykhi and Babi-Bahá'í Studies Oxford Seminar, University of Oxford, 2-3 May 2025 for allowing me to present a draft of these ten perspectives and for a most wonderful conference. A draft was also for a while under review at The Journal of Bahá'í Studies and has benefitted from a number of important suggestions, some structural and which I have incorporated in the introduction and the conclusion. That feedback has also led to a considerable improvement of the section on Perspective 7. I am grateful to the editor and the reviewers for all of these points, while taking full responsibility for not undertaking additional time-consuming revisions, for any subsequent additions since, and for not continuing with the review process - though I would otherwise recommend doing so to anyone.

seem to answer it in the positive. This arrangement only works to some extent, as some perspectives are harder to map and the nuance of intellectual argumentation may require more fine tuning than the question can provide. Alternatively, some of the perspectives discussed might find arguments for each side of the equation, given certain conditions - the question then reverting to where the balance precisely falls. It is these areas, I would argue, that should be of utmost interest. Nevertheless, I find this organization useful - even if it might generate quite some debate. Similarly, the ten perspectives under review may be understood as lying along a continuum extending from a minimalist pole to a maximalist pole. However, while the poles are clearly identifiable in my view, the order on the continuum is quite debatable depending on which one of the ten perspectives (or others) one favours. For this reason, I principally retain the distinction between minimalist and maximalist poles but not so much that of a continuum – unless this is simply understood as an arrangement meant to aid reading and which is based on my current preferences.

As I have previously suggested, one way to conceptualize the knowledge game of the Bahá'í Faith is to start weighing current perspectives in light of a particular philosophical question: Is religion a system of propositional truths or of factual knowledge of the world on the model of the sciences?

Part I

One possible response to such a question would be to follow Terry Eagleton and say 'no, it isn't': ''[B]elieving that religion is a botched attempt to explain the world . . . is like seeing ballet as a botched attempt to run for a bus" (Eagleton, qtd. in Knisely). I am not sure any Bahá'í scholar has openly gone with this option, but such a direction of thought would be

useful to explore. For example, one might think of religion not as a form of knowledge directly communicating to or impacting the system of modern science, but rather, as a form of culture. From such a perspective, religions would interact with the academic disciplines only indirectly, in the same manner cultural contexts interact with the sciences by shaping certain general metaphysical orientations which, in turn, may subconsciously prefigure or not certain research questions. There would be, therefore, no expectation that religion should intervene in or attempt to shape the operations of the modern system of knowledge, that is, the academic disciplines. While such a position has not been fully developed yet, I believe several tendencies can be generally distinguished in Bahá'í scholarship that approximate a partial rejection of the notion of religion as a system of knowledge on the model of the sciences.

Perspective 1 (associated here with an article by Frank Lewis)

Frank Lewis comes somewhat close to this position when he argues the following at the end of his journal article "'First we speak of logical proofs': Discourse of knowledge in the Bahá'í writings":

> Where a distinctively Bahá'í methodology might emerge, it seems to me, is in the ethical application of knowledge and the creation of equitable access to knowledge and the benefits which ensue from it. This is properly a moral question about the means and ends of acquiring knowledge, and the values which drive a society's acquisition of knowledge, rather than a question about the modes or kinds of knowing. It is here, perhaps, where Bahá'ís have the most original contribution to make to the discourse of academic knowledge - in the ethics of what we do with what we can know, and how we consultatively adjudicate conflicting truth claims.

Lewis argues that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá “often appears to give precedence to logical proofs and scientific method over traditional religious modes or explanations of reality, particularly in questions of fact and information, though not necessarily where ethics and morality are concerned.” He also points out that “‘Abdu’l-Bahá several times repeated in almost identical words this idea that religion must conform to science, not the other way around.” This leads him to conclude that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá would “seem to assert the validity of western academic, or materialist, methodologies” and that there cannot be a distinct Bahá’í scientific methodology.[4]

Perspective 2 (associated here with an article by Bahiyyih Nakhjavani)

The second perspective is a rare but important one. It emphasizes that religion is as much, if not more, about rhetorical truth (in a metaphoric and symbolic sense), fiction, and imagination than about a system of factual knowledge, facts, and objective truths. I am thinking here in particular of Bahiyyih Nakhjavani’s article “Fact and Fiction”. I also imagine her potentially advocating for a mode of reasoning akin to American pragmatism in arbitrating between fact and fiction, and for a model of scholarship characteristic of the Humanities (possibly on the lines of Maxine Greene and of the concept of ‘moral imagination’). In “Fact and Fiction”, Nakhjavani boldly outines this line of thinking as follows:

[4] From what I have been told, and this likely applies to all the contributions mentioned in this essay, such arguments always appear in particular historical and intellectual contexts relating to the production of knowledge in the Bahá’í community. Unfortunately, this essay largely sets aside the historical dimension, even while recognizing it as essential. This matters because historical context often shapes how an author’s work is perceived: a text from the 1990s, for instance, may be received more or less favorably today than it was at the time, depending on our current ideological climate. The same work may even be praised for advancing a particular context in its own moment, while also being viewed more critically for its effects and uses today, or vice versa.

a) "indeed sometimes what we call 'fictions' come closer to the truth than an assemblage of … so-called facts" – and there can be "'fictions' which speak of reality and 'facts' which can distort it" (4),

b) that religions spin the most powerful fictions and that fictions are amongst the most potent ways to change social-economic and political reality and, basically, to assert social power, and economic and social control ("Let us not forget that a convincing fiction has the power to make us act, which is politically and economically dangerous, as well as spiritually transforming") (14-15),

c) that the use of fictions to "control human behavior" implies great risk and constitutes "a grave responsibility" (10),

d) that "half-known facts have the power of conveying the most convincing fictions" because "implying the sum by not telling all the parts has always been the subtlest way to capture an audience because it involves self-deception" (18),

e) that religions have at their core the most powerful and convincing fictions because these fictions are based on no facts at all:

> **If the most convincing fictions are constructed on only partially known facts, are the Best Fictions based on no facts at all?** … The drama of the Manifestation of God is therefore the necessary Fiction played out in each succeeding age, and this Divine Fiction is the most convincing form of power we have ever experienced. Its proof lies in the way it has transformed not only human behavior but the human heart. **Indeed, one of the most ironic principles implicit in Divine Fiction is that this is the standard against which we measure all the so-called facts of our lives. Without it we could never carry forward the ever-advancing, endlessly interesting, infinitely various story of civilization**" **[my emphasis]** (22-23),

f) that the lines between "traditional biography" and "pure fiction" and "history" and "story" are very much blurred (17); that we are, in fact, constantly mixing fact with fiction at every moment in our lives, and

g) that this tension between fact and fiction, objective truth and fiction, history and story, religion and imagination, what is real and what is false, must be engaged with through the cultivation of discernment, wisdom, and refinement both at the individual/personal level, and crucially, in terms of the collective decision-making of ruling elites in society (be they religious or secular):

"At any given moment, in any given argument, everything depends on moderation, on refinement, on wisdom in being able to distinguish between fact and fiction; everything depends on our response to their shifting emphasis and their long-term implications …" (21-22)

Perspective 3 (associated here with an article by Julio Savi)

The third perspective is not concerned with discursive or conceptual knowledge per se, but rather, with insight/illumination or intuitive knowledge. This is reminiscent of a Bahá'í tradition of thought that links back to the Persian Sufi School of Illuminationism (Suhrawardi and Mulla Sadra). I associate this model of scholarship with the pursuit of a "divine philosophy" which inclines both towards a dogmatic theology [i.e., which "refers to a set of beliefs officially affirmed by a church body" (Dogmatic Theology, par. 1)] and a mystical theology, and which attempts to:

a) on the one hand, depart from a notion of theology as a philosophical system mostly elaborated by human minds (i.e., not divinely inspired) by emphasizing the existence of a

divine theology in the Bahá'í Writings, which Bahá'ís only need to systematize for Bahá'í theology to be in their hands (Savi 68). This divine theology, revelation theology, or "divine philosophy" would emerge as a "publicly expressed theology" directly and indirectly guided by the Universal House of Justice, with "the subjective, relative, and non-binding elucidation of Bahá'í teachings by competent scholars" and different schools of thought contributing a body of personal opinions referred to as "derivative theology" (69).

b) on the other hand, distance the notion of theology from a philosophical system of abstract principles and redefine it as a realm of experiential and mystical knowledge emphasizing faith, inner knowledge, spiritual progress, and the capacity to love. This divine theology would at the same time constitute a systematized body of theological statements from the Bahá'í Writings and a body of experiential or mystical knowledge, with the Bahá'í Administration having an oversight role in developing such a system of knowledge that could never crystallize into an "impractical or rigid ideology" or "a set of rigidly and dogmatically adopted criteria, customs or procedures" (58). It is not clear from this account how such a 'publicly expressed theology' would communicate with the domains of science and philosophy.

Perspective 4 (associated here with some of the writings of Udo Schaefer)

The fourth perspective is a much more influential one in kind. This view asserts the primacy of divine revelation, or of theology [understood as commitment to "the truth of revelation and to the authority of the scripture" (Schaefer, "Bahá'í Apologetics?" par. 10)] over and above reason and individual autonomy, while retaining a scientific methodology and scientific reasoning as supporting mechanisms on issues not theological. From this perspective, "the

Holy, the Divine is in its very essence beyond the rational and its categories of thought" (Schaefer, "Aspects of Bahá'í Ethics" 3) and Revelation an act of arbitrary Divine Will that must be accepted with absolute obedience, without a grounding in rational justification[5]:

> Thus, the moral order is not, as Plato saw it, anchored in a preceding idea of good and evil, in eternal truths that can be identified by reason, nor in a rational concept of man, defining for all eternity the idea of the good, nor in a rationally recognizable 'nature of things' but rather in the decisions of God's arbitrary will. God alone is *anarchos*, absolutely free: not submitted to any law or principle. Therefore He can never be unjust. He is 'the Lord of all things and is the vassal of none' (Bahá'u'lláh, Prayers and Meditations 4:1). His Will has no reason to will as He wills, other than that He wills it so. His sovereign, unfathomable free will is the foundation of all moral obligations. There is no criterion of moral rectitude independent of His will. (9)

According to this line of reasoning, "theology, the *scientia fidei*, is a closed system, based on revelation, which is beyond the reach of scientific discourse" (Schaefer, "Bahá'í Apologetics?", par. 10) and all forms of Bahá'í scholarship should, therefore, be primarily theological in outlook and methodology while admitting of the scientific method in non-theological matters.[6]

[5] "The highest criterion in moral judgment is recourse to God's arbitrary will" (Schaefer, "Aspects of Bahá'í Ethics" 8).

[6] "The central purpose of Bahá'í studies should be the analysis of the holy texts; the analytical and systematic development of, and the philosophical reflection on, the doctrines and principles enshrined in the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh; the clarification of the fundamentals of the Faith, the correlation of Bahá'í teachings with aspects of philosophy and science and of social and political issues, and, last but not least, the development of Bahá'í apologetics, which has to demonstrate the credibility and plausibility of the revealed truth, to defend the Faith against the assaults of those 'who sow seeds of doubt in the hearts of the believers', and to respond to defamatory accusations, levelled against the Faith. In other words: the fundamental purpose of Bahá'í studies is the development of a comprehensive Bahá'í theology" (Schaefer, "Footnotes to Bahá'í Studies" 18).

These claims of exclusivity and primacy of revealed truth over reason extend further to the domains of ethics (moral theology) and law. Neither science nor reason, but only the domain of religion can provide that "absolute framework [or system/hierarchy in Schaefer (*The Imperishable Dominion* 79-81)] of ultimate values" (Schaefer, "Aspects of Bahá'í Ethics" 13) anchored in God's sovereign will without which no society can be stable. If "the norms set by divine legislation are absolute, independent from all empiricism, authoritative, categorical, apodictic, and not in need of rational justification" (9), it follows then that "a concrete religious law with its binding rules, injunctions, prohibitions, and ordinances, with its demand for absolute obedience" becomes "the standard of all morals" - no matter how difficult that would be for Western thought after the Enlightenment to accept (14). It should be mentioned here that in *Dimensions of Bahá'í Law* (198) and, specifically, in the chapter entitled "Imagining Bahá'í Law", Roshan Danesh challenges this "rule-oriented, formal, and positivistic" conception of Bahá'í Law.

Inasmuch as Schaefer ("Infallible Institutions?") advocates for a restrictive interpretation of infallibility regarding the Universal House of Justice (mainly restricted to acts of legislation) while simultaneously ascertaining a maximal definition of its authority, this position seems to place more of the burden of outlining a Bahá'í theology on the shoulders of theologians.

Perspective 5 (associated here with some of the earlier writings of Jack McLean)

The fifth perspective proposes a form of theology between two seemingly contradictory positions. On the one hand, this theology asserts that "faith-driven and scientific approaches" (McLean, "Method" par. 3) and the poles of Absolute and relative knowledge (McLean, "Prolegomena") can be seen as complementary (although in a dialectical manner). On the other hand, this same theology argues that the academic study of a religion must proceed

from within that particular religious tradition based on the primacy of its irreducible authoritative, objective and normative truths (doctrines) and of its forms of mystical knowledge and experience over forms of reason.[7]

As with Schaefer, McLean sees Bahá'í studies as a form of Bahá'í theology in that the methodology of the study of religion must be religious (as opposed to discipline based or scientific). This must be the case because "the knowledge of God always occurs within a particular religious experience" (McLean, "The Knowledge of God" 38). McLean ("Prolegomena", Note 22) invokes here the perspective of Wilfred Cantwell Smith that "there cannot be any valid theology of another religion by an observer, no matter how generous he or she may be", that "only the participant can theologize" and that "it is not valid for one to objectify another's faith". It follows then, that if one is to study a religion, he should will himself to believe in it as a way to partake of its forms of religious experience, presumably by also attempting to "seek verification of its belief in ultimate reality through direct, nondiscursive, spiritual experience" ("The Knowledge of God" 51).

The study of a religion should also never exclude "a belief in the authority of prophethood or divine revelation" ("Method" par. 6) characteristic of that religion, which again would seem to require every religion to have its own 'faith-driven' research methodology. In addition, McLean also centres Bahá'í studies in a Bahá'í theology because philosophy takes "reason as its ground rather than God and revelation" ("Prolegomena", 'Bahá'í Theology' par. 7) and because, in his view, intuitive knowledge, the knowledge of the heart, mystical knowledge,

[7] In fact, Buck's ("Phenomenon", para. 2) definition of this type of theology as "a normative metaphysical approach from within a particular worldview" seems justified.

and faith – all considered different forms of religious knowledge – have primacy though not exclusivity over reason and acquired knowledge:

> To use acquired forms of knowledge in pursuit of the knowledge of God would result in a confusion of method and object, rather like using a road map to navigate upon an uncharted sea. Bahá'u'lláh, however, is not suggesting that one stop learning, reading, or working because it involves being caught up in acquired knowledge. Such antiworldliness would constitute obvious contradictions to other explicit teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. It simply means that one does not apply these other forms of knowledge in the search after the knowledge of the Manifestation ("The Knowledge of God" 49).

From this metaphysical angle, McLean ("Prolegomena") envisages Bahá'í theology as comprised of two kinds of theology: "Bahá'í source theology" (or "revelation theology") and "derivative theology". While derivative theology refers to personal opinions or commentary on the Revelation, Bahá'í source theology "refers to the authoritative, objective, and normative truths of the Bahá'í sacred writings or those elucidated by its duly appointed interpreters" ("Prolegomena", 'Defining Bahá'í Theology' par. 12). Bahá'í source theology, McLean ("Prolegomena", 'The Function of the Absolute', par. 4) claims, is what places Bahá'í theology "on the hard ground of some central beliefs" allowing "our worldview and religious convictions to function as absolutes, as 'some fixed or absolute center' in our interpretation of reality". This sort of grounding also responds to our strong need to intuitively feel "a relationship of absolute dependence upon God", a feeling without which it is doubtful religion could exist at all ("The Knowledge of God" 45).

However, to what extent is the language of the Revelation directly advancing an obvious theology and to what extent does it actually need its contents systematized into a theology

through derivative commentary? What would some examples of the authoritative, absolute and normative truths of such a "Bahá'í source theology" be?

Perspective 6 (associated here with a recent interview given by Mikhail Sergeev)

The sixth perspective emphasizes the notion of "scriptural philosophy" as one of the five major philosophical systems: "empiricist (Locke), rationalist (Descartes), traditionalist (Confucius), intuitivist (Bergson) and scriptural (Aquinas)" (Sergeev, "Theology and Philosophy" 159). According to Sergeev, "scriptural philosophy" originates with Indian Hindu thinkers of the 7th and 4th centuries BCE ("The Sixth Wave" 3) and can be first identified in the West in the "synthesis of Jewish wisdom and Greek thought" by Philo of Alexandria ("Epistemological Views" 11). It represents a mode of "philosophizing" defined by the "interplay between reason and revelation" (idem). Scriptural philosophy therefore occurs when theology and philosophy are "joined together" rendering "religious scriptures" as "part of rational philosophical discourse" ("Theology and Philosophy" 159). As Sergeev points out:

> "A scriptural philosopher is not a philosopher who simply deduces some truths from scriptures. No, you simply accept your particular scriptures as part of your philosophical reasoning, but being a part of your philosophical reasoning, this does not mean that you disregard reason, empirical evidence, tradition, intuition, etc." ("Scriptural Philosophy" 8:59-9:27)

Although, in the Western tradition, scriptural philosophy is often understood as beginning with Philo of Alexandria and concluding with Spinoza's biblical criticism in the seventeenth century, Sergeev argues that the tradition of scriptural philosophy is not defunct but instead

develops in recurring waves (12:38-12:48). Accordingly, the five major waves of scriptural reasoning - Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim - may now be succeeded by a sixth wave, namely Bahá'í scriptural philosophy.

Moreover, from a philosophical standpoint, Sergeev ("Epistemological Views" 11) situates 'Abdu'l-Bahá within this renewed tradition of scriptural philosophy:

> In the Middle Ages, when philosophy became the servant of theology, such a method of philosophizing produced great works from individuals coming from diverse religious traditions – Shankara and Ramanuja in Hinduism, Avicenna in Islam, Hemachandra in Jainism, Moses Maimonides in Judaism, Chu Hsi in neo-Confucianism, and St. Thomas Aquinas in Christianity. From a philosophical perspective, 'Abdu'l-Bahá belongs to the same tradition of scriptural philosophy as well. Even more so, in the Bahá'í Faith he is regarded as both the infallible interpreter of the writings of His father, Bahá'u'lláh, and as a source of Bahá'í scripture. And as always is the case with this type of philosophizing, it is the interplay between reason and revelation that constitutes the nerve of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's thought.

Sergeev's account is also distinguished from the other views presented in this article by several other important nuances and conceptual distinctions.

In his perspective, theology in revealed religions has historically been given two tasks: "the study of God" and "the study of the scriptural texts" ("Scriptural Philosophy" 20:05-23:54). Like the character in a novel who would try to study the author of the novel, the study of God is an impossibility because one ontological level does not have access to the other: "there is nothing there to study" (21:00-22:00) because "God is beyond creation" (22:40-23:04). Apophatic theology, which acknowledges that "we can say nothing about God except for

negations", is, therefore, but "a tricky way to avoid the fact that theology from this perspective is not possible" (21:59-22:25).

On the other hand, "the study of scriptural texts" refers to the hermeneutical aspect of theology which may or may not intersect with philosophy (20:05-24:00). This is because scriptural texts address not only worldviews and philosophical questions but also moral injunctions, prescriptive laws for believers, prayers, meditative practices, and religious rituals - domains that do not fall directly within the scope of philosophical inquiry (23:54-24:28). As Sergeev succinctly puts it: "philosophy is not about how to pray" (24:54-24:58).

Sergeev also thinks that religion, philosophy, art and science represent distinct domains, different ways of exploring reality (26:00-27:03).

At a fundamental level, Sergeev rejects the view that philosophy can be scientific, a position he links with a tradition of thought extending from Aristotle through Descartes and culminating in both Anglo-American analytic philosophy and the Marxist-Leninist tradition (25:45-26:40). He further insists that a Bahá'í philosophy cannot start from the Cartesian position of methodological doubt:

> In his philosophy, Descartes begins with doubt. Why? According to Descartes, philosophy is a science, like for Aristotle, and like all the sciences, philosophy should start with some self-evident premises which are called axioms (something that we cannot doubt). And based on those premises, philosophy should develop its own foundations, through a set of theorems, like mathematics. … It seems to me that Bahá'í scriptures offer a totally different understanding of the nature, purpose and scope of philosophy and philosophical inquiry. First of all, number one, philosophy is

> not a science. It originates not with doubt or self-evident truths, like sciences, but it originates from faith and revelation. That's what Bahá'u'lláh tells us in the Tablet of Wisdom ("The Concept of Reason", 22:00-23:00; 33:00-34:00).

At the same time, philosophy does not provide universal truths (or laws like science does), that is, truths that apply to every human being (27:00-28:09). Rather, it offers interpretive frameworks or meanings regarding the purpose of existence that some individuals may find compelling or personally significant, without these perspectives being binding or obligatory for others (28:10-28:36). In addition, "every philosophical system has an imprint of the personality of the philosophers and you like some philosophers, you don't like other philosophers" (29:35-29:48). Sergeev summarizes this position as follows: "philosophy cannot be a servant of science, philosophy cannot be the servant of theology; philosophy is a separate endeavour which can or cannot be tied to religion" and which offers individuals a sense of meaning in life (29:55- 30:35). From this perspective, Sergeev does not find it useful to think of Bahá'í philosophy as "one system of thought that everyone should accept", a prospect he characterizes as "devastating" (30:36-31:10) Instead, he envisions the development of Bahá'í philosophy as contingent upon the emergence of a plurality of philosophical schools.

Although Sergeev regards the scriptures as "beyond ordinary human knowledge" and allows for the possibility that mystical experience or human intuition may surpass rational cognition, he nonetheless emphasizes that such experiences are diverse, inherently subjective, and often resulting in contradictory claims: "but here is the problem with any mystical experience: it is unique to the person who experiences it, and if we look at the history of mysticism we will see many mystics who have experiences that are contradictory to each other; and since those

experiences are unique how could you distinguish which one is true and which one is not?" (32:44-35:12) Consequently, mysticism must be checked by reason, and the scriptures themselves should be interpreted in light of rational analysis and argument (32:44-35:48).

How, then, might one proceed in developing a Bahá'í scriptural philosophy today? Sergeev approaches this question by first accepting several limitations imposed by modernity.

The first of these limitations pertains to the problem of 'universals'. The concept of universals originates in Plato's theory of Ideas. Subsequently, Philo of Alexandria's synthesis of Platonism and Judaism gives rise to the view that Plato's Ideas are themselves "thoughts within God's mind" – a notion which becomes "the mainstream of religious philosophy for centuries" (1:02:50-1:03:20). From Socrates to Thomas Aquinas, medieval Western philosophy is based on a single "presupposition": "that our thought and the so-called Being - the universe around us, are compatible, that we can penetrate with our thought to the essence of the world" (1:06:06-1:06:34). However, starting with the Christian thinkers of the 12th to the 14th centuries the notion that reason can access the essence of Being through categories such as that of universals comes into question through Peter Abelard's conceptualism (*Universals exist, but only as concepts in the mind, not as external realities*) and the rise of nominalism (*universals, general ideas, or abstract objects are merely names or labels which do not point to any kind of physical or intellectual kind of existence*). These ideas that "language is not referential" and "that by means of reasoning, thinking and language we cannot penetrate to the essences, to the essence of the world" undermine "the medieval philosophical project" and eventually become the dominant view of modernity via Heidegger, Derrida and Foucault, etc. (01:06:45-1:07:30).

In addition to these developments, Spinoza's biblical criticism in the seventeenth century signals the end of scriptural philosophy in the West, while Descartes articulates a new form of rationalism that lays the foundations for modern science (1:07:57-1:08:23). This rationalism comes to define the Western philosophical project, yet beginning with Kant it decisively rejects the claim that human reason can know the essences of things or 'things in themselves' (1:08:24-1:09:23). At the same time as this Kantian shift again brings the medieval philosophical project to an end (idem) Western philosophical rationalism dethrones philosophy as "the queen of sciences" (1:09:00-1:09:57).

It follows then that Sergeev is against Neoplatonism and Panentheism and against metaphysics (though he has wrestled for a long time with whether to be for or against metaphysics). As we have seen, he likewise rejects the view that philosophy could be considered a science. He takes such positions, however, while acknowledging that the philosophical project he pursues is his own and not one he seeks to impose on others. His notion of a Bahá'í scriptural philosophy fundamentally aims at synthesizing "the new wave of modern rationalism with its rejection of knowing 'things in themselves'" with the Bahá'í revelation that he believes to be true (1:10:10-1:11:14) (here Sergeev thinks that only revelation and not science could maybe provide 'synthetic a priori statements' – which are the fundamental elements of any metaphysics) (1:19:48-1:20:06). Sergeev seeks, in this way, "to create a philosophy … that could be rationally consistent with what modern philosophers have been doing for the last three centuries starting with Kant" (1:10:10-1:11:14).
He also maintains that, since Kant, metaphysics has been understood as "either impossible or possible only as an exact science" (1:11:35-1:11:55). While he does not believe in the latter option, he is also deeply sceptical of metaphysics – in his own words, an "anti-metaphysician" (1:15:00-1:15:06). Nevertheless, Sergeev holds that if metaphysics is at all

possible, this could only be in the form of a religious metaphysics derived from revelation, meaning, by access to a source of knowledge beyond human experience (1:11:35-1:11:55).

What, then, might such a scriptural philosophy look like?

First, Sergeev describes ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s epistemology and its emphasis on the limitations of knowledge as closely aligned with (and indeed, going beyond) Kant’s critique of pure reason and, also, as incompatible with Aristotle’s metaphysics of substances and its modern continuations [i.e., that “the knowledge of the essences of things” could be “an exact science” (“Epistemological Views” 13)]. In brief, the limitations of knowledge[8] Sergeev refers to are as follows:

- Humans cannot know the essence of a thing; the best they can do is derive an understanding of its attributes.
- A lower degree of existence cannot understand a higher degree of existence, which means “humans cannot comprehend Divinity or the spiritual realm” (14).
- All four criteria of human knowledge – sense perception, reason, tradition, and intuition – are fallible or prone to error, whether combined together or separate.

Second, such a scriptural philosophy would align with Kant and with the philosophies of Lao Tzu and Nagarjuna (and, therefore, presumably explore the trajectories of anti-essentialism and anti-foundationalism). It would admit that knowledge of the Divine or of the essences of things is not possible through reason (1:15:06-1:15;57). On the one hand, this would imply an acceptance that our understanding can only function at the human level of reasoning and a

[8] Interestingly, this Kantian reading of Bahá’í scriptural philosophy corresponds in part to the apophatic philosophy in Dávúdí’s “Treatise on God and Revelation”.

commitment to developing that form of understanding (1:15:06-1:15:44). On the other hand, this would allow for continuation of the interesting direction pursued by Lao Tzu who holds that "understanding is beyond words", a position also echoed by Nagarjuna in India and Kant in the Western tradition (1:20:36-1:21:05). This avenue is promising because "it does not make reason the only authority in life, it leaves place for visions, intuition, mysticism and it does not see language as the only tool of expression" (1:21:05-1:21:29).

To conclude with, for Sergeev ("Theology and Philosophy" 172) the Bahá'í Faith "offers a systematic philosophical outlook that is deeply rooted in biblical monotheism and represents a unique blend of Western and Eastern spirituality". Furthermore, Sergeev ("Theology and Philosophy") identifies a Bahá'í epistemology, ontology, philosophical anthropology, philosophy of religion, political philosophy, ethics and social philosophy, and aesthetics, but not a Bahá'í metaphysics or philosophy of science. Inasmuch as philosophy is not a science (and, therefore, not engaged in discovering universal laws) and judging by the example of past scriptural philosophies, Sergeev ("Aristotle") envisages the development of Bahá'í philosophy as conditional on the establishment of a diversity of philosophical schools.

Part II

Then, of course, the other possible answer is to say 'yes, religion is a system of propositional truths or of factual knowledge of the world on the model of the sciences'. And here, again, I would like to emphasize several tendencies within Bahá'í scholarship.

Perspective 7 (associated with an article of William Hatcher from 1980)

The first tendency of this kind, and quite influential to this day, is the one expressed by William Hatcher in "The Science of Religion". In that article, Hatcher starts with a binary dilemma regarding the epistemological concern of this present essay:

> Is religion primarily a cognitive activity like science, or is it more akin to an aesthetic or emotional experience? If religion is seen as primarily cognitive, then the main problem seems to be that of reconciling the application of scientific method to religion. In particular it is often felt that this is difficult to do without falsifying either the nature of scientific method or else the global, subjective, mystic character of religion. On the other hand, viewing religion as primarily noncognitive appears ultimately to relegate religion to an unacceptably secondary and inferior status in the range of human activities. It becomes very difficult to attribute any objective content to religious belief and to religious moral imperatives. These latter are seen at best to be expressions of various subjective, emotional, essentially irrational (and perhaps illegitimate and illusory) yearnings and desires on the part of a more or less general segment of mankind (29).

In very broad terms, the answer Hatcher provides to this question is as follows: "Once we realize that the basis of science is its method and that the basis of religion is its object of study, the essential move toward resolving the religion-science controversy seems obvious and logical: Apply scientific method within religion" (31). While many could support such a general statement, what does Hatcher really say here?

"Religion," Hatcher maintains, "results when we turn scientific method to the study of the unseen creative force of the universe which we call God" (20). Not only that the phenomenon of revelation and religious experience (as experience of the Divine) can be studied empirically and validated objectively via the scientific method, but the phenomenon of religion itself is scientific in its method. Let us briefly examine these arguments.

First, Hatcher attempts to argue that faith is a similarly critical setting and testing of assumptions about an object of knowledge as scientific reason is, and no more relative or subjective an exercise. This would seem to imply that just by having faith, one is also scientific in mindset. However, this argument seems problematic for a number of reasons:

a) the object of knowledge against which we are to test our assumptions is, in this case, a completely unseen and inaccessible Divinity.
b) faith is not similarly based on the observation of an external, measurable divine reality, which then produces assumptions; rather, more often than not, certain starting assumptions are taken as a matter of faith requiring believers to align their life accordingly.
c) while scientific truth is relative and subjective to some degree (for example, in how the colour red is considered an interval reading on the spectroscope) (6), that degree is considerably restricted by the procedures of scientific reason in a way not comparable with the limits (or lack thereof) allegedly arbitrating the subjective operations of faith.
d) are people of any Faith really primarily concerned with directly applying the scientific method to their fundamental assumptions about Divinity or the Absolute in order to test their validity (although maybe they should)?

The second argument that Hatcher puts forward is that religious communities function as the scientific community does in terms of the production and testing of knowledge. In this sense, the collective and social dimension of religion is assumed to be scientific in its development. There are, of course, merits to this line of argument, for example, by urging the cultivation of a more scientific mindset in community affairs. However, the capacity to revisit decisions based on their outcome, or to consult and reflect on experience (here I would argue that consultation is a form of collective decision-making not a research methodology), or any other basic form of self-reflexivity Hatcher wishes to call "self-conscious common sense" (19) is not identical with scientific reason unless based on the procedures of the scientific method and science, that is, based on actual scientific research that is accepted and validated as acceptable within the domain of the academic disciplines. In recent times, Friberg ("Revelation as Scientific Method" 20-21) has defended and built on this perspective of Hatcher by drawing, for example, on Susan Haack and Paul Hoyningen-Huene's arguments that scientific knowledge is just everyday knowledge but of a special critical kind or with a higher degree of systematicity. Based on such arguments, however, all forms of organized thought including mystical thought, alchemy, and ancient philosophy, "the humanities … and the theoretical parts of the arts" and even "homeopathy, creationism and climate-change denial" (Bschir et al., "Systematicity") would fit under the umbrella of scientific methodology and scientific knowledge. However, modern philosophy is by definition based on a methodology of doubt – known as methodological scepticism or systematic scepticism - and so are in different degrees all the scientific methodologies that have come into existence since the start of the Scientific Revolution. This scientific form of methodological doubt, which is not a part of the everyday life of religious belief, becomes central during the Scientific Revolution (16th–17th centuries) and continues to remain foundational to modern

scientific inquiry.[9] Carl Sagan (*Cosmos* 333) expresses something of this view when he describes the two rules of science: "First: there are no sacred truths; all assumptions must be critically examined; arguments from authority are worthless. Second: whatever is inconsistent with the facts must be discarded or revised. We must understand the Cosmos as it is and not confuse how it is with how we wish it to be".

Next, the argument that Hatcher puts forward as proof of how "an unprejudiced application of scientific method … leads to the probable conclusion that God exists and that He has consciousness and intelligence" (22) does not take into account the notion of autopoiesis that defines self-organizing and self-reproducing systems.[10] As for applying the empirical scientific method directly to Divinity, an observation from Friberg ("Revelation as Scientific" 23) can be used to highlight the difficulty of the task: "Lacking a physical basis of measurement, there can be no empirical tests or observations".

Finally, Hatcher also asserts that the phenomenon of Revelation, the divine reality of the Manifestations of God, and the "hypothesis that social evolution is due to the influence of the Manifestations" (40) can be empirically proven through the scientific method. The following longer passage provides an example of this type of argument:

> Bahá'ís believe that man's social evolution is due to the periodic intervention into human affairs of the creative force of the universe by means of the religious founders or Manifestations. What is most significant is that the Bahá'í Faith offers fresh

[9] Earlier we have seen how this issue has been picked up by Mikhail Sergeev, his way out of this impasse being to suggest that a Bahá'í scriptural philosophy should start from faith, the existence of God, and revelation (like Aquinas has done) and not from the Cartesian position of methodological doubt, or as he also describes it, from the modern notion that philosophy is a science.

[10] The case could be made, however, that the notion of autopoiesis, which was put forward in 1972 and gained broader recognition in the 1980s, would have still been unknown to Hatcher at the time of his essay in 1980. Thank you to Michael Sabet for this suggestion.

> empirical evidence, in the person of its own founder, that such a phenomenon has occurred. …The only way we can judge Bahá'u'lláh's fascinating hypothesis that social evolution is due to the influence of the Manifestations is the way we judge any proposition: scientific method. This is the only way we can judge Bahá'u'lláh's claim to be one of these Manifestations. We must see if these assumptions are consistent with our knowledge of life as a whole. We must see if we can render these assertions considerably more acceptable than their negations. In the case of Bahá'u'lláh we have many things which we can test empirically. Bahá'u'lláh made predictions. Did they come true? Bahá'u'lláh claimed divine inspiration. Did He receive formal schooling, and did He exhibit power and knowledge not easily attributable to human sources? He insisted on moral purity. Did He lead a life of moral purity? In His teaching are found statements concerning the nature of the physical world. Has science validated these? He engaged in extensive analysis of the nature of man's organized social life. Does His analysis accord with our own scientific observations of the same phenomena? He also makes assertions concerning human psychology and subjectivity and invites individuals to test these. Do they work? The possibilities are unlimited (39-40).

In fact, Hatcher feels that the empirical evidence for the phenomenon of religion is so strong as to "unhesitatingly say that the residue of subjectivity in the faith of a Bahá'í is no greater than the residue of subjectivity in the faith one has in any well-validated scientific theory" (14-15). These claims seem enthusiastically overblown. First, the data gathering and data analysis to scientifically validate the positive social impact of a series of Revelations which confusingly chart both the rise and fall of religious dispensations and the integration and disintegration of world orders would constitute, if not a utopian task, then one of the most complex experiments ever attempted in social science. Second, while their genius might be

asserted from historical evidence in a way that could generate some degree of consensus (as currently exists about certain major artists and scientific figures), it would be extremely difficult to scientifically prove the divine status and divine inspiration of prophetic figures.

"The Science of Religion", one feels like concluding, offers more in its general imperative than in its particular analysis of the scientific nature of religion: "Apply scientific method within religion" (31). The issue is how. And here it is a surprise that Hatcher did not seek to interpret Shoghi Effendi's statement that "The Revelation proclaimed by Bahá'u'lláh …is…scientific in its method" (30) in a much simpler and arguably more productive way: as suggesting that religion should make use of the academic disciplines in the study of the Revelation. After all, the Guardian could be interpreted to have supported or at least permitted such a direction[11]:

> It is hoped that all the Bahá'í students will follow the noble example you have set before them and will, henceforth, be led to investigate and analyze the principles of the Faith and to correlate them with the modern aspects of philosophy and science. Every intelligent and thoughtful young Bahá'í should always approach the Cause in this way, for therein lies the very essence of the principle of independent investigation of truth [From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, dated 6 August 1933, to an individual believer, in Taylor (65)].

Part II

[11] In addition, it would be difficult - and might even seem paradoxical - to claim that religion is scientific in its method but that it should not apply the academic disciplines and therefore their scientific methodologies to itself.

The next group of Bahá'í scholars I look at seem to have accepted to a much greater degree that the study of the Bahá'í Writings should proceed via and in parallel with the development of the modern system of knowledge and the academic disciplines. While this might constitute an unspoken consensus within most Bahá'í inspired fields of study the following authors are distinctive because of a specific type of claim. They all claim that a comprehensive Bahá'í philosophy can be derived from the Bahá'í Writings.[12]

Perspective 8 (associated with an article by Jean-Marc Lepain)

A newer perspective, and one filling an existing gap, is to conceive of no strict separation between Bahá'í metaphysics and sciences such as physics, biology, etc. (Lepain, "The Concept of Nature"). We can immediately see how such a stance brings something new to the discussion: "As a consequence, one of the responsibilities of Bahá'í metaphysics is proposed interpretation of Bahá'í writings regarding the nature of reality in the light of the latest progress in science" (p.87). However, to get to grips with this new perspective requires some in-depth familiarity with Lepain ("The Concept of Nature").

Lepain (80) argues that for man to know nature, he must know God and himself (this contains the problem of consciousness vs. nature); for him to know God, he must know nature and himself; and for him to know himself he must know God and nature. This hermeneutical circle makes Bahá'í philosophy inseparable from the study of nature. As Lepain (69) sees it, Bahá'í philosophy has as fundamental a role to play in "the intellectual development of the

[12] It should be remembered here that Sergeev also identifies a comprehensive Bahá'í philosophy, but on largely more complicated terms in relation to science (the issue, though, is one of nuance and deserving of further analysis). Sergeev ("Theology and Philosophy" 172), for example, argues that the Bahá'í Faith "offers a **systematic philosophical outlook [my emphasis]** that is deeply rooted in biblical monotheism and represents a unique blend of Western and Eastern spirituality".

Bahá'í Faith" as theology has had in Christianity and Islamic philosophy in Islam. This is so because "the Bahá'í Faith sees philosophy as the interface or the mediator between science and religion" (87). As part of this argument, Lepain (69-70) divides Bahá'í philosophy into three branches, highlighting the middle one (combining metaphysics with the philosophy of science) as foundational for all the other branches:

> (a) the philosophy of the human person (covering topics such as anthropology, psychology, sociology, political science, etc. as well as the principles of our spiritual development); (b) the philosophy of nature (describing both the way in which the cosmos works and its finality and meaning); and (c) the philosophy of divine revelation (expressing how God communicates with humankind and how to interpret the Holy Writings).

With this introduction, we can now focus on how the Bahá'í philosophy of nature envisioned by Lepain is meant to interact with the domains of science. The Bahá'í philosophy of nature consists of two elements: a Bahá'í metaphysics and a Bahá'í theory of intelligibility (which responds to the question: 'to what extent can the world be known by us?'). The four criteria of knowledge highlighted by 'Abdu'l-Bahá ("sensory data, rational reasoning, the authority of tradition and of Holy Scriptures, and intuition") are faulty and imperfect, even when combined together (78). At the same time, his confirmation of the Holy Spirit as the only infallible method of comprehension cannot be used as part of the scientific method. This means that "from a scientific perspective human knowledge must therefore remain without firm foundation" (79). The limits of intelligibility also derive from the hermeneutical circle mentioned earlier. Such are as some of the elements Lepain outlines for a theory of intelligibility. Even more significant here, however, is that a Bahá'í metaphysics would also come with limits in terms of what it can offer to science. This argument, of how a Bahá'í

metaphysics might and might not be able to support science, is of the greatest importance. In what follows, I have attempted to trace this line of reasoning through a series of claims:

Claim 1

Most philosophers of science operate within the larger philosophical framework of naturalism, which assumes that "nothing exists outside of nature, with the consequence that all explanations of nature must be sought within nature itself and its various physical constituents" (71). Bahá'í metaphysics, on the other hand, assumes that nature constitutes only "one of the modalities of reality among other modalities" (91), that science cannot fully elucidate this modality of reality or any other, and that "all ontological questions are not amenable to the methods of empirical science" (86).

Claim 2

On the other hand, this does not mean that the Bahá'í writings tackle directly the issues of science:

> we must remember that the Bahá'í writings are not considered authoritative with regards to scientific questions and when statements about the nature of physical reality are found they should be interpreted in the light of the best science available, knowing that our knowledge is not definitive. The purpose of the Bahá'í writings is not to inform us about the nature of the physical reality but to provide guidance for our spiritual development (85).

> Based on Aristotle, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá uses a classification that divides reality into five kingdoms: the mineral kingdom, the vegetable kingdom, the animal kingdom, the human kingdom and the spiritual kingdom. It would be mistaken to give biological taxonomic value to such classification which is not concerned with biological taxonomy but with metaphysical relations. Its only purpose is to establish that the human soul does not originate from nature but rather from the spiritual world. However, it clearly demonstrates the principle of the discontinuity of reality (103).

Nor does it mean that the relevance of the divine text for scientific problems is transparent and can be unproblematically captured in statements of a scientific kind:

> Rather than trying to explain the writings of the Faith in the light of past history and old philosophy, I started to study contemporary problems to see how they could relate to the Bahá’í teachings. However, one of the difficulties of this approach is that most of the time the Writings give only indirect answers found at the end of a chain of reasoning (Lepain, Tractatus 178-179).

Claim 3

Science focuses on defining a scientific methodology that produces “a precise description of natural objects and of their properties” by “formulating theories based on observation and tested through experiment” (Lepain, “The Concept of Nature” 71). In doing so, it eschews the why and how questions of ontology such as ‘why does nature operate the way it does?’ or ‘how do things exist?’ Even so, modern ontology admits that “all natural objects have ontological dimensions because they have a mode of existence that can be distinct from other objects, as we see in quantum mechanics” (70). Such metaphysical and ontological issues are

also acknowledged by scientists but set aside as not constituting an "obstacle to scientific progress" (75). This situation, Lepain argues, leads to "ontological confusion" (70) in several ways. First, because mathematical formalism produces abstract entities "whose existence and nature remain highly speculative" (73). Physics, for example, produces abstract concepts such as "energy, forces, fields and the like", but is unable to tell us what these really are (idem). Second, the lack of a wider perspective leads to multiple ontologies competing as explanations for the same scientific phenomenon. For example, different ontologies have resulted in six different interpretations of quantum mechanics. Third, because science is analytical and seeks to understand a system by breaking it into parts, the picture of nature that emerges is "highly fragmented" (76). What results is "not a unified model of nature but an entanglement of maps established at different scales and using different measurement units, different concepts and different methodologies and often at conflict with each other" (idem).

Against this backdrop, Lepain proposes that a Bahá'í metaphysics can bring unity and clarity to the ontological confusion produced by science. The question is how. Can a Bahá'í metaphysics achieve a "holistic approach to reality … by connecting together the various maps of nature's sub-systems produced by science" (idem)? The answer is no, because "the heterogeneity of these maps is irreducible and any attempt to reduce them to the same language would deprive them of any useful meaning" (idem). On the one hand, this means that each discipline must have its own philosophy, and on the other, that a Bahá'í philosophy of nature cannot replace them. A Bahá'í philosophy of nature, for example, cannot replace the philosophy of physics or the philosophy of biology. Could a holistic approach be guaranteed by ontology instead? The answer is again no, "because ontology operates in a way that is very similar to science by trying to identify the smallest logical constituent of reality and suggest reduction to a unique scale or dimension of reality" (idem). Still, Lepain believes

there is a way forward. What, then, is this alternative possibility that Lepain thinks he can discern? A holistic approach "based on identifying the logical structure of reality that can produce concepts independent from any scale of reality or from any field of science" (76-77). To explain this line of thought, Lepain (81) invites us to consider the role of metaphors. All abstract ideas can be understood as metaphors. Metaphors are part of nature and metaphorical thinking has played a key role in the discoveries of science. "Metaphors," Lepain (81) furthermore argues, can "reveal the common rational structure that links all the different ontological levels of the universe". Such metaphors can be envisaged as macro-concepts that aim to understand the universe as a whole. As examples, Lepain highlights the following macro-concepts from the domain of the philosophy of science: "interconnectedness, continuity and discontinuity, complexity, order, laws of nature, evolution, emergence, diversity, adaptation, entropy, chance, stochasticity or determinism" (97), causality (87), and change (97). These examples and types of concepts constitute a possible research agenda for developing a Bahá'í metaphysics. Once such macro-concepts have been identified, Lepain adds, metaphysics must also attempt to trace the sort of ontology that could explain them.

Claim 4

Nature is essentially not a sensible but an intellectual reality, that is to say, a "metaphysical category" - "an entity that exists on a metaphysical level, an abstraction existing independently of the human mind" which can only be perceived through the intellect and not through the senses (91). Lepain (90) cites here a famous statement from Bahá'u'lláh: "Nature is God's will and its expression in and through the contingent world ... Were anyone to affirm that it is the Will of God as manifested in the world of being, no one should question this assertion".

Claim 5

While what we see when we look at nature or reality is discontinuity, "what actually exists is continuity" (94). The discontinuity of nature is exemplified by the different kingdoms of existence highlighted by Aristotle and 'Abdu'l-Bahá: mineral, vegetable, animal, human, and spiritual. Each kingdom "requires its separate mode of intelligibility" and, thus, its own distinct ontology (96), and that is before we start differentiating between the molecular, the atomic, and the subatomic levels. That this is how our mode of perception structures reality renders the unity of science an impossibility: "Each natural kingdom, having a different ontology, requires a different scientific methodology. Reduction of one level of nature to another is impossible and, as a consequence, so too is the completeness of science. Although biology includes physics and chemistry, it cannot be reduced to physics or chemistry and chemistry cannot be reduced to physics" (96). The conclusion Lepain draws from this and other considerations is quite stark: "nature remains a mysterious reality that cannot be fully grasped by the human mind" (96). And still, Lepain believes that certain unifying principles or metaphysical principles exist which indicate that nature "should not be seen as an assembly of things[13] but as an organic whole whose existence transcends the existence of its components" (92). To support this argument, Lepain brings into discussion the concepts of emergence and interconnectedness.

[13] Here Lepain (96) criticizes a dominant perspective in science: "This view of nature is fundamentally opposed to the Humean view of nature as a mosaic of discrete phenomena or logical atoms that, since Russell, has become one of the fundamental tenets of many contemporary philosophers".

Claim 6

The Bahá'í Writings envisage reality as being founded by the two complementary processes of emanation and manifestation. The physical world and the essences of all created things originate through emanation from the spiritual world. However, "everything that exists manifests the Spirit" (101), i.e., contains hidden potentialities that are manifested when certain thresholds or conditions have been met. The novelty in the thought of Lepain (102) is that he applies these concepts to the problem of the continuity and discontinuity of nature: "The process of emanation is responsible for the continuity aspect of reality, while manifestation is responsible for its discontinuity aspect".

Claim 7

When applied to natural phenomena, the process of manifestation corresponds to the modern scientific and philosophical notion of emergence: "The important point is that both Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá link the concept of emergence with the idea of complexity. When a threshold of complexity is passed, new properties naturally emerge, not as the result of the interaction of particulars but because they already exist potentially in the universe" (106).

At this point, it is still not clear how the metaphysical macro-concept of manifestation or emergence supports the idea of nature "as an organic whole whose existence transcends the

existence of its components" (92). However, the notion of emergence refers not only to the development of a tree from a seed – so within the same system (systemic emergence) but also to the "emergence that occurs between different levels of reality (kingdoms) such as, for example, the emergence of life out of the mineral kingdom" (ontological emergence) (107). While science has been successful at investigating instances of systemic emergence it has struggled to account for the emergence of life and of consciousness. This limitation is there, Lepain argues, because only metaphysics can assist science in the investigation of ontological emergence. If we take this to mean that the metaphysical notion of manifestation (in tandem with the concept of emanation) could assist in explaining how biological life emerges out of the mineral kingdom, animal life out of the vegetable kingdom, and human consciousness out of the animal kingdom then metaphysics could indeed be seen to contribute substantially to a holistic account of nature. Furthermore, the latest scientific thinking on complexity and emergence indicates "that new emergent properties cannot be explained by the properties of the level from which they emerge and that their appearance cannot be predicted by the properties of that level" (107-108). If this were true, and the notion of emergence still requires elaboration, then that would also confirm that "nature (if we consider the universe as a system) has properties distinct from its components or subsystems" (108).

Claim 8

'Abdu'l-Bahá employs the term 'necessary relations' as a concept that unites science, philosophy, and religion:

"By nature is meant those inherent properties and necessary relations derived from the realities of things" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablet to Forel* 11).

"'Religion, then, consists in the necessary relationships deriving from the reality of things" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 181).

The notion of 'necessary relations' should, therefore, be seen as central to a Bahá'í ontology and as reinforcing the macro-concept of interconnectedness. Let us now try to explain why Lepain would think this to be the case. In Bahá'í metaphysical language a natural object can be conceptualized as consisting of three ontological dimensions:

1. its essence or reality (which remains unknown),
2. the properties that derive from that essence (which can be known),
3. and the necessary relations that derive from the interaction of its properties with the properties of other natural objects.

However, and this is the important part, 'necessary relations' have the characteristic of emergence. They are novel, unpredictable, representative of a higher level of complexity, and cannot be explained by the properties of the natural objects from which they emerge. Most importantly, as novel unifying characteristics, they point to the existence of a system that transcends the properties of its components, i.e., to a holism that transcends the idea of reality as primarily built around distinct natural objects or particulars.

"The laws of nature", Lepain ("The Concept of Nature" 110) maintains, "are simply the mathematical formulation of some of these necessary relations". The usefulness of the concept, the argument goes, becomes more apparent as the complexity of the aspect of reality studied increases:

> Physics and chemistry can be based on a relatively limited number of 'laws' because the relations existing between physical objects are relatively few. On the other hand, it is far more difficult to formulate biological laws because biological phenomena are

> far more complex than physical or chemical phenomena. When we come to the study of animals, this study must be put in the perspective of the vast web of relations that link and interconnect all living beings in a community that itself extends not only to plants but also to geological and meteorological systems that form the biosphere. Because necessary relations are not limited to the physical world, they also apply to human activities. Human societies are based on necessary relations that we try to formulate through psychology, anthropology, sociology and political science. Economics, with its theory of markets and price formation, is a good example of necessary relations applied to human activities (110-111).

The implication from all this is that the metaphysical notion of 'necessary relations' pushes us towards a complementary understanding of reality which emphasizes interconnectedness:

> It means that there can be two complementary views of nature. The first one is a description of nature as a structure made of natural objects in which each object is described precisely in terms of properties and behaviours. This view of nature is very powerful as long as natural objects are discrete, relatively simple and interacting with a limited number of other objects as it is the case in fundamental physics. This is the view of nature that we find in Western science. The second complementary view of nature is a view that takes a holistic approach and sees nature as a web of necessary and accidental relations between natural objects. This view is very powerful when applied to complex systems of natural objects such as the weather or an ecological system. This is the view that Bahá'í philosophy should try to promote while recognizing that the first view is complementary and should not be neglected (109-110).

Claim 9

A Bahá'í philosophy of nature should be based on the notion of 'necessary relations' rather than on the notion of "primitive entities in the universe (entities whose existence cannot be explained by other entities)" characteristic of classical ontology (70). The implications of such a perspective are discussed by Lepain in relation to the field of biology as follows:

> Most attempts at defining the gene start from the assumption that the gene is either a 'primitive' object or that the gene organizational level is the most primitive level. These questions are questions more for philosophy of science and show that science, either theoretical or experimental, cannot be isolated from philosophy of science which is often introduced covertly. As we will see later, the notion of 'primitive object' is not part of Bahá'í philosophy of nature which is based on necessary relationships. In that case, it could be that relations between genes are a more fundamental level of explanation than the gene itself (75).

In advancing such a claim, it would have been noticed, Lepain ("Tractatus" 177) moves Bahá'í philosophy away from "a language of essences" and from "the old metaphysics of essence".

What should we then make of all of this? How is one to evaluate such interesting, creative, but also, open-ended claims? How should we judge the Bahá'í philosophy of nature proposed by Lepain? Ultimately, at a very general level, it all seems to come down to one question: do such macro-concepts as emergence or interconnectedness (i.e., 'necessary relations') show enough promise to make us believe in the research agenda of developing Bahá'í metaphysics as a supportive ontology for science? And, whatever the answer, should we not accept that

"one of the responsibilities of Bahá'í metaphysics is proposed interpretation of Bahá'í writings regarding the nature of reality in the light of the latest progress in science" ("The Concept of Nature" 87)?

Perspective 9 (associated with an article by Roland Faber and a very partial reading of his book "The Garden of Reality"[14])

The next philosophical standpoint I want to highlight is represented by the process theology advanced by Roland Faber. Central to this philosophy is the search for, the experience of, and the relationship with Reality understood as an ineffable and inexhaustible mystery and, also, as a form of unity of all things "that expresses itself in infinite modes" and "in which nothing can be viewed in mere opposition to one another" (Faber, "Manifestation of God" 11). It follows then that the role of philosophy is to give, to the extent possible, rational expression to this type of mystical insight, that is, to constantly find ways to characterize it verbally in novel philosophical formulations (idem). An apt mode of characterization, therefore, is to state that such a philosophy is about "the non-duality of mysticism (ʻirfan, maʻrifa) and its fresh articulation in ever-new categorizations of relationality" (idem). Clearly, nondualism and `irfán are philosophical-theological terms that require unpacking. The Merriam-Webster dictionary provides the following definition of nondualism:

> Nondualism is a doctrine of classic Brahmanism holding that the essential unity of all is real whereas duality and plurality are phenomenal illusion and that matter is materialized energy which in turn is the temporal manifestation of an incorporeal spiritual eternal essence constituting the innermost self of all things.

[14] This was probably the book that gave me the most enjoyment in terms of reading – and I hope to return to it. It is one of the most significant contributions I have seen but a barrier is the lack of familiarity with Whitehead, which of course, presupposes familiarity with Western philosophy in general.

As for the notion of `irfán, a useful definition has been advanced by Lewis ("Bahá'ís and the western academy" pars. 5-6):

> This acquired human knowledge (`ilm) is distinct from `irfán, the knowledge of spiritual recognition or insight, a word which among Sufis often has the meaning of esoteric knowledge or gnosis, though it can also more mundanely convey the sense of "cognition." It is actually this type of spiritual insight-knowledge-cognition (Arabic `irfán, Persian `erfán) of God, along with worship of the Deity, that is the purpose of human life …To achieve this knowledge of God or Truth (ma`refat-e Haqq), a person must rely upon his own efforts of insight, his heart and his innate character (be-basar va qalb va fetrat-e khod). It is insufficient to imitate what one has been told (che ke taqlid kefáyat nanamáyad). This kind of knowledge/recognition/insight of God (`irfán) is, Bahá'u'lláh says in his Words of Wisdom, the root of the more experiential or logical knowledges, or sciences (`ulúm).

Faber ("Manifestation of God" 11) himself prefers to translate `irfán as "intuition". From all of this, we can conclude that `irfán as mystical insight or intuition into nondualism seems to constitute the ultimate source of philosophical thought in Faber's process theology. `Irfán also seems to act, in the final analysis, as the main criterion guarding against "rationalist reductionism" and its destruction of "the fabric of experience of reality as one interrelated whole" (idem). Rationality is too often prone to devalue, freeze, or divide Reality and our connectivity to the unity of all existence in the name of a final conception of Truth. As history shows, such reductionism is often associated with binary categories of thought that impose "the dictatorship of one divergent trajectory (one religion, or school of thought, one savior, one history, one tradition, one dogma, one logic) *by the exclusion of all incompatible*

elements" (Faber, *The Garden of Reality* 332). Outside such considerations, however, philosophizing seems to imply the equal interaction of reason (or intellect), mystical insight (or intuition), and empirical experimentation, with all elements working together in a coherent manner: "as Whitehead's whole philosophy demonstrates, all philosophical insights must be in resonance with art and poetry, on the one hand, and coherently relating reason and empirical experiment, on the other" (Faber, "Manifestation of God" 11). As Faber (idem) points out, this kind of philosophy is open both to religious experience and to empirical reality. In principle then, and this remains a claim to be evaluated, Faber's process theology operates based on and in parallel with the development of the modern system of knowledge, reason, and the scientific method, although it does so from a different metaphysical framing (i.e., nondualism) than that originally constituting the backdrop of modern science and from a position which transcends not only naturalism, but also, current attempts at an expanded naturalism.

Perspective 10 (associated with the unpublished manuscript of Behrooz Sabet[15])

The final point of view I want to introduce here is one that is unusually assertive in its epistemological aspirations. This standpoint states that the role of the Bahá'í Faith is to change the world by revolutionizing the modern system of knowledge (Sabet "Integrative Approach", *A Conceptual Perspective*). This perspective assumes that the advancement of

[15] The sections on Jean-Marc Lepain and Behrooz Sabet were the most complex, making them both the most challenging and the longest to write. In Sabet's case, this is also due to my reliance on an unpublished manuscript that would otherwise be unfamiliar to the reader. More importantly, his theoretical model is integrative and offers an experimental framework for curriculum development - features that are crucial because they enable an evolutionary approach that allows, at least to a degree, for the incorporation of elements from all these perspectives. In my view, then, Sabet's contribution is not only a perspective but also a methodology - and in some important respects, the methodology may even transcend the perspective itself. Lepain's book chapter spans 44 pages, yet it proved to be an intense read, as I do not typically work within the field of the ontology of science. Sabet's draft manuscript - about 208 pages in length, which I have condensed into an approximately 11-page summary - was even more challenging, as it resists any kind of easy summarization.

knowledge is impelled by the rise and fall of religious systems in interaction with the development of philosophy and science. In their authentic phase, religions not only bring a "transcendental dimension of knowledge" (*A Conceptual Perspective* 162) with new meanings, but also, a new set of values. Together these new meanings and values permeate the material and intellectual levels of culture helping to organize them into an "overarching spiritual and intellectual system" (162). The order of social systems, it follows then, derives from this hierarchy of meanings and values provided by religion. As Sabet (22) observes:

> Furthermore, the life and vitality of any integrated cultural system depend upon the pattern of reciprocal interdependence of diverse components within the system and the way these diverse elements organize themselves around the Nucleus of the system. Values and meanings comprise the Nucleus, the central core or the inner unity of the system.

When religions lose their vitality by crystallizing into dogma (and secularization advances), science gets separated from the transcendental dimension of knowledge and suffers from the collapse of the moral order, oftentimes becoming an "instrument for mass destruction, prejudice, and irrational ends", and for "control and dominance" (17).

Although he agrees with A. J. Toynbee "that all world civilizations have had religious/moral structures" and that "the rise and decline of civilization" mirrors the cyclical pattern of the "emergence and decay of religion" (17), Sabet does not advocate for a return to the old days in which religion (and/or theocracy) governed over science. To make this point explicit, Sabet (164) outlines three levels of reality – each with its own dominant type of knowledge and methods of inquiry:

1. Spirit / Metaphysical ⇒ spiritual / revelation
2. Intellectual ⇒ philosophic / reason
3. Material ⇒ scientific / empirical

The historical tendency, Sabet observes, has been to unilaterally prioritize either the spiritual or the material level as the primary source of knowledge, with that in turn shaping the hierarchical structure of knowledge across various domains—such as the physical (matter), biological (life), psychological (mind), human and social sciences (culture, ethics), and spiritual (values and meaning). In Sabet's estimation, however, "an integrative model" should try "to incorporate these two approaches" (165). It can thus be asserted that when read against Sorokin's famous tripartite taxonomy, Sabet chooses to depart from both the "sensate" and "ideational" systems of truth and knowledge in favour of the "idealistic" one:

> Idealistic truth is a synthesis of both, made by our reason. In regard to sensory phenomena, it recognizes the role of the sense organs as the source and criterion of the validity or invalidity of a proposition. In regard to supersensory phenomena, it claims that any knowledge of these is impossible through sensory experience and is obtained only through the direct revelation of God. Finally, our reason, through logic and dialectic, can derive many valid propositions – for instance, in all syllogistic and mathematical reasoning. Most mathematical and syllogistic propositions are arrived at not through sensory experience, nor through direct divine revelation, but through the logic of human reason. Human reason also "processes" the sensations and perceptions of our sense organs and transforms these into valid experience and knowledge.

> Human reason likewise combines into one organic whole the truth of the senses, the truth of faith and the truth of reason. These are the essentials of the idealistic system of truth and knowledge (Sorokin, 68-69).

It would be difficult to engage the integrative model of Sabet without understanding the three main epistemological challenges this model seeks to address.

First, for Sabet, as for Sorokin, Western culture is in deep crisis. In their assessment, the materialistic framework that has long structured civilization (or sensate culture) has run its course. The result is fragmentation, disunity, and reductionism within our modern knowledge system, as well as social disintegration and disorder. This crisis stems from the erosion of the hierarchy or Nucleus of meanings and values that once sustained the coherence of our social systems, leading to a profound "crisis in value systems" and, therefore, to a larger process of "cultural disintegration" (*A Conceptual Perspective* 16).

Put differently, the core spiritual foundation and the overarching moral and intellectual system it shaped that once provided coherence and direction to the material and technological order has become dysfunctional and lost its influence. This breakdown has led to an era of fragmentation, where technological advancements proceed without a unifying ethical or philosophical framework to guide them. The key to understanding Sabet's argument lies in recognizing that the crisis of the spiritual and moral order is not merely a societal or cultural issue but is deeply connected to the broader challenge of developing an integrated view of reality. Without a revitalized moral and intellectual foundation, efforts to reconcile knowledge, values, and technological progress will remain disjointed and inadequate. This means that the way forward lies not with the universal imposition of a given set of values (for example, from the domain of religion) but with developing a unified view of reality or "a new

paradigm of knowledge" based "on the union of two evolutionary sources: the spiritual and scientific traditions of humanity" (108).

Second, confusion, disunity, alienation, and disintegration have also ensued because the materialistic framework of modern science has sidelined questions of consciousness (and the notion of potentiality versus actuality), failing to account for the aspects of human nature that transcend animal nature. This reductionism has distorted the nature and goals of individual and collective development, leading to cultural disintegration.

Third, both individuals and societies need a sense of transcendence:

> In no past era…has a culture been able successfully to maintain its moral character through education without the sustaining force of widespread individual belief in something greater than oneself, i.e., without some form of decent, widely accepted values or religious belief. They are needed to counter the raw self-interest and savagery that lurk beneath the thin veneer of 20th century civilization in much of the world, as our scholars implied. Without such inner strength, I doubt that our era will fare very well in providing educational reform that both reflects love and respect for young learners and the courage needed to cope with a turbulent planet seemingly bent on ecocide (Harold G. Shane, cited in Sabet 58).

Even moral values, Sabet adds, might be ineffective at the motivational level without a sense of transcendence:

> A social construct that is shaped purely on the basis of social imperatives/duties and not influenced by a transcending spiritual motive will eventually recede to a lower level that is dominated by material impulses. Ideal social constructs can be established

> and released from the domination of nature if a higher level of purposeful reality, the realm of meanings and values, is present in the culture. In the lack of a spiritual magnet, physiological needs dictate societal constructs and instinctual impulses animate human interactions, even if the social façade pretends differently (116).

These three main challenges represent issues of the modern system of knowledge. Sabet attempts to address them by proposing an initial philosophical basis for a new integrative curriculum that could support the long-term search for a new model of scholarship and a new paradigm of knowledge. The new curriculum should develop out of a theory of social and cultural change that is prior to it and out of a theory about human nature and human development while accounting for a notion of transcendence, that is, as a response to the three challenges highlighted.

In short, the vision Sabet proposes consists of several elements:

- a developmental model of the stages through which religion proceeds to understand its own revelation and apply it to social reality,
- an initial philosophical basis for an integrative curriculum that covers the interaction between the contents of the revelation and the modern system of knowledge,
- the actual integrative curriculum that could support the long-term search for a new model of scholarship and a new paradigm of knowledge, and
- the curricular methodology and specific subject areas that could frame a curriculum for Bahá'í Studies.

A Developmental Model for Religions

According to Sabet (*A Conceptual Perspective* 107), religions follow particular stages in their interaction with existing scholarship. They begin, characteristically, with a period of self-focus, in which the believers strive to understand what is contained in the Nucleus of the new revelation ("the essential subject matters of education at this stage are the teachings of the religion") (107). This is followed by a phase that opens this Nucleus of new knowledge to dialogue with the outside world and existing branches of knowledge. Finally, the third stage is one in which the new revelation can reinterpret the outside world and interact with its branches of knowledge to the point of producing a new system of knowledge (107). This new system of knowledge is based on the integration of knowledge and develops by constantly attempting to find solutions to the world's problems. Sabet identifies the first stage with the internal incubation of the Nucleus of the knowledge of revelation (i.e., the internal dimension of his integrative model) and the remaining two stages with the transitional expansion and external consolidation of this Nucleus into a new modern system of knowledge (106-112) (i.e., the external dimension of his integrative model). This conceptualization allows Sabet to propose an initial philosophical basis or conceptual framework for curriculum building which advances certain propositions or themes in relation to the internal dimension of his model and another set of such propositions in relation to its external dimension. These propositions or themes lay the groundwork for an integrative model of curriculum building for Bahá'í Studies.

The Internal Dimension

An Ordered Organizational Structure

A key assumption here is that the concepts of the Bahá'í Revelation are "organically connected yet need to be classified and arranged in a proper hierarchical ordering" (113). This can be attempted through distinct integrative studies on various Bahá'í subject matters until "the hierarchical values that must underlie the organic relationships" (113-114) between their different concepts come more and more into view. The goal here is to dispel any notion that these teachings are eclectic or merely a social theory created in response to the exigencies of time and era. Rather, the Bahá'í teachings are grounded in a profound internal coherence, where each principle and concept support and enrich the others. This coherence, in turn, reflects the divine origin of the Revelation, affirming that the Bahá'í Faith is not a human construct but a divinely inspired framework, offering timeless wisdom for personal and societal transformation.

A Unified View of Reality

This theme explores the concept of unity. Ontologically, it asserts that everything is inherently unified in its existence, while epistemologically, it emphasizes the need for us, as knowers, to understand and perceive the world in a unified, integrated way.

The central concern is the development of a unified perception of reality that transcends traditional dualities such as nature versus nurture (or natural science versus social sciences), matter versus spirit (science versus religion), and ego versus others. These dualities point to a

fundamental issue of our time: the fragmentation in how we perceive ourselves and the world. This fragmented view leads to a lack of coherence and insight, contributing to confusion, disorder, and strife.

Progressive Revelation

While this could be regarded as an examination of the notion of progressive revelation, Sabet is keen to emphasize that the principle assumes "that movement and change are essential features of our existence" (117). This means that "human institutions, social, economic and political theories, and religious doctrines are all subject to the universal law of change and decay" meaning, they must be dynamic to last.

Transcendental and Historical Truth

The theme for investigation in this section is to what extent truth is absolute and to what extent relative. As Sabet observes, "an integrative synthesis requires a balance between relative and absolute dimensions of religion" (118). For Sabet this balance is reached by admitting that truth is absolute in the divine realm and relative in the historical domain:

> God's vision is absolute and unified, while the evolution of the world toward completion is a relative process that requires a multiplicity of efforts. … Thus, truth in the context of progressive revelation is both transcendental and historical. The historical dimension of religion is conditioned by social and cultural realities. However, the transcendental dimension (God-like vision or perfection) is given absolutely (118-119).

Criteria for Interpretation

If the Bahá'í Revelation contains certain criteria for interpretation (i.e., a hermeneutics) what are these criteria and how do they apply to previous religious dispensations? Furthermore, "what are the essential criteria for interpreting knowledge across different fields of study?" (Sabet, "Personal Communication").

Modernization

What is modernization, how has it impacted religions, and how should religions engage tradition and modernity? Sabet (*A Conceptual Perspective* 127), for example, provides the following perspective:

> The Bahá'í Faith does not oppose modernization and experimentation. On the contrary, it claims to be the originator of monumental changes in the nineteenth and twentieth century. Modernization was a part of the historical forces that were released to break the backbone of superstitions and dogmatic patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting. It forced religions to develop or to die out. It gave humankind a scientific and technological order to manipulate its physical environment and to achieve the physical unity of the world. One may even argue that the pronouncement of the death of God in the nineteenth century was, in fact, an inevitable reaction to a dogmatic definition of God.
>
> It is however crucial to understand that the Bahá'í Faith was not just another religious movement of the nineteenth century responding to the challenges of modernization. It rather provided modernization with bounds of moderation. Interpreting the developments of the Bahá'í Faith as reactions to the whims of modernization is

tantamount to negating it as the generating impulse of a new global culture and civilization.

Potentiality and Actuality

When considering different life forms and evolution, “the emergence of consciousness”, “the continuous and progressive process of divine revelation”, or the development of civilization from tribes to nation states and ultimately to a new world order, we are, in essence, conceptualizing themes of development and change. For Sabet, this development and change necessitate engagement with the philosophical and theological concepts of potentiality and actuality, and the how they interact, particularly when applied to education and discussions about human nature: “The process of actualizing human potentialities becomes the central theme of proper education” (128).

Teaching, Learning, and Change

Teaching and learning should aim to transform the human condition. Teaching occurs when the inner transformation achieved through the knowledge and love of the Manifestation of God has a transformative impact on the lives of others, precisely because it is expressed through action. Because it challenges prevailing patterns in society, “scholarship bent on teaching” implies “revolutionary action” (129).

What is Sabet conveying through this enumeration of philosophical concepts?
In the simplest form, his message is that in the first stage of studying the knowledge of Revelation one should:

a) identify a proper hierarchical ordering of its values and concepts,

b) develop a unified view of reality and the revelation,

c) investigate the principle of progressive revelation,

d) differentiate between the absolute and relative dimensions of truth,

e) explore Bahá'í hermeneutics and the essential criteria for interpreting knowledge across different fields of study,

f) engage with the question of modernity and modernization, as well as the role of tradition,

g) conceptualize the interaction between potentiality and actuality as the determinant of development and change, and

h) explore the pedagogical concept of teaching in relation to the transformation of the human condition.

The External Dimension

In Sabet's vision, to engage with "the articulation of a systematic relationship between the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith … and knowledge and practice in philosophical and scientific domains" (111) requires:

Philosophical Hindsight

Sabet (132) highlights the importance of correlating philosophy with religion in the following terms: "An understanding of philosophy will enhance our understanding of the Bahá'í Faith, and a higher understanding of the Bahá'í Faith will enable us to reinterpret philosophical ideas in a new light". In his view, the first challenge of modern philosophy is to transcend the

knowledge of the "fragmented sciences" (i.e., specialization) and the dichotomy between the natural and the social sciences by providing a "universal and integrated vision of the world" and "a synthesis of insight into the purpose and meaning of life" (135). The second challenge of modern philosophy is to "become the backbone of a new scientific scheme" able to transcend the dualism between the philosophical traditions of realism (Aristotle) and idealism (Plato), the objective and the subjective experience of reality, matter and mind, and the physical and human sciences in order to establish "a coherent model about reality" (135-136), that is, the foundation of a new scientific paradigm.

As part of this argument, Sabet strongly endorses the idea that the Bahá'í Faith, and religion in general, can be seen as a complete philosophy:

> The Bahá'í Religion is perhaps the religion with the most philosophical ideas in its writings. In most other religious literature the central emphasis is on laws, prophecy, and moral lessons. The Bahá'í Faith is a knowledge-based religion. It seeks a comprehensive approach to knowledge that incorporates philosophical concepts and emphasizes reason and intellect. … Religion in its broadest sense represents a complete philosophy with propositions concerning the nature of reality, both physical and metaphysical (ontology). Religion deals with the nature and organization of knowledge (epistemology). It has ideas about social organization, political life and the question of justice (political philosophy). It originates and promotes a system of ideal conduct (moral philosophy/ethics). Finally, religion tries to find beauty in the order and design of the universe and also in striving for nobility (aesthetics). Religion, like philosophy, tries to synthesize, to bring diverse ideas together in a coherent way. In that, like philosophy again, its role is to work as a complementary force with science (131-132).

A Brief Review of the Harmony between Science and Religion

"The urgent issue", Sabet maintains (136), "is to recognize what elements have contributed to the historical separation of religion and science". Principal amongst these are "the dogmatic hardening of religion and the materialistic overtone of science" (136). "In the Bahá'í view", Sabet (136) claims, "universal teachings of religion should be interpreted within the context of the relativity of human comprehension and the historical nature of knowledge". As for the scientific method, this could, over time, be released from "the narrow confines of empirical methodology" and expanded to include "properties of consciousness" (137) such as "cultural and historical experiences", intuition and spiritual insight, and also, revealed knowledge. Such a scientific method would extend "from sense perception to reason to revelation" and would be applicable to the "subjective domains of reality", such as religion (137-138). As Sabet sees it, the fragmentation of knowledge and the division and antagonisms in the world cannot be addressed through rational discourse alone: "Revealed knowledge is necessary to illumine reason and understanding and to direct individualization and separation into unity and wholeness" (141).

Integration of Fact and Values: A Unified Philosophy

Scholarship should not be separated from "the ultimate values and meanings of life" and should work towards a "complementary relationship between empirical and normative values" (141). Without a grounding in values, sciences tend to become a tool of oppression and injustice: "Physical and applied sciences as well as social and human disciplines need the illumination of the spiritual reality to become the cause of enlightenment and true understanding" (142).

Six Foundational Challenges and Emerging Paradigms Requiring a Bahá'í Response

Materialistic Empiricism

This section provides a historical study of the emergence of empiricism in the 16th century and its further development into "a powerful materialistic philosophy that is still dominating all aspects of cultural life" (142). It includes discussions of Newtonian physics, Darwin and the Theory of Natural Selection, Locke, Hume, Hobbes, Freudianism, Behaviourism, Marxism and even religious dogmatism as a contributing factor to "the ascendancy of materialistic positions" (146).

A State of Crisis in the Social Sciences

In my understanding, Sabet identifies three causes for the current state of crisis in the social sciences: 1) the borrowing of materialistic and mechanistic philosophies and scientific methodologies from the natural sciences of the 19th century (such as the influence of Newtonian cosmology and Darwinian biology on the theoretical models of the social sciences), 2) the separation from religion as a source of knowledge that can provide hierarchical values, a unified perspective, and account for "the phenomenon of transcendence" and the concept of consciousness (149), and 3) the failure to incorporate "the limitations of reductionist mechanistic thinking that are demonstrated by quantum physics and Einstein's theory of relativity" (148).

It should be noted that Sabet's view emphasizes the need for the social sciences to adopt Organicist models of reality that propose that the universe and all phenomena within it are interconnected and interdependent, much like the components of a living organism. In contrast to mechanistic models, which view the universe as a machine governed by isolated parts and predictable laws, organicism emphasizes the dynamic relationships between the parts and the whole. It also incorporates the idea of self-organization, where systems are capable of growth and adaptation without needing an external controller, much like biological organisms.

What has resulted from all these influences and the neglect of an organicist perspective? A state of crisis in the social sciences in which "a multiplicity of ideas and theories without a unifying framework to solve human problems and to explain the complexity of human behavior have created a deep theoretical and moral bankruptcy at the core of these disciplines" (148).

Dynamics of Consciousness

"Physics, which is the core of the experimental sciences," Sabet observes, "is moving to increasingly abstract ideas to explain the universe" thus envisioning phenomenal reality as the partial manifestation of an intellectual reality that "is beyond human comprehension" (153). This implies that in the quest to formulate a unified field theory, physicists will have to tap into the dynamics of consciousness. The nature of consciousness is deeply connected to these ideas of time, quantum mechanics, and the possibility of other dimensions or realities. Consciousness is one of the greatest mysteries in both science and spirituality, and many of

the cutting-edge theories in physics and philosophy suggest that our understanding of consciousness might be fundamentally linked to the structure of the universe itself.

A New Scientific Paradigm

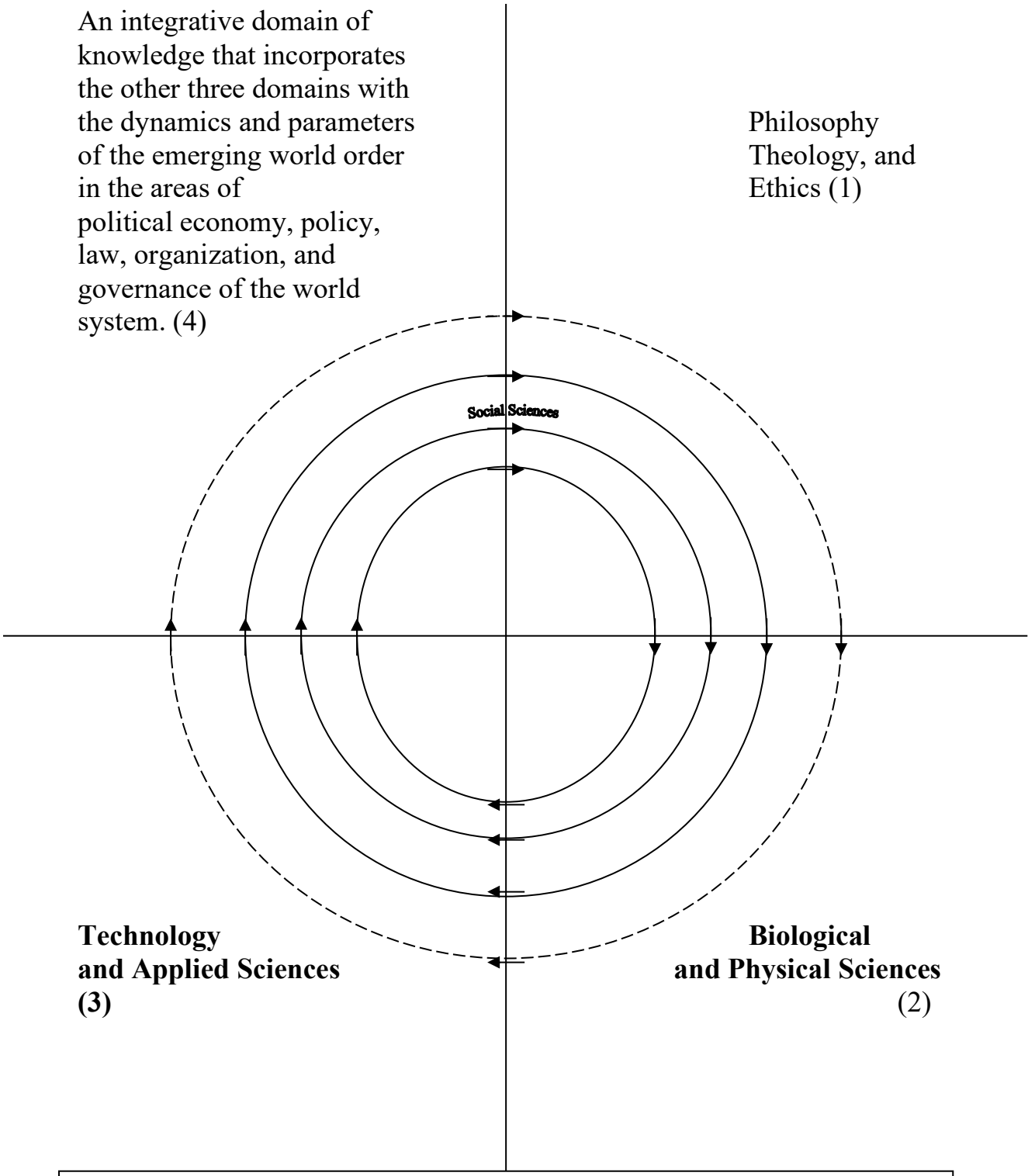
The convergence of science and religion cannot be forced; it must emerge naturally as both disciplines evolve and mature. Despite the materialistic tendencies that currently characterize science—though gradually diminishing—we must trust in its potential to navigate its own transformation. As noted, "The scientific side of the paradigm shift needs to arise out of science itself. This process cannot be imposed from outside by various cultural configurations" (154). For such a shift to have a solid foundation, it must begin with the physical sciences (such as physics and biology) before extending to the social sciences.

An Integrated Vision

Systems theory, Whitehead's process philosophy, and advancements in physics, the life sciences, and information technology are contributing to a transition from the current materialistic and mechanistic paradigm toward an organicist model. This shift will give rise to "a new hierarchical structure of knowledge with lifelike, dynamic-organic characteristics" (158). However, this "emerging integrative worldview" (157) must be anticipated through a revised curriculum. Sabet imagines such a model as consisting of four clusters of knowledge: "(1) theological, philosophical, and ethical, (2) physical and biological, (3) applied sciences, and (4) the totality of sciences that contribute to the emergence of a world civilization" (159). Sabet (159) describes this integrative curriculum in the following manner:

> The first two domains constitute the theoretical foundations and the last two constitute the practical and applied dimensions of the model. The first domain is about the refinement of values while the second domain generates facts. They also, in their interrelationships, establish a system of checks and balances that regulates the excesses of each domain. The third domain is where the patterns of thought, developed in the first and second domains, interact with and influence the function of technology. The first three levels of knowledge come to a fruition at the fourth domain. The fourth domain constitutes social processes of global development. Here a synthesis of values and scientific thoughts, inventing ever more advanced technology, transforms the whole of humanity.

While each circle represents one of the clusters of knowledge, all the circles in interaction also represent the social sciences and the social discourse, as these "are generated and given meaningful context by the interaction of all 4 domains" (159).



Evolutionary methodology that integrates past and future, biological evolution and social history, whole and parts.

Sabet, Behrooz. *Bahá'í Education: A Conceptual Perspective*. 2002, p.159.

Catastrophic Events

Sabet believes that catastrophic events will produce shifts in consciousness and in epistemology that will trigger fundamental changes in the modern system of knowledge.

A New Model of Scholarship

Sabet believes that, through a process that cannot yet be discerned now, the eventual synthesis between the nucleus of the Bahá'í Revelation and the core of existent knowledge will result in a new modern system of knowledge. In his view, Bahá'í studies will lead the way in developing integrative models of scholarship and a unified perspective of reality that integrates values and meanings with facts, science with philosophy and religion, and the natural sciences with the social sciences, a development that might unfold according to his three stages model. The resulting "interpenetration of Bahá'í scientific and philosophical ideas will hasten the historical encounter of science and religion" (161) which will then lead to four types of changes:

1. A new understanding of evolution which sees spirituality or the reality of the spirit as the fundamental aspect of all things in existence.
2. "when the majority of the scientific community acknowledges the need for a coherent corpus of spiritual knowledge in the general framework of science, then the totality of ultimates, absolutes, values, and meanings in the Bahá'í teachings will act as a unifying philosophy for the human sciences, making the organization of separate bodies of theory possible" (161)
3. through also the efforts of science in shifting from a mechanistic paradigm to an organicist one, "a scientific/spiritual model of reality with a hierarchical

structure of knowledge that relates all the sciences to each other" (161) and which transcends the divide between "subjectivity and objectivity, spirit and matter, idealism and materialism" (167) will be developed.

4. In this "new spiritual-scientific paradigm" (167) the scientific method will make way for a "transcendental methodology" that brings "empirical-analytic models, cultural and historical experiences, models of symbolic interaction, intuition, spiritual insight, rational consensus, and historical-hermeneutic disciplines into an organic whole" (163).

In the remaining portions of his unpublished manuscript, Sabet then provides a curricular methodology for integrative studies and detailed subject areas outlines in six areas – with the aim of establishing correlations between them: philosophy, metaphysics and theology, modern science, spirituality and psychology, social sciences, and the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh.

By comparison with the views presented so far, I would consider Sabet's perspective to represent the maximalist position on the notion of religion as a complete philosophy and system of knowledge on the model of the sciences.

Conclusion

As it can now be observed, I have structured this essay in such a manner that the reader might ponder on where they sit in relation to these perspectives ahead of the conclusion.

Nevertheless, while I would like everyone to draw their own conclusions from this, there might be some use in sharing a few thoughts of my own:

I. It seems to me that philosophy has a key role to play in understanding the Bahá'í Revelation in almost each of these perspectives. Overall, these accounts highlight a need to engage many of the branches of philosophy: epistemology, ontology, metaphysics, philosophy of science, philosophy of education, philosophy of religion, philosophical anthropology, political philosophy, ethics and social philosophy, aesthetics and so on.

II. Such a diversity of perspectives seems to invite a deeper inquiry: what kind of language is the language of religion or Revelation as compared to the language of science, and as compared to the language of philosophy? (see "What Kind of Language is Revelation?")

III. Our current collective understanding of the principle of the harmony of science and religion is not developed enough to be able to arbitrate between these different perspectives. The great divergence on show points to the need to advance in this area, but this conceptual diversity should be seen as a positive.

IV. The perspectives analyzed seem to generally represent different research agendas[16], each with its pros and cons. These research agendas have already played a role in the development of our understanding of the Bahá'í Revelation, and it is likely that most of them (and maybe others) will continue to do so. At times, these perspectives may represent more than mere epistemological positions; they may also reflect features that are, to some extent, historically

[16] I am thankful to one of the reviewers of the Journal of Bahá'í Studies for this suggestion.

embedded within the socio-cultural and institutional contexts of the Bahá'í Faith, elements of which may persist or circulate independently.

V. It is okay to admit that we do not have the answers to very important questions and that some of these answers might not be there and might never be found. It is also unproblematic to admit we have been wrong on key issues, and that we will be wrong again. In such conditions, it becomes important to be able to operate with uncertainty, risk, and with multidimensional and probabilistic thinking. Pragmatism is called for, and the possibility of failure must not be feared but rather acknowledged as an aspect of necessary experimentation.

VI. It is enough to look at the negative uses of technology today[17], at how economic and political systems have been constructed to benefit the richest in society through the exploitation of the other social classes (for example, through the recent shift to rentier capitalism) and at the zero-sum games shaping our global reality (and, increasingly, our everyday reality) to clearly observe a huge imbalance in our modern system of knowledge. Sorokin's critique of this sensate system of knowledge and truth has, at least in part, an important degree of validity. However, a return to an ideational system of knowledge and truth, that is, to the days when philosophy and science were the handmaidens of theology, is, in my view, no longer possible. The scientific revolution has rendered moot any notion that the sciences could ever again become subservient to religion. Nonetheless, the question remains as to whether religion can contribute to rebalancing the modern system of

[17] For example, ecological destruction, financial capitalism and the rentier society, the collapse of the informational ecosystem and the rise of post-truth, the centralization of surveillance, the spectacular rise of monopolies, the high increase in social inequality, the demise of the liberal democracy and of the international liberal order, the use of automated weapons systems, and the gradual replacing of the post WWII international system with Big Powers' spheres of influence.

knowledge, and what role it has historically played in its formation process. The current essay has sought answers to the first part of this question, but they are much harder to find than anticipated. In fact, it seems we have just arrived at the questions of modernity – an encounter yet to take place. I would also argue that religion must first adopt a reflexive stance, examining itself historically and acknowledging the role of the subconscious in its processes, before making claims within scientific domains or about truth.

VII. The reader would have observed that missing from this account is exactly the perspective which gives the current approach of the Bahá'í community on the issue of the relationship between science and religion. In short, this is the perspective that views "science and religion as complementary systems of knowledge and practice" (Arbab, "An Inquiry" 132). This perspective has the potential to span a considerable part of the continuum discussed above or adopt different positions from it (or from outside of it) based on its own internal logic when faced with the challenges of reality and the need to develop more complex discourses and structures. As this view is central to all the lines of activity of the Bahá'í community, including scholarly work, it has been - and will remain - the focus of significant attention. The reader is no doubt aware that this perspective originated with FUNDAEC and Farzam Arbab ("Promoting a Discourse", "An Inquiry"), received further treatments by Paul Lample (*Revelation & Social Reality*), Todd Smith ("Dynamic Interplay"*)*, Stephen Friberg ("Revelation as Scientific Method") and others, and was adopted in the language of the Universal House of Justice and of the institutions of the Administrative Order. It has been expressed educationally through the Ruhi Institute and the programs of the ISGP, integrated into the conceptual framework of the Associations for Bahá'í Studies and of numerous research groups across diverse disciplines, and directly applied to fields such as education (Sona Farid-Arbab, *Moral Empowerment*), social theory/social change (Michael

Karlberg, *Normative Foundations*), community building (Michael Karlberg and Todd Smith, "A Culture of Learning"), and the social sciences (Zabihi et al., "Aspirational Trends") - all as part of an extensive and continuing process of carefully directed scholarly engagement. This perspective, which to a significant extent reflects the lived reality of the Bahá'í community over several decades, could not have been adequately summarized or examined within the limited space available in this review. At the same time, owing to the efforts of the aforementioned agencies and the extensive body of related works, this perspective is already widely accessible and, in most cases, largely familiar to the reader.

VIII. Since the minimalist position is associated with the lowest degree of risk for the relationship between science and religion, it should maybe be seriously cultivated no matter what other options are in play. Maybe many of the problems of the world could be tackled by simply focusing on the ethics that should accompany the results and applications of science and technology (and of the academic disciplines) once these have been provided, in the manner suggested by Frank Lewis.

IX. Even if maximalist positions are not fruitful in terms of their impact on the academic disciplines in the long run, such experiments might prove quite useful and maybe even indispensable to the understanding of religion and of the Revelation. In other words, religion might have a considerable amount to gain from employing philosophy and the academic disciplines to bear on its most fundamental questions, irrespective of any material benefits to science.

X. Each perspective comes with potential benefits and some degree of risk. While opinions may vary, the following reflects my 2025[18] assessment of the advantages and disadvantages of each perspective analyzed - one which obviously comes with its own biases:

Perspective 1 (associated here with an article by Frank Lewis)

The main advantage of this perspective is that it avoids from the start any possible friction between religion and science. At the same time, a focus on the ethical aspects of the application of knowledge would still enable religion to positively connect with scientific discourse. Frank Lewis's concern with "the creation of equitable access to knowledge" ("First we speak of logical proofs") mirrors a theme in the Bahá'í community's current approach to scholarship. Another positive is that this option will always be there if maximalist approaches fail. On the other hand, a main disadvantage might be that the process of Revelation has more to offer, that maybe deeper connections between science and religion are possible.

Perspective 2 (associated here with an article by Bahiyyih Nakhjavani)

This standpoint seems to read the claims of religion as not so much about facts but about offering a grand narrative or ethos which can provide directionality, unity, and purpose to society through the power of fiction/imagination. This position is reminiscent of the 'moral imagination' of Maxine Greene, and to some extent, of the 'religious fictionalism' of someone like Robin Le Poidevin (an extremely important position to consider) but could also be linked with the 'creative imagination' of Henri Corbin. In each case, the pros and cons

[18] I am signaling here that one's views can change radically even over a short period of time.

would differ. One advantage of this position for me is that it would treat religious language as a symbolic structure in need of literary analysis and hermeneutical interpretation. A second advantage is that it would seek to challenge the current disenchantment of the modern era by re-activating the magic power of fiction/art and of direct lived experience. Yet another is that it would focus on moral character as a matter of moral sensitivity in the everyday context of life. Such a perspective would bring religion much closer to the rest of the Humanities, also without overstepping onto the domains of the sciences. The problem that opens up, however, is how to ensure social order and an order of values based on religious fictionalism and appeals to the moral imagination, that is, on the foundations of 'weak thought'.[19]

Many Bahá'ís have read "A History of God" by Karen Armstrong and have even met her personally (for example, the Bahá'í community in Derby, UK). I have only recently realized (and that might be the case with others) that the introduction of that book provides an excellent example of 'religious fictionalism':

"When I began to research this history of the idea and experience of God in the three related monotheistic faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, I expected to find that God had simply been a projection of human needs and desires. I thought that 'he' would mirror the fears and yearnings of society at each stage of its development. My predictions were not entirely unjustified but I have been extremely surprised by some of my findings and I wish that I had learned all this thirty years ago, when I was starting out in the religious life. It would have saved me a great deal of anxiety to hear – from eminent monotheists in all three faiths – that instead of waiting for God to descend from on high, I should deliberately create a sense of

[19] Formulated by Gianni Vattimo, 'weak thought' can be understood as a type of philosophizing that rejects absolute, 'strong' truths in favor of interpretive understanding, pluralism, and dialogue.

him for myself. Other Rabbis, priests and Sufis would have warned me not to expect to experience him as an objective fact that could be discovered by the ordinary rational process. They would have told me that in an important sense God was a product of the creative imagination, like the poetry and music that I found so inspiring. A few highly respected monotheists would have told me quietly and firmly that God did not really exist – and yet that 'he' was the most important reality in the world". (Armstrong *A History of God* 4)

Perspective 3 (associated here with some of the writings of Julio Savi)

The main advantage of such a position is that it seeks not to disconnect itself from the mystical core of religion and the language of Revelation. The main disadvantages might be that:

a) it might not necessarily use philosophy and science (or, the academic disciplines) as tools for investigating the contents of the Revelation, situation which could, if prolonged extensively, lead to the crystallization of dogma or superstition over time.
b) that it arguably prioritizes the subjective dimension (intuition/mysticism) over the objective dimension (reason/academic disciplines), which could create a major imbalance between idealism and realism in engaging processes of social transformation in the real world.
c) it is also not clear to me to what extent the Universal House of Justice would like to play a major role in either outlining or directing the formation of a revelation theology.

Nevertheless, I assume that Shi'a Sufism is an example of a religious and philosophical tradition of great consequence that might have emerged in such a manner. Would I want to

cancel a strand of thought and being[20] that develops in this direction or which retains a mystical component? I certainly would not, though I would also feel the need to simultaneously highlight other perspectives that might respond more directly to the challenges of modernity.

Perspective 4 (associated here with some of the writings of Udo Schaefer)

A possible limitation of this approach is that it seems to assume that the Revelation is given directly in a transparent language and requires no major effort at interpretation. A second problem is that it seems to view philosophy and science as the handmaidens of theology, and not primarily as tools for investigating the content of the Revelation. In my view, this perspective hides the fact that what might be deemed to constitute the objective and transparent language of Revelation might itself be a construction of theologians, and one without the usual checks and balances offered by philosophy and science. The main advantage would be the focus on theology and a strong emphasis on the notions of faith and obedience (even though this would come at the expense of the notion of reason) and on God's absolute sovereign will (though this would overshadow the dynamic of love between the Creator and creation emphasized in works like 'The Hidden Words'). Another advantage, but this could also become a major disadvantage, is that a top-down organizational approach would likely be very strongly promoted to ensure social order. Either or both features could satisfy that need for strong, hard truths and clear hierarchies and forms of authority which many religious people are attracted to out of a subconscious need for security, certainty and order.

[20] See *'Remoteness' - an Interview with Julio Savi:* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_M5mVOo_OZM.

In a way, this perspective most closely aligns with Sorokin's 'ideational' system of truth and knowledge, which is grounded primarily in belief and deference to religious and theological authority. As such, at least in potentia all the huge problems of past theocracies would seem to apply. Is Sorokin's 'ideational' system of truth and knowledge still a possibility in the age of modernity? That is a difficult question to answer in a way that elicits consensus. I personally do not think that can be the case today.

Perspective 5 (associated here with some of the earlier writings of Jack McLean)

The fifth perspective is a somewhat more science and philosophy friendly version of the third and fourth perspectives, displaying similar pros and cons, but still significantly different. Like with Savi, Bahá'í studies must be centred in a Bahá'í theology and intuitive/mystical knowledge and not primarily in philosophy or reason. Acquired knowledge is useful but not in studying God and the Revelation which must be approached mainly through the mystical and faith tradition of one's particular religion. McLean ("Prolegomena") envisages Bahá'í theology as comprised of two kinds of theology: "Bahá'í source theology" (or "revelation theology") and "derivative theology". While derivative theology refers to personal opinions or commentary on the Revelation, Bahá'í source theology "refers to the authoritative, objective, and normative truths of the Bahá'í sacred writings or those elucidated by its duly appointed interpreters" ("Prolegomena", 'Defining Bahá'í Theology' par. 12). Bahá'í source theology, McLean ("Prolegomena", 'The Function of the Absolute', par. 4) claims, is what places Bahá'í theology "on the hard ground of some central beliefs" allowing "our worldview and religious convictions to function as absolutes, as 'some fixed or absolute center' in our interpretation of reality". However, to what extent is the language of the Revelation directly

advancing an obvious theology and to what extent does it actually need its contents systematized into a theology through derivative commentary? If a systematic theology can in fact only be advanced by derivative commentary (as McLean at times seems to indirectly imply in my view), can we still assume the principles of such a systematic Bahá'í theology as absolutes? Equally, in the context in which absolutes are not at all guaranteed, would not such derivative commentary in fact require the support of philosophy and the sciences? What would, after all, be some of the absolute principles of this systematic theology? The work I have enjoyed most on this topic so far, and which, in my view, justifies the need for the development of theological thought, has been the treatise by 'Alí-Murád Dávúdí on God and Revelation ("Discourse on Bahá'í Theology"). However, to me a lot of this treatise seems to emphasize the apophatic dimension of Divinity.

Perspective 6 (associated here with a recent interview from Mikhail Sergeev)

The sixth perspective is extremely important as it is the only perspective here that fully admits of the limitations of human reason highlighted by modern Western philosophy and by modern science from the 18th century onward. Sergeev's account, therefore, gives rise to a number of considerations in my view.

If universals are merely names - linguistic forms without physical or intellectual existence and expressive only of historically conditioned human subjectivity - then moral values lack ontological grounding and other types of grounding or legitimization are needed. If the universals of Plato, the divine Names and Attributes, and those advanced by ancient and medieval philosophies do not refer to real, mind-independent essences, then, regardless of their appeal, they reduce to subjective mental constructions, and Neoplatonism and

panentheism can be affirmed only as highly elaborate fictions or hypotheticals which originate from historical traditions. On the other hand, if we cannot know the essences of things, if we cannot know 'things in themselves', then what is the basis for metaphysics? What is the rational basis for belief in God or for the notion of the soul? What does all of that say about human imagination or creativity in the construction of social reality and history? What does it say about social constructionism, the process nature of reality and the role of an individual reason that cannot rely on constructs from the past as objective reality?

The challenge is not just to confront these questions, but to understand that the world we live in today is the product of three centuries of engagement with the limits of human reason, and that different alternative paths have already been put forward and explored. If the limitations of human reason highlighted by modern philosophical and scientific thought are real, then ignoring such concerns means largely disassociating religion from the condition and context of modernity as well as from contemporary academic disciplines. It means turning away from humanity's deepest questions at a time when adequate answers still appear elusive.

On the other hand, one might ask whether a form of metaphysics or Neoplatonism could be conceived that respects the modern limits of human reason, or whether an alternative form of usefulness for them could be identified.

Finally, Sergeev's argument - that philosophy cannot uncover universal laws, cannot penetrate the essences of things, cannot function as a science, and has, since Descartes, been grounded in a methodology of doubt – would seem to imply that:

1. a universal philosophy is likely impossible.

2. philosophy cannot generally serve as an objective guide for the academic disciplines (at least, not in the way we used to think it would).
3. and philosophy should therefore be restrained in its attempts to interfere with the scientific methods or with the sciences themselves (as these generally constitute a different kind of pursuit).

It is worth noting that Sergeev does not explicitly take a position on any of these three issues (although I would argue he hints at the first point); this reflects my current reading of his work as an attempt to draw out implications relevant to the main questions of this article.

Overall, I suspect that both the strengths and the limitations of Sergeev's approach lie in his tendency to draw sharp, final distinctions. To my mind, the more compelling challenge is one of nuance and process - of carefully navigating back and forth between such distinctions. That said, given the current context of Bahá'í studies and of Bahá'í philosophy in particular, this kind of clarity may be particularly necessary and quite unique.

Perspective 7 (associated with an article of William Hatcher from 1980)

I have already offered my assessment of the advantages and disadvantages of this perspective within the section describing it. For many years I have been very supportive of this perspective reading it as a Bahá'í example of the stage of Dialogue within Ian Barbour's fourfold taxonomy: 1. Conflict, 2. Independence, 3. Dialogue, and 4. Integration (*When Science Meets Religion*). Looking at it again with more experienced eyes I have found that the logic of argumentation no longer seemed convincing to me, except in a metaphoric and motivational way. However, it still retains an importance to me as the opening of a trajectory that could approximate Barbour's 'Dialogue' stage and because of its emphasis on the

scientific spirit of inquiry. I also think that at the time, in 1980, this would have been a major positive contribution to Bahá'í intellectual discourse - which is precisely why some of these ideas are still very much part of our current cultural forms – though that does not mean they should not now be questioned.

Perspective 8 (associated here with an article by Jean-Marc Lepain)

This perspective is exciting for me because it starts from the conviction that "one of the responsibilities of Bahá'í metaphysics is proposed interpretation of Bahá'í writings regarding the nature of reality in the light of the latest progress in science" (Lepain, "The Concept of Nature" 87). I believe this research orientation to be extremely positive for the Bahá'í Faith. Why not attempt to compare and contrast Bahá'í metaphysics and a Bahá'í philosophy of nature with the philosophies and ontologies of the sciences? As far as I am aware, no one else has tried to do this. Could Lepain's philosophy of nature (i.e., Bahá'í metaphysics) in its current form, however, act as a supportive ontology for science? I am not so sure, but I think we should absolutely try to find out. Whatever the answer might be, there will be much to gain from it.

Perspective 9 (associated here with an article by Roland Faber and a very partial reading of his book "The Garden of Reality")

This perspective emphasizes `irfán and the process philosophy of Whitehead as a paradigm shift from naturalism to nondualism, which is to say, to an integral or integrative approach to knowledge that also has a mystical dimension. The philosophy of Whitehead does indeed seem compatible with the Bahá'í Writings, but this remains to be determined. The main

advantage here is a new aesthetic and way of seeing the world; the challenge is to identify how exactly such an integrative approach to knowledge could power a model of scholarship and education that integrates religion with the academic disciplines and reason with `irfán and revelation. The specifics need to be worked out. The next perspective constitutes one possible example of how this might look, but others could be envisaged.

Perspective 10 (associated here with the unpublished manuscript of Behrooz Sabet)

While directly opposed to the minimalist stances of Terry Eagleton, Frank Lewis, and Bahiyyih Nakhjavani (and potentially to the anti-Panentheism of Sergeev, his likely notion that philosophy cannot be universal, and to poststructuralist philosophy – likely to be perceived as a form of nihilism[21]) this maximalist position has the advantage of potentially being able to integrate aspects from all the perspectives discussed so far. This kind of synthesis could feature as a procedural type of integration via Sabet's three stages model, research methodology, and proposed curriculum. The focus on theological matters and mysticism, for example, is given full space in the first stage of the model in which the believers strive to understand what is contained in the nucleus of the new revelation. Similarly, intuition and revelation are considered aspects which need to be integrated within or considered alongside the scientific method. Furthermore, theological considerations, 'scriptural philosophy' (including Lao Tzu, Nagarjuna, and poststructuralist philosophers), and the study of religion and mysticism fit within the first cluster of knowledge in Sabet's proposed curriculum, that is, the cluster of 'theological, philosophical, and ethical knowledge' from which values originate and flow to the rest of the clusters. The ethical considerations of Frank Lewis and Nakhjavani's emphasis on moral education and the moral

[21] These are just my speculations.

imagination also play a prominent role in this philosophical model and its proposed curriculum. Nakhjavani's emphasis on religious fictionalism and metanarratives, Sergeev's rejection of a universal and/or scientific philosophy, and poststructuralism, it is true, do not fit with Sabet's assumption that a hierarchical system of truth (or a unifying philosophy) that can organize all compartments of life can be created at the interface between science and religion. Do the Bahá'í Writings truly contain a broad, comprehensive philosophy? This, and especially the character of such a philosophy, are still very much in question. Yet Sabet's recognition that any system of ordering truth and knowledge represents only a historically contingent, evolving approximation of divine truth opens a possible intersection with the approaches of Nakhjavani and Sergeev. After all, a curriculum must be based on some perspective that arranges values and meanings to some extent.

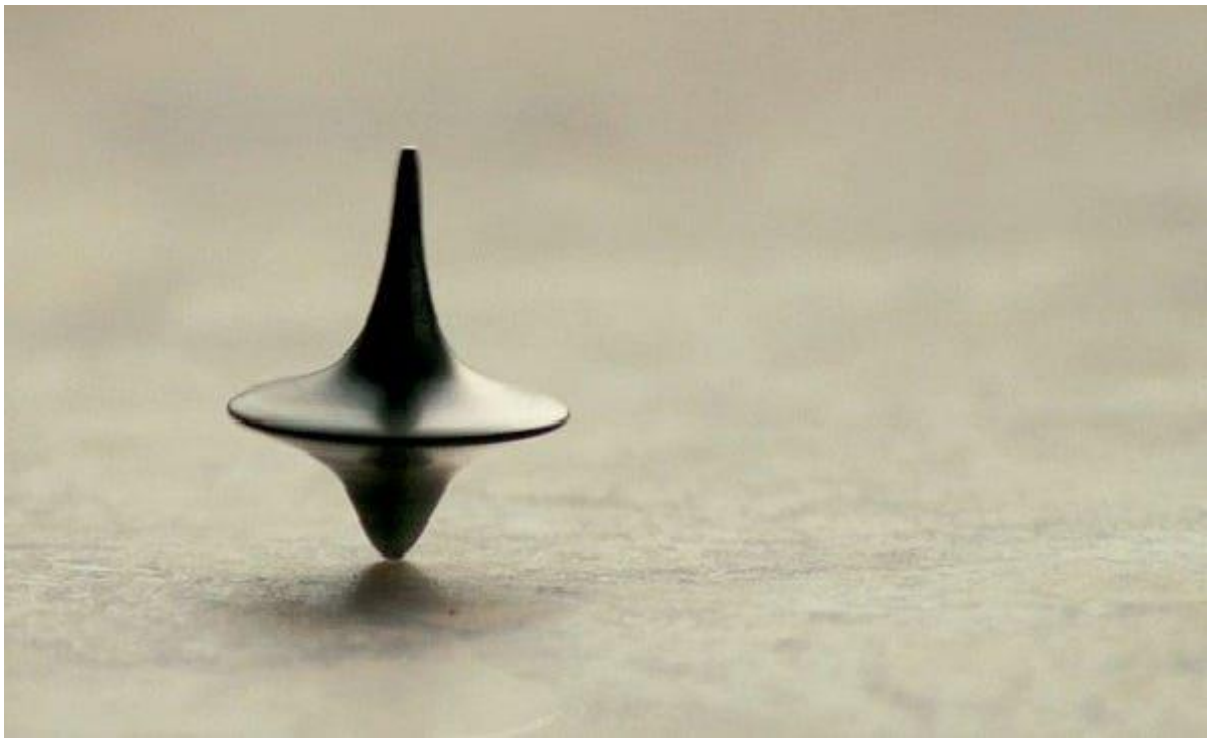
Conversely, even if some of the maximalist aspects of this perspective can be challenged as unattainable or utopian - for example, the idea that intuition and revelation could be integrated within the scientific method, or that the integrative study of the Bahá'í Writings could eventually lead to the unification of social and natural sciences and of the subjective and objective aspects of existence, thus helping to usher in a new scientific paradigm - the overall trajectory of Bahá'í scholarship and education must, in my view at least, still aim toward the interdisciplinary integration of knowledge.

That is not to say, however, that the issue of the integration of knowledge is unproblematic. How could we possibly capture the explosion of knowledge of the last three centuries into a synthesis, when mastering a single area within a discipline can take around 30-40 years after which one still lives with a high degree of uncertainty about their own claims to disciplinary knowledge? Because finding an appropriate balance between individual specialization and

the integration of knowledge is such a difficult task, and especially so in the current knowledge and labour market environment which rewards only niche specialization, integrative models come with very high risks. That must be weighed, however, against the risk that the full potential of the Bahá'í Faith might not be realized and drawn upon in addressing the fundamental challenges of the world and of the modern system of knowledge in the next 100 to 200 years or - following my interpretation of Sergeev - that the Bahá'í Faith would remain bound to a fascination with medieval philosophical models.

To sum it all up, I think that we would benefit from a broader framework that keeps these various perspectives active - as independent but interconnected lines of inquiry that inform one another. In addition, I believe that many more perspectives and entirely new ones should be added. Maybe such a spectrum of possibilities is already part of the Bahá'í community's current approach to knowledge creation.

What beckons, however, is an encounter with the tough questions of modernity.



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