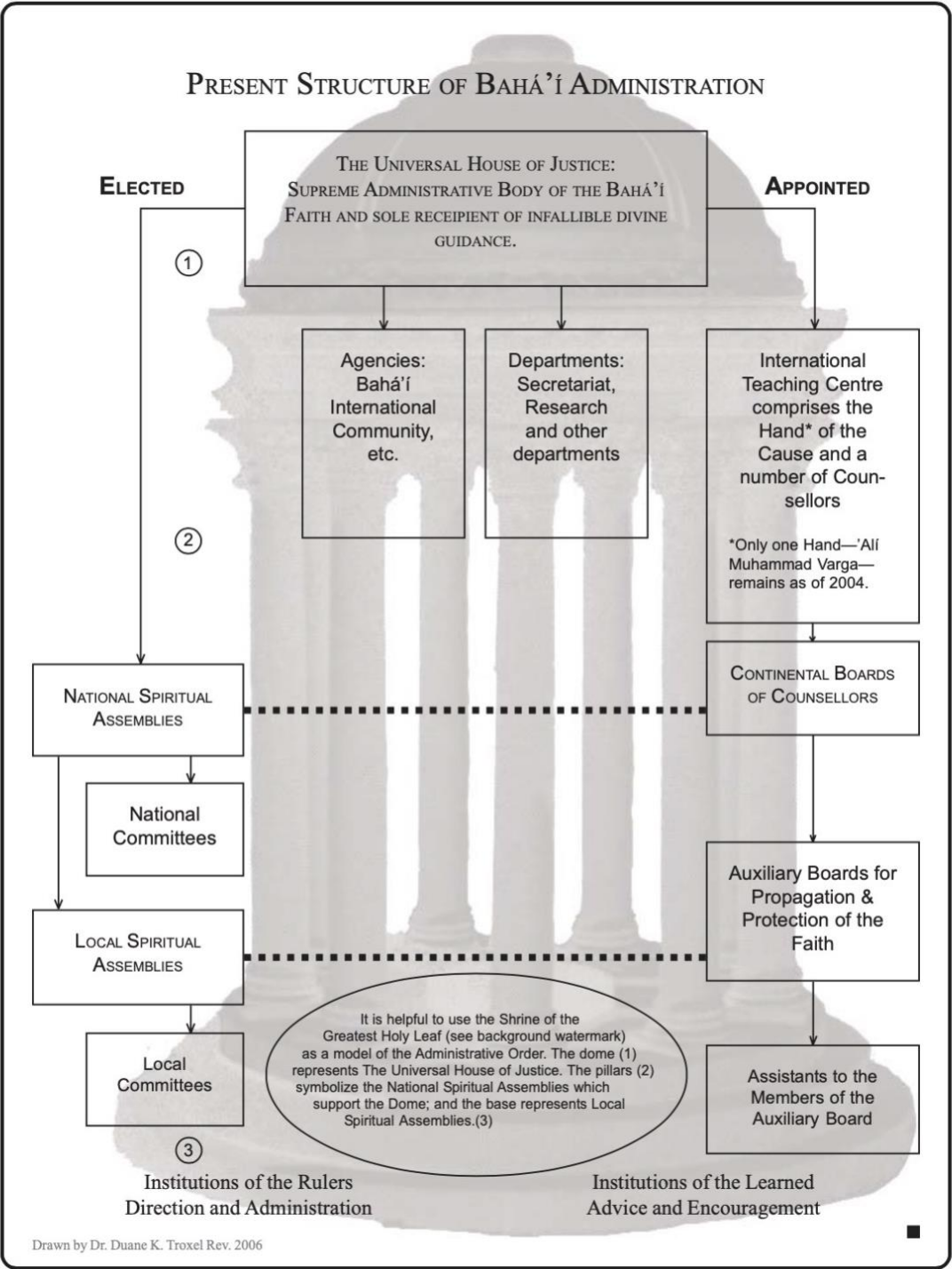


The Feed-Back Mechanisms in the Bahá'í Community and the Need for a Global Knowledge Architecture

This is an open question: what are the principal feed-back mechanisms in the Bahá'í community?

- 1. the checks and balances, information-sharing/collaboration, or consultation between the Appointed and the Elected Arms. See [diagram](#) below and a recent introduction into the topic by [Todd Smith](#).



## 2. the feedback mechanism from Bahá'í scholarship and associated fields of practice.

This depends on:

- investment in and the development of Bahá'í inspired fields of study,
- on the quality of Bahá'í scholars and their forthrightness in presenting their views, their points of critique, and suggestions for improvement, with detachment, and in 'the spirit of frank and loving consultation'
- on how much the role of such expertise is valued at the level of Bahá'í culture and in the decision-making of institutions.

- and fundamentally, on recognizing that academic spaces of inquiry have particular messy characteristics that are essential to the knowledge process. For example, academic spaces of inquiry are spaces where one is allowed to throw around the craziest and oddest of ideas or hypotheses and run them as experiments or simulations. Every perspective is allowed representation because each contributes to the collective advancement of knowledge due to another key feature: critique, that is, systematic analysis & evaluation at both individual and collective levels. For those unfamiliar with such spaces, such dynamics might seem threatening or extreme.

Within intellectual spaces, however, if one cannot bounce off their craziest ideas against someone else or against another school of thought, then their thinking cannot really develop. It is normal for one to challenge their most fundamental assumptions, to discard them, undergo periods of crisis in the search for meaning, and start afresh with new hypotheses framed at a higher level of complexity – all within a constant horizon of uncertainty. It is because of such features that the trademark of intellectual activity are constant doubt and the constant change in one's understanding, even from week to week, based on self-examination and the constant exchange of perspectives.

It is for such reasons that every school of thought is given protection within the academic space or academic community. Even those schools of thought that might not contribute amazingly in terms of the outputs of knowledge contribute hugely to the research process by creating positions, orientations of thought, and experimental results that others can learn from either through critique or by bouncing off ideas against. And in the end, the intellectual space regulates itself by filtering out which contributions are of the highest value, which ones of medium relevance, and which ones can be neglected – a hugely important function in the knowledge ecosystem which many Bahá'í inspired fields of study have not yet been able to develop. Finally,

while those overseeing or administering academic spaces of inquiry must be cognizant of their special nature, this notion of discernment plays both ways. In their turn, researchers should not expect that all social and administrative spaces would function as academic spaces of inquiry.

### **3. individual and grassroots feedback.**

Individual feedback is safeguarded by the principle of the freedom of conscience and self-expression:

“Let us also remember that at the very root of the Cause lies the principle of the undoubted right of the individual to self-expression, his freedom to declare his conscience and set forth his views. ...Let us also bear in mind that the keynote of the Cause of God is not dictatorial authority but humble fellowship, not arbitrary power, but the spirit of frank and loving consultation.” (Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá’í Reference Library – Bahá’í Administration, Pages 63-64*. <https://reference.bahai.org/en/t/se/BA/ba-55.html>)

One of the most demanding Bahá’í teachings is for the individual to turn away from imitation, that is, away from the presuppositions and the frameworks of thought inherited from their social milieu (society, religious order, community, friends and family), or instilled via social media & the attention economy as part of growing up in a tech-mediated world:

“The essence of all that We have revealed for thee is Justice, is for man to free himself from idle fancy and imitation, discern with the eye of oneness His glorious handiwork, and look into all things with a searching eye.” (Bahá’u’lláh. *Bahá’í Reference Library – Words of Wisdom. Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh Revealed After the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, Pages 155-157*. <https://reference.bahai.org/en/t/b/TB/tb-11.html>)

In a world of increasing misinformation and disinformation, of a renewed behaviorism and of the centralization of power, sense-making (one of the biggest challenges of our age), or the principle of the independent search for truth, is depicted more and more as the last line of defence for safeguarding individual human will and a free and open society.

### **4. outside expertise and partners**

At this point in time there is considerably more expertise outside the Bahá’í community than within, including on themes relating to the foundational principles of the Faith, moral

development, social institutions, consultation, administrative culture, social change, research, the developmental challenges and phases of religions, the building of the New World Order and so on. This is where I understand intellectual humbleness to begin from.

**5. underlying all of this is an open, transparent, communicative culture on all topics and at all levels which encourages diversity of human thought, self-expression, and which is in intimate contact with the outside world, both in terms of theory and practice. A culture which appreciates rigorous reason, continuity of tradition, and past contributions of value, but also critique, imagination, the unusual, the divergent, and the marginal for the unique insights such perspectives might have to offer.**

**6. the last feed-back mechanism concerns the embeddedness, participation and contribution of the entire Bahá'í community, as an epistemic community and open system, within the larger sphere referred to as “the epistemic commons”.**

Some have suggested that what is needed here is “a new movement for cultural enlightenment” that can reboot and revamp the model of the liberal democracy:

“In a democracy, we cannot rely on a single monarch or cloistered politburo to make good decisions for us. Democracy is self-government at scale and, therefore, requires sensemaking at scale in the form of an epistemically healthy public sphere.”

[\(https://consilienceproject.org/democracy-and-the-epistemic-commons/\)](https://consilienceproject.org/democracy-and-the-epistemic-commons/)

**7. connecting all of them is the practice of consultation (by which I truly mean consultation at medium to large-scale – an innovation being explored in many sectors of our society at the moment, but which no one has yet been able to unlock so that it could become a key mode of governance at different levels of society).**

A key problem here is that consultative practice is not necessarily scientific unless scientific expertise, forms of inquiry, and evaluation feed into it, and feed into it in a democratic manner. In other words, consultative practice must be aligned with the scientific method and with theory (from philosophy and from the other academic disciplines) if it is to be based on the procedures of reason. The fact that people would regularly meet and talk about their experiences does not mean what is happening can be understood as a scientific process of knowledge or as somehow reflecting the scientific method or procedures of reason. The dimension of research and the scientific method itself must somehow be embedded into that consultative process for it to be even considered as possibly scientific.

The issue of scale and the issue of the democratic procedures of reason (or of the scientific method and of the ability to operate with theory) make this a very complex problem, in which

we cannot advance except by experimental practice and continuous research efforts.

Consultation is a practice so it can only be developed through continuous practice, but this must be critically evaluated in light of wider domains of knowledge and application, hence the need for continuous research efforts. Such research efforts would imply the open sharing of existing data, the constant weighing of different theoretical models, and the integration of knowledge from diverse fields.

It is maybe in such practices of consultation that religious groups might have, at least theoretically speaking, something more to offer towards the resolution of the world's problems than their particular lists of normative universal principles.

A model of Bahá'í consultation exists in the Bahá'í Writings, but it is not clear that this has yet been developed into a specific form of practice that is either noticeably distinct from current common practice in the outside world, or ahead of other attempts in the society at large at consultative practice or deliberative democracy. For that reason, we don't yet seem to know how to transfer this model of consultation to other settings or whether the model is translatable outside a Bahá'í context.

In this model, the functioning of which requires a particular set of attributes as a common starting-point, "the clash of differing opinions" (one should express with absolute freedom his own opinion) is a prerequisite for reaching 'truth':

"The prime requisites for them that take counsel together are purity of motive, radiance of spirit, detachment from all else save God, attraction to His Divine Fragrances, humility and lowliness amongst His loved ones, patience and long-suffering in difficulties and servitude to His exalted Threshold. Should they be graciously aided to acquire these attributes, victory from the unseen Kingdom of Bahá shall be vouchsafed to them.... The members thereof must take counsel together in such wise that no occasion for ill-feeling or discord may arise. **This can be attained when every member expresseth with absolute freedom his own opinion and setteth forth his argument.** Should any one oppose, he must on no account feel hurt for not until matters are fully discussed can the right way be revealed. **The shining spark of truth cometh forth only after the clash of differing opinions.** If after discussion, a decision be carried unanimously, well and good; but if the Lord forbid, differences of opinion should arise, a majority of voices must prevail. (*Abdu'l-Bahá, cited in a letter dated 5 March 1922*)

written by Shoghi Effendi to the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada, published in *“Bahá'í Administration: Selected Messages 1922-1932”, p. 21-22)*

I have mentioned this quotation because I tend to somehow subconsciously shy away from its meaning. It is a lot more comfortable and peaceful to not challenge an existing opinion than to do so. It is a lot more comfortable to ignore a thought that differs from what I consider to be the general consensus or my deeply held belief, so that I do not have to doubt myself and my own self-worth (I found [this](#) definition of ‘self-worth’ useful: “Self-worth is the internal sense of being good enough and worthy of love and belonging from others”). At the same time, most of us would rather have friendship and be appreciated than risk that connection because of having a different perspective. Still, different opinions and perspectives are key to the process of knowledge, and so is critique. As some have observed before, a problem well-understood is a problem half solved.

Therefore, it follows that spaces of consultation should be very open spaces. Randy T.’s optimistic take on how the concept of unity in diversity should inform our consultation processes is of note here:

“It’s one thing to have lofty theories, but they’re worth nothing till the rubber hits the road, and that’s where institutions and individuals are shaped. ... It’s not arid and empty talk and concepts, it’s the daily reality of self-management, group dynamics and institutional forms that validate rather than stifle variety, it’s polycentrism on steroids, hyped up and singing as loud and happily as possible in every musical style on the planet, it’s a riotous blend of every flower that can possibly be thriving in every corner of the garden of humanity, and it’s every opinion and character finding its place in the mixing bowl of consultation and collaborative decision-making.” (Randy T, cited in Van den Hoonard, 2005, p.252) [Van den Hoonard, Will. *Etching the Idea of ‘Unity in Diversity’ in the Bahá'í Community: Popular Opinion and Organizing Principle*. Warburg, Margit, et al., editors. *Bahá'í and Globalisation*. Aarhus University Press, 2005, pp.245-267.]

Feedback mechanisms at all levels and in all directions are essential to survival and evolution. It is how an organism or organization makes sense of its environment, survives, and develops. While some will have a much greater responsibility than others, neglecting the functions of feed-back mechanisms and minimizing the dimensions of critique, divergence, or that of the ‘clash of opinions’ in consultative practice can only lead to an overall

weakening of feed-back mechanisms and, eventually, to self-censorship (which would impair all feed-back mechanisms without the phenomenon itself ever being obvious or traceable).

This is one of the most significant problems in the outside world: feed-back is many times largely ritualistic (even when anonymized) and leads nowhere; oftentimes its main aim is to collect information that would justify an already pre-determined agenda, or which could provide enough information about the views of a particular group or population in order to then introduce to them a pre-determined agenda (or decision) in a format and language they would be most likely to accept. As a result, the cultural norm is that we are all conformists; we live with some kind of strategic self-censorship, which in time, becomes automatic. It is this that leads to passivity, not only in terms of action, but also, in terms of thought. Why would I think about something that is different from what those in charge want to hear? Why would I think outside the box if it only brings risks? Why would I even engage with feed-back mechanisms or participatory processes if these are, more often than not, forms without substance? Why shouldn't I accept reality as it is, and find my piece of happiness wherever I can within that?

What I am saying here is that feed-back mechanisms must be reinvented as they are the engines of evolution and growth. They must be cherished, they must be strengthened – that should be part of our culture. Everyone can work on improving at least one of these mechanisms. An open culture is dynamic, free, and even fun – and we all benefit from it. Furthermore, it is something that could be extended to others.

Feedback mechanisms at all levels and in all directions are essential to survival and evolution. It is how an organism or organization makes sense of its environment, survives, and develops. This is particularly the case when the environment is one of uncertainty, volatility, complexity and ambiguity and the organization relates to this environment as an open-system. Feed-back mechanisms are, therefore, essential elements of a culture of learning. But why would these feed-back mechanisms need to be linked to a global knowledge architecture?

We live in a context in which we need to create viable architectures for the production of *global knowledge* in order to cope with the planetary challenges rising from the extension of human civilization at global scale. At the moment, knowledge and knowledge-production are still very much nation-based, with some countries and companies dominating these processes

worldwide. In a global environment which has established knowledge and information as the key mode of economic production and as the arena of geopolitics (meaning, as the domain in which nation-states, regions, and multinational corporations etc. compete for hegemony – take the AI arms race, for example), the Bahá'í community faces an unprecedented task.

The task is that of creating a complex global architecture for the production of a new form of knowledge – one that has the entire world as its main unit of analysis. In short, *a global knowledge architecture* to help us make sense of this chaotic world and its quickly unfolding processes. We also need such an architecture in order to understand and apply the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. Why? Because this might be the first revelation (and if not, the most recent) to have identified the global level as its primary unit of analysis. This realization forces us to acknowledge a key epistemological limitation. That, because of the way knowledge has been framed at a national level of analysis until now, we are currently limited in accessing the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh through our current systems of knowledge.

How do feed-back mechanisms relate to the need for a global knowledge architecture one might ask. Bluntly put, without very strong feed-back mechanisms and an incredible foundation in all forms of knowledge the current [challenges of sense-making](#) are too difficult to overcome. What are some of these challenges?

- the explosion of knowledge
- the fragmentation of knowledge
- geopolitics as a contest for empire-building and world hegemony
- the AI arms race
- [the polycrisis and the meta-crisis](#)
- the need for a global level of analysis
- the commodification of knowledge
- the financialization and [assetization of knowledge](#)
- the way in which digitalization and the AI revolution have been directed by governments and multinational corporations/digital platforms so far, and their impact on the informational ecosystem – we could call this the rise of [surveillance capitalism](#) (see also, Zuboff's 'The Age of Surveillance Capitalism')
- the rise of Behaviourism 2.0
- [the rise of neurotechnology and its threat to thinking freely](#) (see, "[The Battle for Your Brain: Defending the Right to Think Freely in the Age of Neurotechnology](#)" by Nita



Farahany: “What will it mean if our thoughts and emotions are up for grabs, just like the rest of our data being commodified and sold by corporations?”

- [“the deep and long-standing damage to our epistemic commons”](#)
- the transformation of the knowledge ecosystem and of the public sphere into a space for information warfare
- the rise of anti-intellectualism, the undermining of scientific expertise, and the increase in the levels of [intimidation and online abuse targeted at scientists](#) (on digital platforms such as Twitter) to prevent them from contributing to public discourses
- the transformation of new knowledge into an inaccessible private good through the digital/AI revolution
- the monopoly of knowledge creation and of intellectual property rights in the Global North
- the rise of [AI ideology machines](#)
- [the attention economy](#), the rise of extreme social polarization and of artificial tech religions like Qanon
- the displacement of religion by AI as new systems of knowledge that can be personalized – for example, [by a personal assistant as a wearable AI device that replaces the smartphone](#) (that is, ‘designed or produced to meet someone’s individual requirements’ Oxford Languages).
- [the way in which the new and unregulated models of AI can be abused to distort the knowledge ecosystem](#) (for [example](#), by pumping AI created content into the information ecology until the very data on which different AI get trained is skewed and distorted, thus skewing and distorting the entire information ecology)
- the way in which the new and unregulated models of AI could lead to unforeseen destructive consequences.
- the fact that exponential tech is constantly creating new and unprecedented challenges to the knowledge ecosystem and to human civilization, challenges which might not even be detectable for considerable periods of time.

This is a very brief account of why sense-making, or reading reality, has emerged as one of the main civilizational issues of our age. How can the Bahá’í community engage this challenge, considering that if this function of sense-making became distorted or compromised, that would immediately impact and even likely impair many other functions and processes?

I cannot really answer this question, but I can attempt a thought experiment:

In my view, the process could begin with the development of Bahá'í inspired fields of study and with allowing them to put forward different models of scholarship based on the internal logic of their discipline and research into the contents of the Bahá'í Revelation. All of this would require a preliminary step: the formation and accelerated development of Associations for Bahá'í Studies – first in every continent, and then in every nation.

One observation should be made here. It cannot be assumed that the functioning of the Associations for Bahá'í Studies would automatically lead to the development of Bahá'í inspired fields of study. For this to happen such Associations would have to be conceptualized with this key purpose in mind, and optimized through the right conditions and the right incentives. If we want the intellectual life of the Bahá'í community to not be overly influenced by the paradigm, culture, and key problems of one national community and/or region, it is likely a large number of Associations for Bahá'í Studies would be needed. Such Associations could also help each other and in doing so problematize and transcend the knowledge produced at the national level.

Nevertheless, developing many Associations of this kind would be a significant challenge. The amount of time, material support, and intellectual effort required to produce any significant advancement within a domain of knowledge is truly considerable. At the same time, however, the quality of research will always depend on the quality of the overall research network (or research community) that supports it and on the diversity of thought present within that network. The Associations for Bahá'í Studies are such emergent research networks that could be linked together to form a wider network supporting an even larger architecture.

Based on this epistemic foundation (Associations for Bahá'í Studies → Bahá'í inspired fields of study → emerging models of scholarship that integrate science and religion), universities could then be established, first in each continent, and then as a feature of every Mashriqu'l-Adhkár. This could occur in parallel with the strengthening and multiplication of other knowledge institutions such as think-tanks, media agencies, and development agencies.

A key thing here would be to allow for a diversity of models, pedagogies, curricula and different theoretical traditions. We can imagine a scenario in which each university, think-

tank, or development agency would initially constitute a unique societal laboratory at the cutting-edge of the academic disciplines; each advancing its own model of scholarship/policy/social action and its own curriculum, pedagogy, set of practices, and administrative system. Such institutions would also be grounded in the epistemologies and epistemic networks of their local, national, and continental contexts.

What would keep all these different knowledge institutions together? The study of the Revelation, the guidance of the Universal House of Justice, common notions of Bahá'í scholarship, the analysis of the world and of its megatrends, engagement in the three areas of endeavour (community-building, social action, and participation in the prevalent discourses of society), and a global knowledge and data analysis center & digital infrastructure that could collect, preserve and integrate all the knowledge transmitted.

But this is not the whole story. The Associations for Bahá'í Studies, the Offices of Public Affairs, institutions like the BIC, BIDO, ISGP, OPD (and others), universities and other HE institutions, think-tanks, development agencies, businesses, and start-ups, could then all coalesce into one global knowledge architecture aimed at tackling the crisis of sense-making and the other problems of our age. An open system of this kind could also serve to inform and support the information gathering and knowledge processing centers that are the Research Department, the International Teaching Centre, and the National Spiritual Assemblies. This architecture is almost there, many of its elements are already in place. It likely just needs more of a push in relation to several themes:

1. the activation of knowledge via the development of Bahá'í inspired fields of study,
2. a common (and autonomous) digital infrastructure,
3. a more joined-up approach based on the open and transparent sharing of information and resources, and
4. a global knowledge and data analysis center that could collect, preserve and integrate all the knowledge transmitted **while ensuring the autonomy of each unit** and the resilience of the overall network.

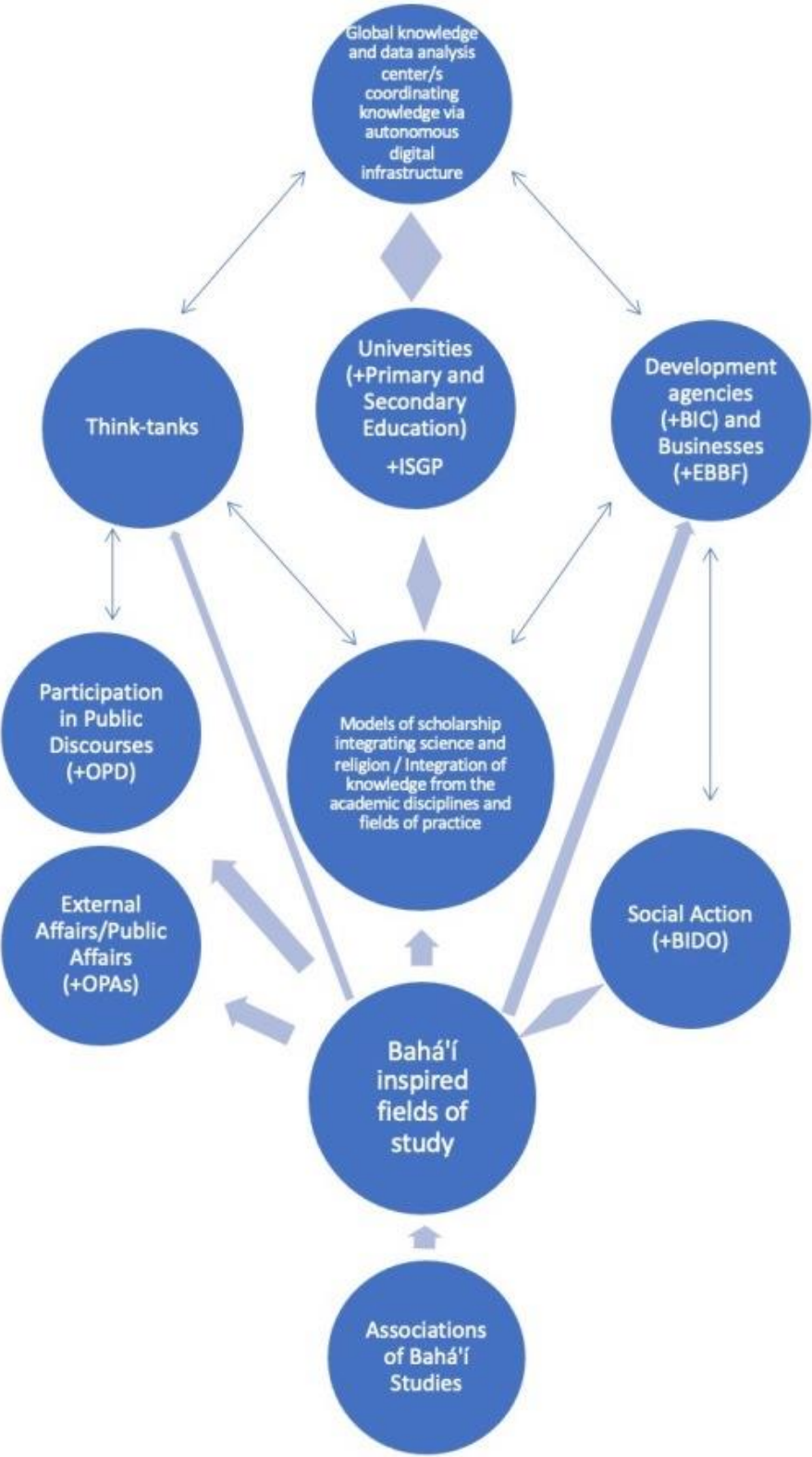
Over time, such global knowledge and data analysis centers could be established in each continent to ensure the resilience of this global knowledge architecture (and digital infrastructure) in case of volatility. I have left the specifics unclear here because multiple

possibilities exist for how to establish such global knowledge and data analysis centers. Would one or several be needed? That is another question that I must leave completely open.

I think the Consilience project is right to suggest that such an architecture of global knowledge could not substantially advance without it being the expression of “a new movement for cultural enlightenment” that attracts and connects every individual, in their free and open self-expression, to the process of knowledge. Such a global knowledge architecture would act as a network of open systems based on the fundamental principles of reason, transparency, and the independent investigation of truth. This is essential to knowledge-formation but also needed to correct the general negative perception organized religion has in most of the world today as anti-scientific, anti-democratic, serving private interests, and opposed to reason.

While such a global knowledge architecture could offer help in many areas, its research agenda, namely, the search for knowledge against the background of a crisis in sense-making, interpretation of the Bahá’í revelation, the integration of knowledge, and addressing the challenges of the 21st century, should never be obscured by instrumental purposes. The aim of expansion and consolidation, for example, could easily overshadow the research agenda. Achieving a balance here will be difficult, but if allowed to develop independently, research knowledge would eventually contribute greatly to all other processes of transformation.

These topics of discussion (and not the actual suggestions made, which are just exploratory formulations) would seem to constitute, in my perspective, some of the necessary building-blocks for a bottom-up or participatory approach to knowledge generation. As already indicated, what is being proposed here is a quick thought experiment from which reflection, discussion, investigation, research, or consultation (and the clash of opinions) could begin. I have also provided below a reductionist and rudimentary visualization of what has been discussed so far. Maps are very imprecise instruments. The key thing is to think of how a global knowledge architecture (supported by an independent digital infrastructure) could be put together in such a way that knowledge (research) would be the life-blood of an entire social system.



The diagram above is meant only as a device to activate our imagination. Through the Institutions of the Learned a whole command center and ‘culture of learning’ network already exists in and around the ITC for the task of community-building (or expansion and consolidation). In contradistinction, the global knowledge and data analysis center I have recommended does not take on the role of an administrative center. Rather, its remit is with the collection, preservation and integration of knowledge, and with providing and maintaining an autonomous digital infrastructure. As an organization, therefore, the global knowledge and data analysis center would probably resemble something like an institutional merger between the Research Department and the Bahá’í Internet Agency. However, inasmuch as the Research Department is engaged long-term with the huge task of dating, indexing, and translating the Sacred Writings, it seemed wise to suggest the formation of a different type of institution for the time being. Again, this visualization should not be viewed as a proposal, but rather, as a speculative exercise and play of the imagination.

I think the perspective I have outlined so far can be questioned in a number of ways. The first is to ask whether Bahá’í inspired fields of study are really that important, or of any importance. Can we not operate without them? This model or visualization presupposes that they are central to knowledge, but so far we have seemingly functioned without truly developing or drawing on such fields of study. Would it not suffice to have just a few Associations for Bahá’í Studies or have such associations just as a venue where those interested in knowledge can gather to study together or develop projects in line with the framework for action? Is it not enough for Bahá’ís to be formed as scholars in the higher education institutions of the outside world? What would a Bahá’í inspired field of study have to contribute to the Bahá’í community or towards the building of a new world order? What would a Bahá’í inspired field of study have to add to what its corresponding academic discipline is already offering? Do we need Bahá’í inspired fields of study in order to understand the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh or can we maybe progress without them? How would such a visualization model look, one that did not have Bahá’í inspired fields of study or did not assign them a foundational role in relation to other processes? These are questions for further reflection.

Let us also mention some other possible counterarguments. Some might say that the organic way to develop a societal model like a religious community should follow a step by step increase in complexity. That one should start with kindergartens and primary schools, then

move to high-schools, and only after those have been fully developed, transition to undergraduate colleges and, finally, to fully fledged universities and research institutes. Another approach could be to focus on cluster development until research structures naturally emerge at the level of the cluster. I presume other countervailing positions could also be advanced.

In my view, however, the need to develop a global knowledge infrastructure/architecture right now is so essential a requirement as to override many other considerations. Why would I think that? Here are some of the arguments that I keep pondering over in my mind:

A first reason for designing a global knowledge infrastructure now is the current [crisis in sense-making](#). To protect sense-making in our community, we need an array of responses. Securing a viable architecture of knowledge that can filter the noise in the information ecosystem, integrate true knowledge, and produce accurate predictions, and cultivating a research mindset at the individual level that can inform but work independently of collective processes of knowledge (so that there is a two-way form of screening, and plenty of creativity and difference of perspectives) are options that would seem to safeguard our collective and individual sovereignty (that is, our ability to self-govern). This could also help protect our communities from the forces of extreme polarization and disunity, misinformation and disinformation, addiction, mental-health issues, and the other excesses of the attention economy and surveillance capitalism.

A second reason is what Shoshana Zuboff has called Behaviourism 2.0. – a theme that falls under surveillance capitalism but which merits consideration on its own here. The use of [digital personae](#) (p.64), psychographics, continuous surveillance, nudging, tuning, and herding (and even self-tracking) to predict individual and collective behaviour and to attempt large-scale behavioural modification points towards issues that extend from individual freedom to democracy. Taking his cue from Zuboff, [Clarke](#) is concerned that the digital surveillance economy will induce such conformism and passivity and will engender such loss of personality and creativity as to “stultify economies, societies and polities.” (p.68) For Zuboff, “surveillance capitalism must be reckoned as a profoundly antidemocratic social force” because it gives a tiny elite control over the common person through the exploitation of their very human nature in light of market objectives (“The Age of Surveillance Capitalism” 2019, pp.513-515). What is also at stake for Zuboff in this tech age of Behaviourism 2.0 is the very notion of the human spirit (or [human dignity](#) defined as “the

recognition that human beings possess a special value intrinsic to their humanity and as such are worthy of respect simply because they are human beings”):

“These new architectures feed on our fellow feeling to exploit and ultimately to suffocate the individually sensed inwardness that is the wellspring of personal autonomy and moral judgment, the first-person voice, the will to will, and the sense of an inalienable right to the future tense. ... Instrumentarianism reimagines society as a hive to be monitored and tuned for guaranteed outcomes ...” (Zuboff 2019, p.444).

A third reason is the huge explosion in knowledge, and here things are not constant, but marked by incredible and unexpected leaps in specific domains. Those disconnected from the recent advances of science and technology are quickly left behind and will inevitably lose their sovereignty to more powerful actors, unaware of when and how this has happened. We are not currently in the knowledge game and this is traditionally a risky position to be in for a religion. Without a network of universities in every continent, very developed Bahá’í inspired fields of study, and a ‘new movement for cultural enlightenment’ that impacts every individual and which allows for knowledge to be extended beyond the narrow circles of social-economic elites, I struggle to see how we could keep up.

A fourth reason is the truly unprecedented shift that has seen knowledge, innovation and R&D transition from the public sector to the private sector, with knowledge rapidly becoming an inaccessible private good in the hands of the ruling elites. Only if we have developed a knowledge architecture able to sync with, monitor and comprehend these transitional processes will we be able to understand the new instruments of knowledge and the new type of knowledge being created. Without that, even universities in the public domain and entire governments are about to find themselves outside the knowledge game.

A fifth reason has already been mentioned. That, because of the way knowledge has been framed at a national level of analysis until now, we are currently limited in accessing the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh through our current systems of knowledge. In order to transcend this limitation, a global knowledge architecture might be needed.

A sixth reason can be presented under the guise of a question: what is the current foundation of public discourses, government policy, foreign policy, research, education, economic growth, development, business, marketing, law, social action in the outside world today?



While the power of the ruling elites, tradition, and managerial cultures are very significant factors in the shaping of social reality, more and more these areas of endeavor have begun to have their foundation in the branches of knowledge, in the academic disciplines, in the research and [R&D](#) generated. This is a key feature of the information age we live in:

“the productivity and competitiveness of units or agents of this economy (be it firms, regions, or nations) fundamentally depend upon their capacity to generate, process, and apply efficiently knowledge-based information.” (Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* 2010, p.77)

Does this view of knowledge, research, and R&D as foundational also apply to the Bahá’í world? This is up for debate and the answer largely depends on how the principle of the harmony of science and religion is being understood. If it does, then one could expect that progress in research of the Bahá’í Revelation, Bahá’í-inspired education, participation in public discourses, social action, development, external affairs, business, (and many other such ‘areas of endeavour’ including ‘community-building’) would likely depend on the strength of the Bahá’í inspired fields of study and of the global knowledge architecture they could help constitute. In such a scenario, these lines of action would derive to a considerable degree from the collective terrain of Bahá’í inspired fields of study.

A seventh reason is given by a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi:

“It seems what we need now is a more profound and co-ordinated Bahá’í scholarship in order to attract such men as you are contacting. The world has – at least the thinking world – caught up by now with all the great and universal principles enunciated by Bahá’u’lláh over 70 years ago, and so of course it does not sound ‘new’ to them. But we know that the deeper teachings, the capacity of His projected World Order to re-create society, are new and dynamic. It is these we must learn to present intelligently and enticingly to such men. (From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi dated 3 July 1949, qtd. in *A Compilation on Scholarship* nr.75)

What are these new, dynamic, and deeper teachings and how come we have not been able to access them? Could this task depend on the degree of progress attained by Bahá’í inspired fields of study?

An eight reason is the historical reality that movements not very firmly grounded in knowledge are more prone to getting swayed by the shifts in the dominant ideology or dominant paradigm of the time (ideology and paradigm always associated with a dominant form of politics and cultural politics) towards one extreme or another.

A ninth reason is given by Behrooz Sabet's model for how religion unfolds into a world civilization:

“Religions, Sabet (*A Conceptual Perspective* 107) claims, 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”) (idem). This is followed by a phase that opens this nucleus of new knowledge to dialogue with the outside world and existing branches of knowledge (here the nucleus of Revelation eventually engages with the core of knowledge structuring our societies). The third and final 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 (idem). In other words, the synthesis between the nucleus of the Revelation and the core of existent knowledge results, in this third phase, in a new system of knowledge that can support a world civilization.” (see [here](#))

Based on this model I have offered the following assessment:

“It could be said that the Bahá'í community is now initializing the transition from the first stage to the second stage; that is, opening lines of communication with the academic disciplines (and fields of practice) and with the other religions, a process from which advancement in the arena of public discourses could be expected to also proceed. ... I would venture to suggest that the inadequate development of Bahá'í inspired fields of study is in itself an indication that we are in the first stage of the religious developmental model described by Sabet. Danesh, for example, assesses the field of Bahá'í law (a type of evaluation that is still missing for the field of Bahá'í inspired education) as follows: “Very little has been written about Bahá'í law, and even less about how it may be understood, expanded, and applied in the future. In the Bahá'í Faith, a discussion of the principles of legal interpretation and methodology has yet to begin” (“Imagining Bahá'í Law 195). In another place, he further adds: “It is perhaps surprising that in a quarter century, the central written

work of the Bahá'í religious system has not garnered broader scholarly attention outside the Bahá'í community. From one perspective, this lack of attention might be considered symptomatic of the fact that the study of the Bahá'í Faith generally remains in its infancy.” (“Themes in the Study of Bahá'u'lláh's Kitáb-i-Aqdas” 17)

In my opinion, the transition from phase 1 to phase 2 of Sabet's model requires the development of a global knowledge architecture/infrastructure as delineated above. The challenge is a delicate one. If a religion remains too long in phase 1 that can trigger the rise of anti-intellectualism – leading to a narrow and frozen interpretation of Scripture that could eventually crystallize even into man-made ideology and dogma. On the other hand, because of the intense time pressures within the Academia and their Bahá'í administrative and community life, Bahá'í scholars might be unable to go outside their own specialty in order to balance that with their study of the Bahá'í Writings once phase 2 has started. Phase 2 also requires that scholars develop a broad foundation of knowledge outside their own specialty, as a precondition for approaching the study of the Sacred Writings, a condition that again, would not be easily met. This could result in a systemic tendency to place too much emphasis on academic specialties and subdisciplines and not enough on an integrative study of the Bahá'í revelation. That, in turn, could lead to the interpretation of the Bahá'í Revelation solely through the prism of academic theories or ideological standpoints one is most intimately associated with and in a manner which is piecemeal and does not give equal attention and consideration to the study of Scripture. In my view, a global knowledge architecture would help negotiate both of these phases in Sabet's model and would help address their specific epistemological challenges.

A tenth reason is the need to think ahead of the global challenges likely to trigger critical tipping points and irreversible changes to our planetary ecosystem by the decade 2040-2050. The energy crisis, environmental and biodiversity crises, financial crises, food crises, geopolitical crises, the competition for control of global supply-chains, debt crises, nuclear proliferation, the crisis of liberal democracy, lack of global governance, the rise of AI and of a new and private technology of knowledge, massive urbanization and the demise of agriculture, pandemics, synthetic biology and human genome editing, and [the rise of infertility](#) (1 in 6 people worldwide), are just several examples of key challenges that we must be prepared to address in the next 20-30 years. None of this can be achieved without a global knowledge architecture and infrastructure able to integrate global knowledge across multiple

domains and make relatively accurate predictions. This is one of the primary reasons for starting the construction of such a global knowledge architecture now. Creating a viable structure of this kind within 15-20 years would be an enormous achievement, but it can be done if we start now.

An eleventh reason can be found in a policy story. Between the 1960s and the late 1990s the World Bank policy for developing countries had been to “[promote higher investment in basic education \[primary and secondary education\] while systematically marginalizing higher education](#)“. This has led to the underdevelopment of HE and national economies in regions like Africa and elsewhere, at the same time as Western universities were forging ahead at breakneck speed. In 2002, the World Bank finally acknowledged its failed policy but the effects of 40 years of wrong policy-making have left African economies and African higher education in a dire state. I recommend reading on this topic [here](#). This story teaches us that there can be huge costs to neglecting the development of research & higher education in the informational age.

Not a proposal and not a list of suggestions, this has been an imaginary journey highlighting particular themes and questions which could be considered to center around a particular topic: the role of Bahá'í inspired fields of study, of the Associations for Bahá'í Studies, and of Bahá'í inspired higher education in the next 30 years. The underlying theme has been that of knowledge and of the intellectual life of the Bahá'í community in the context of rising global challenges and the main consideration that of the design of knowledge architectures. The issue of design is the level at which I think the following injunction has to be answered: “Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in, and centre your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements.” (Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings: CVI).

“Shall they who have knowledge and they who have it not be treated alike?” (Qur'an 39:12, cited by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in 'The Secret of Divine Civilization', p.2.)

“The House of Justice looks to rising generations of Bahá'ís to wholeheartedly address a wide range of intellectual challenges, overcome all pitfalls and obstacles, and render service for the betterment of the world.” [The Universal House of Justice, Message to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada, 24 July 2013.](#)

## Addendum

### **I. The Knowledge Game**

The knowledge game is something I have not yet described but that would require another blog entry. Some initial considerations here could be:

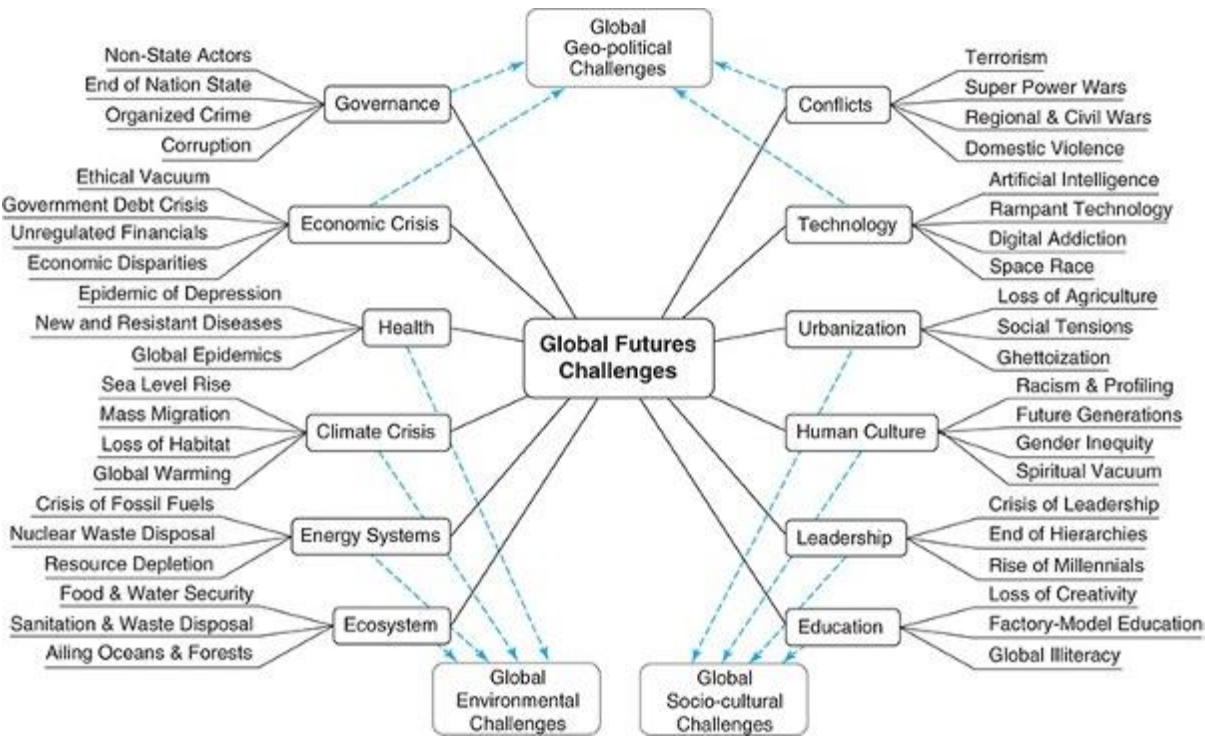
- having strong Bahá'í inspired fields of study (this can be measured in a number of ways).
- a record of scholarly contributions that have had significant impact on the existing paradigms of academic disciplines and fields of practice. Without such a preliminary step the current attempts to reconceptualize the foundational principles of knowledge and society will likely remain just a worthy aspiration for the distant future.
- having made the contents of the Bahá'í Revelation a very attractive domain of research for scholars from all across the academic disciplines through the contribution of Bahá'í inspired fields of study.
- having opened access to the Bahá'í Revelation to the general public (also, through the contribution of Bahá'í inspired fields of study and scholars in the public sphere).
- being at the forefront of society in knowledge & technology (AI, etc.), social justice (ethics), and social transformation (development).
- having a digital and physical knowledge infrastructure that could compare with that of a decent global university or digital platform at this point in time.
- being able to make predictions about the main global trends in the world for the 2040-2050 decade, period which would mark our entry into the third century of the Bahá'í Faith etc.
- having created a global knowledge infrastructure, processes and models that can produce a form of knowledge and scholarship and a type of intellectual that are truly global (so, a new type of knowledge and of social identity): “Bahá'u'lláh is designating and establishing a new unit of analysis – the global level – at which to reconceptualize human, spiritual, economic, and political culture and institutions. His

perspective intentionally transcends the limited nationalistically oriented discourse of political theory because solutions based on the category of the nation-state are inadequate to meet the needs and moral challenges of a global human society.”

(Saiedi, Nader. *Logos and Civilization: Spirit, History, and Order in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*. Univ. Press of Maryland, 2000, p.324).

- an ability to think of the issues of new world order, of the principle of the oneness of humankind, of the principle of the harmony of science and religion, of the principle of the basic unity of all religions, of the Names and Attributes of God (particularly in relation to human psychology), of social change, of each of the Writings, etc. in innovative and more complex ways that connect and communicate directly to the academic disciplines and fields of practice.
- having a proven ability to transcend the excessive polarization characteristic of the wider society in terms of issues such as race, politics, environment and climate change, gender, the Covid pandemic (vaccines and other health related issues), immigration, and the war in Ukraine, and to see through conspiracy theories and social media behavioral mechanisms such as surveillance and intermittent reinforcement.
- Having a huge, well-indexed, and accessible reservoir of knowledge about the global knowledge produced in the world and the different knowledge traditions in existence.
- producing both specialized knowledge and integrative rather than fragmented knowledge.
- our ways of knowledge are linear and operating with single ('the most important principle'), dual or triple master-categories (love, will and knowledge). A new epistemology that centres around non-linear dynamics as a key approach to understanding the behavior of living systems in both society and nature is needed in order to catch up with the most advanced forms of thought in society today. Such a new epistemology could also apply to the study of the Revelation.

II. The Meta-crisis or the polycrisis?



**Diagram from Jennifer M. Gidley, *The Future – a Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, 2017, 119.**

These are two interesting concepts sharing some overlap. I think it would be fair to say that the ‘polycrisis’ refers to a more empirical investigation of the interconnectedness of the global challenges in our world while the ‘meta-crisis’ looks more at the epistemological challenges associated with the polycrisis.

A definition of the term ‘polycrisis’:

“We propose the concept of global polycrisis as an overarching framework with which to investigate the causal connections of crises across global systems, and define it as follows:

A global polycrisis occurs when crises in multiple global systems become causally entangled in ways that significantly degrade humanity’s prospects. These interacting crises produce harms greater than the sum of those the crises would produce in isolation, were their host systems not so deeply interconnected.” see [What is a global polycrisis?](#)

This definition and approach has been rightfully criticized by [Farwa Sian Jan](#), but that perspective is also liable to critique for other reasons:

“A key feature of the current crisis, which remains unaddressed by the Polycrisis concept are the substantive drivers of the crisis. While the Polycrisis is keen to explore the multiplicity and complexity of the current global order, the implicit causes of the seemingly conjectural crises appear as nebulous, automated and self-perpetuating. For example, the discussion paper by [Lawrence et. al.](#), describes a global Polycrisis as a situation when *‘crises in multiple global systems become causally entangled in ways that significantly degrade humanity’s prospects.’*

This methodology is reminiscent of modelling, as in the natural sciences, such as in the discipline of physics. In fact, all definitions of the Polycrisis although focusing on systems, are seemingly bereft of any identifiable agency.

Citing causal entanglements in political decision making is a strange analysis, diminishing the role of the powerful and the hierarchy of geopolitics. In describing a situation, which is no longer under any implicit control, we remain not quite sure about any obvious poly-perpetrators.

Who are they and what is their precise role in all of this?”

Some resources for the term ‘polycrisis’:

- [Public policy and the polycrisis](#) (video)- Thomas Homer-Dixon March 16, 2023
- [What is a global polycrisis?](#) The Cascade Institute September 2022
- [Welcome to the world of the polycrisis](#) Adam Tooze Financial Times October 28, 2022
- [We’re on the brink of a ‘polycrisis’ – how worried should we be?](#) World Economic Forum Jan 13, 2023
- [Whose Polycrisis?](#) Farwa Sial Jan 27, 2023
- [On the ‘Polycrisis’: Part I](#) Bo Harvey 24 Jan, 2023
- [On the ‘Polycrisis’: Part II](#) Bo Harvey 11 Feb, 2023
- [Notes on the Polycrisis](#) 3 Dec 2022
- [Anti-Crisis: thinking with and against crisis excerpt from interview with Janet Roitman](#)
- Jonathan Zeitlin, Francesco Nicoli & Brigid Laffan (2019) Introduction: the European Union beyond the polycrisis? Integration and politicization in an age of shifting



cleavages, Journal of European Public Policy, 26:7,963-976, DOI:  
[10.1080/13501763.2019.1619803](https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2019.1619803)

Some key resources for the ‘meta-crisis’ from the members of the Consilience Project:

- [In Search of the Third Attractor, Daniel Schmachtenberger \(part 1\)](#)
- [In Search of the Third Attractor, Daniel Schmachtenberger \(part 2\)](#)
- [Utopia or Bust Designing a Non Self Terminating Civilization Daniel Schmachtenberger – on Emerge](#)
- [The Metacrisis with Daniel Schmachtenberger | Part 1 | Green Pill #26](#)
- [Daniel Schmachtenberger: “Artificial Intelligence and The Superorganism” | The Great Simplification](#)
- [Daniel Schmachtenberger: Ai Wars & The Metacrisis](#)
- [Zak Stein – The Meta-Crisis is a Human Development Crisis: Education in a Time Between Worlds](#)