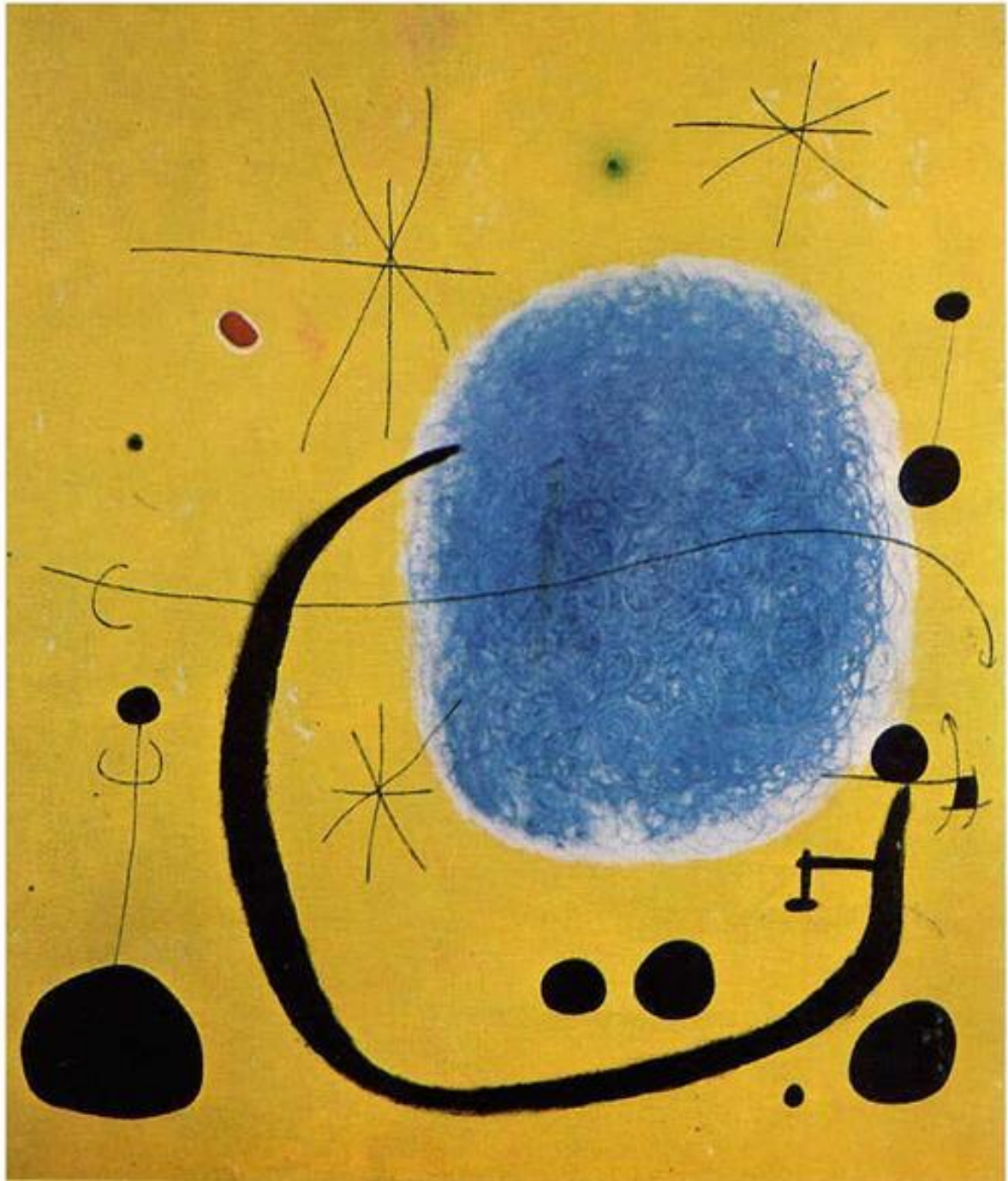


# Notes on Uncertainty & the World: Theories for Social Change? A Framing

by Filip Boicu 03/09/2023

**Theories of social change? Part 1: how to read what theories are dominant in a particular setting via the use of a basic grid. Two applications: 1) education and 2) religion.**



I just wanted to scribble few notes<sup>1</sup> down on a topic I have never tried to seriously cover before.<sup>2</sup>

## Part I

Social change is an example of a key topic that can never be exhausted. Social reality is too large, complex, and ever shifting to be captured via analysis.

So how do we tackle such topics?

We build manifold theories and models in many disciplines, each attempting to cover a particular aspect of reality usually representing a tiny percentage of the data we could gather about the world. Theories attempt to identify patterns in the data collected. We could call these theories ‘level 1’ theories.

There is also a ‘level 2’. At this level we try to build comprehensive theories that attempt to integrate, contest, and re-order the findings of some of the level 1 theories while attempting to account for the new features in the ever-changing world in front of us. We could call these ‘super-theories’. A super-theory is the result of collective intellectual efforts over generations being brought to fruition by the massive synthesizing work of a particular individual or set of individuals.

Sometimes, certain super-theories become the zeitgeist (the spirit of the age dominating an epoch) and generate their own dynamics of power enabling the rise of new elites and political and social systems. (Once adopted by power elites, zeitgeist theories are always susceptible of being reduced to ideologies.)

But almost always it is those in power, or those ready to challenge power that select and activate the use of certain theories or super-theories over others. They don’t necessarily do this consciously, because of the scientific spirit, or because of the specific currency of theories in the marketplace of ideas. There are very complex reasons for why a particular theory or super-theory gets selected and/or becomes dominant in any particular setting. These

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<sup>1</sup> This is not an academic paper (it lacks that rigour and format) but a way to underline the coherence of a series of posts on the theory of social change from my blog [Notes on Uncertainty & the World](#).

<sup>2</sup> Most Christian sources in use here have been recommended by Dr. Tim Hutchins from the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Nottingham in answer to specific questions I had. For this I am very grateful.

dynamics and interactions between knowledge and power are extremely intricate and hard to capture accurately. Nevertheless, what I would like to do is share two points of view or abstractions/simplifications that I make use of:

- The first point is that there are theories and super-theories of social change (and also, theories and super-theories in some way relevant to the topic of social change – these can play an even more important role at times).
- The second point is that from a diversity of theories and super-theories that find themselves in play, the political factor (whether represented by elites in power or by rising elites) usually selects only some theories or super-theories as dominant ‘theories-in-use’ while also attempting to have influence over the selection of dominant ‘espoused theories’. I am using here the distinction of Argyris (1976) between ‘espoused theories’ (“those underlying professional practice”) and ‘theories-in-use’ (“that guide practice in the event”) – see John Biggs (1996, pp.347-348) with a minor alteration: dominant ‘espoused theories’ are the theories that are dominant or have most acceptance at the level of thought and ideas within a particular setting and which derive from professional domains of knowledge and practice; on the other hand, dominant ‘theories-in-use’ are the dominant theories or constructs actually guiding decision-making, action, and implementation and the entire social system in a particular setting and which have the (distortional) imprint of the ruling elites.

This is an oversimplification, but it provides us with a basic grid that has some explanatory power when we think of the theory of social change characteristic of a particular social setting. How can we make use of this grid? First, we can try to identify which theory is the dominant ‘espoused theory’ and which theory is the dominant ‘theory-in-use’ (that implies a working knowledge of the various theories at play in a particular setting). Next, we can try to establish if these are actual theories or super-theories (sometimes the ‘theory-in-use’ might not really even be a theory but simply a fad or micro-ideology reflecting the will of particular elites – as is the case with many managerial ideologies). Finally, we can try to figure out the type of interaction between the two types of theories (‘espoused’ and ‘in-use’) and how this might advance or prevent meaningful social change.

[Elsewhere](#) I have proposed a particular interpretation for the sectors of European and UK Higher Education. Thus, while *constructivism* appears to be the dominant ‘espoused theory’

in these sectors, the actual dominant ‘theory-in-use’ has been found to be of a different kind. Educational research identifies this ‘theory-in-use’ as a version of ‘constructive alignment’ and outcome-based curricula from which constructivism has been stripped away, to be replaced with learning outcomes and skills representing the economic agendas of governments and businesses.

*Constructivism*, however, is a learning theory, and not one of the comprehensive theories that might be able to sensibly cover a large part of the educational domain. The matter is somewhat more complicated, because even the dominance of *constructivism* as an ‘espoused theory’ has much to do with the power element in society. Why? Because no matter how successful and appealing *constructivism* has been as compared to other learning theories (and it has been), its dominance over all other theories in the field of education is due to an extrinsic factor constantly tipping the balance: namely, the action of the government. For it is the government that has repeatedly identified the domain of learning theories, or assessment – to be more specific, as the domain from which dominant espoused theories of education should be selected. Why this focus on assessment? Because the government’s main concern is with the financial/economic inputs and outputs of the educational system, and the key assumption is that of a strong correlation between educational achievement (final grades) and salary/employment leading to productivity and innovation. Since teachers and academic staff (for whom the personal development of students, and the advancement of knowledge are absolute priorities) would never accept such a narrow vision of education, the feigned or partial avowal of *constructivism* allows governments to imperceptibly introduce their ‘theory-in-use’ while persuading teachers, academic staff, and the wider public of the legitimacy of their increasingly centralized involvement in education and their function as regulator. The incongruity between the ‘espoused theory’ and ‘the-theory-in-use’ is, therefore, a function of social control.

As it can be observed, there are two games here. The game of the elites – which is represented by the ‘theory-in-use’ and which largely determines reality; and the game for the rest (or the masses) – which is largely an ideological and imaginary game/social project playing a legitimizing role for the elites and taking the attention away from the real game/social project currently being unfolded by the elites. The point I am trying to make here is that entire social systems and their future trajectories are determined by the choices of theory. This is something we must be better aware of, for every setting has its dominant

‘espoused theory’ and dominant ‘theory-in-use’ and their depth, quality, interaction, and congruity/incongruity are key determinants of human life.

Now let us attempt to apply this grid analysis to a less politicized setting: that of the Bahá’í community. This is just an experimental exercise reflecting my own perceptions regarding the theoretical undercurrents at play within the Bahá’í community.

From 1996 until today it could be said that the dominant ‘theory-in-use’ has been the development theory of FUNDAEC and Farzam Arbab as adjusted towards the goal of growth or ‘entry by troops’ via the Ruhi institute. While undergoing a shift from critical pedagogy approaches and constructivism towards an alignment with analytical philosophy and foundationalism (for example, ‘ontological foundationalism’) this two-level theory (rural community development and growth of a religious community) was also reconstituted as the underpinning theory/methodology for expansion and consolidation, social action and participation in public discourses – deemed integrated lines of activity for advancing the movement of clusters (for an expanded discussion see [here](#)). The origins of this theory-in-use are two key texts:

1. The Ruhi Institute – “Learning about Growth. The Story of the Ruhi Institute and Large-scale Expansion of the Faith in Colombia” (1991).
2. Farzam Arbab – “Promoting a Discourse on Science, Religion and Development” from *The Lab, the Temple and the Market* (2000).

If I am correct in suspecting that from 1963 onward this was the first time that a dominant ‘theory-in-use’ was ever adopted, then 1996 constitutes a great point of transition. Why would this be significant? Because it signals a change from direct reliance on the universe of Bahá’í teachings and the use of multiple theories towards adoption of a particular theory as the primary interface with the Bahá’í Revelation and as its main conceptual and practical expression. This is worth pondering on.

The Bahá’í intellectual field is so uneven and fragmented that it would be hard to attempt to identify any dominant ‘espoused theory’. Nevertheless, work in the three lines of activity must be aligned with the ‘theory-in-use’, while considerable intellectual and institutional efforts have been more recently undertaken to present revised versions of the dominant ‘theory-in-use’ as an ‘espoused theory’ all could find attractive. The tendency and imperative

in the intellectual field and elsewhere, therefore, is to constantly operate from within the conceptual framework of the ‘theory-in-use’ while also reconfiguring it as the dominant ‘espoused theory’. In this sense, it could be said that all Bahá’ís are expected to contribute to a single theory – the ‘theory-in-use’ guiding all the activities of the Bahá’í Community. Nevertheless, the dominant ‘espoused theory’ will always be to a considerable extent determined by its currency on the marketplace of ideas, that is, by its relevance to multiple domains of knowledge. This is a natural element of the principle of freedom of thought.

Furthermore, there are some complications that derive from the manner in which theory-building is sometimes attempted within the religious domain as a direct superimposition or transposition of a belief system and religious faith over the domains of academic disciplines and scientific reason. Some have attempted to describe the theory-in-use underpinning the mode of growth of the Bahá’í community as a scientific theory for the construction of social reality – and one that transcends the current theoretical paradigms in philosophy and the social sciences and exposes their weaknesses.

However, in order for such a dominant theory-in-use to become an espoused theory it must show its relevance in terms of ‘development’ as defined in the field of development (namely, in relation to each of the SDGs, for example), and within the intellectual domain, through the validity and explanatory power of its epistemic claims regarding social change and the condition of the world. Providing a more abstract description of the methodology in use for the expansion of the Bahá’í community is simply not enough.

In other words, something that started as a rural development theory and became a religious programme of growth based on faith and on activating faith cannot be easily translated into a comprehensive philosophical and/or sociological theory based on the procedures of reason and the scientific method. The ‘theory-in-use’ in the field of religion cannot simply become a dominant ‘espoused theory’ within the domain of the academic disciplines.

The problem is a difficult one.

What are the dynamics that open up here?

## Theories of social change? Part 2: religions, social change, and strategies for growth

Despite a variety of abstract concepts, the actual day-to-day approach to social change of the Bahá'í community is not something difficult to map. I think the essence of it can be summed up in a sentence. Here it is: the methodology for social change of the Bahá'í community is largely identical with its methodology for growth.

This explains why the main educational program of the Bahá'í community has been developed around the concept of large-scale expansion and consolidation or “entry by troops” [see The Ruhi Institute – “Learning about Growth. The Story of the Ruhi Institute and Large-scale Expansion of the Faith in Colombia” (1991)] and why our energies and plans are focused on developing ‘programmes of growth’ and ‘intensive programmes of growth’ in all clusters via the institute process (that is, via the Ruhi materials). Of course, things are more complex than that but this, meaning, the development of clusters, is what we believe will truly change the world – our main strategy for social change.

[“A [Programme of Growth](#) is a system of organizing activities to achieve the expansion and consolidation of the Bahá'í Faith in a [cluster](#).”

“... that moment which has come to be known as the ‘launching’ of an intensive programme of growth represents conscious recognition that all the elements necessary to accelerate the expansion and consolidation of the Faith are not only in place but also functioning with an adequate degree of effectiveness. It signals the maturation of an ever-expanding, self-sustaining system for the spiritual edification of a population: a steady stream of friends is proceeding through the courses of the training institute and engaging in the corresponding activities, which serves, in turn, to increase the number of fresh recruits into the Faith, a significant percentage of whom invariably enters the institute process, guaranteeing the expansion of the system.”<sup>[81]</sup> ([source](#))]

Methodologies for growth, I need to add, largely underpin (and often override, depending on your perspective) the current methodologies for social change of almost all religions. That didn't use to be the case for religions heavily identified with monasticism, gnosticism, or even mysticism in the past, but times have changed. At least, this would be a good assumption to start from in most cases nowadays. Judaism, where some have argued that a model of community-based education and learning and, therefore, the acquisition of knowledge, is central, might be a notable exception to this. I don't know much about this (Judaism also seems to have an attenuated evangelistic drive by comparison with other religions) but I mention it as a working hypothesis. Donald Streets had this opinion, and it



seemed a very well informed one. He was keen for Bahá'ís to study the Jewish model for its educational culture and achievements but that is another story.

Few months ago, a consultant informed me the Catholic Church was using consultancies to develop its strategy of growth, and to assess the readiness of populations for conversion in different zones and regions. Most likely, these strategies for growth will now be powered by AI – a practice that will likely spread in the religious domain because of the perceived need to protect one's religion from the rise of secularism (by, for example, arresting the huge drop in membership or active believers for some religions) and because of mass religious conversion also being deemed a zero-sum game in some corners. This piece of news about the use of consultancies to derive strategies for growth surprised me. Of course, at the time I was not aware that the Vatican had already decided to approach the biggest consultancy firms back in 2013:

*“Pope Francis has taken the dramatic decision to allow an army of outside [consultants](#) – lay people all, and the great majority non-Italians – into the secretive bowels of Vatican City, to let daylight in on an institution which long ago ceased to perform efficiently.*

*This week the Vatican announced that it is hiring McKinsey and Co, the US-based consultancy, to modernise its communications operations, and the international accounting firm KPMG – corporate slogan “cutting through complexity” – to bring its accounting up to international standards. They join the London-based firm Ernst & Young, which is looking at management and economic activity within the Vatican City State's government, and the Washington DC-based Promontory Financial Group, which has drafted in two dozen employees to bring the Institute for Religious Works, also known as the Vatican Bank, up to international standards of protection from money-laundering and terror financing.”*

Clearly, the Pope aims for this to be [a two-way relationship](#) and the argument could be made that this is exactly what firms like Deloitte need, a reminder of their spiritual mission on earth. What should not escape us, however, is the need felt by religions to reform their organization, organizational strategies, and strategy of growth based on the financial projections, marketing insight, and corporate advice used to restructure business companies. If you ask me, it is not clear who is going to end up more similar with who in this alignment. Like with the adoption of new technology, the borrowing of organizational strategy tends to also introduce elements of the wider culture from which it has originated.



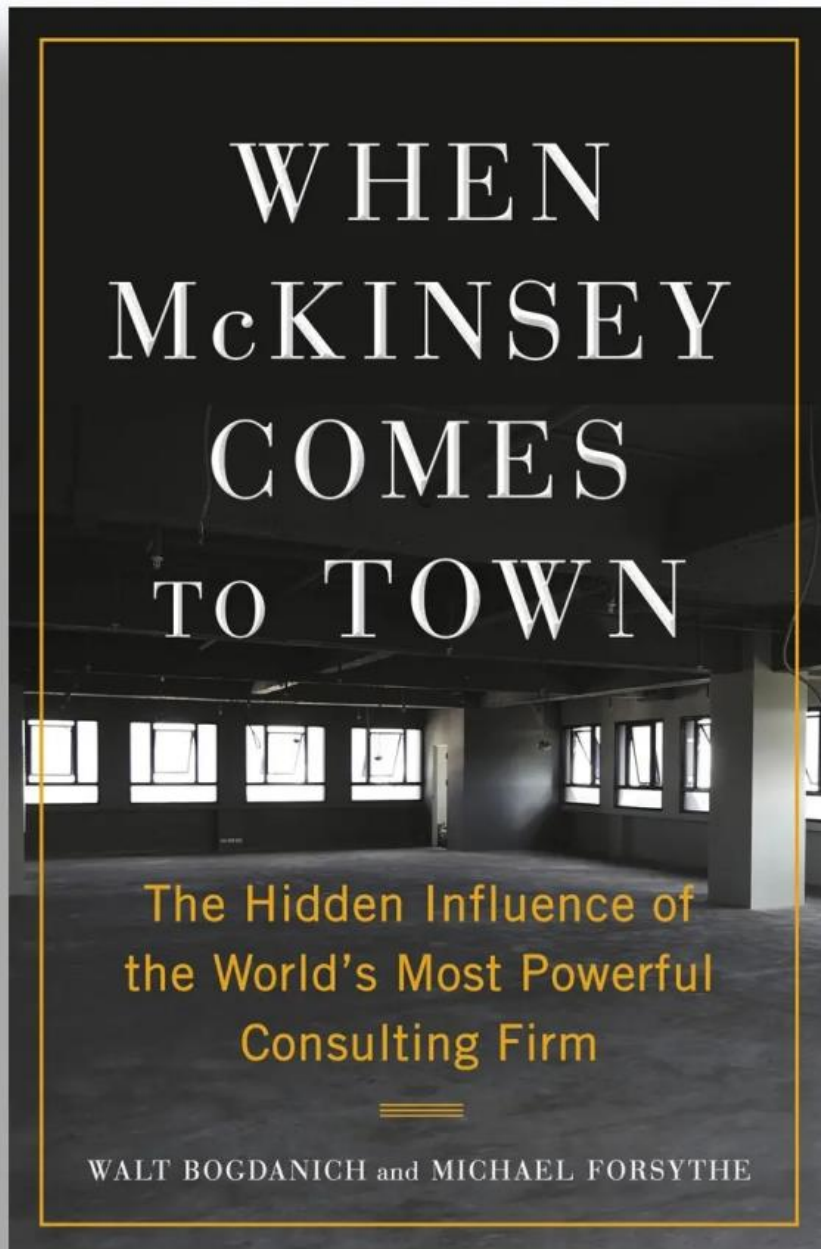
The Catholic Church is not the only church to have gone down this path. Interestingly, in 2018 the Church of England [tasked McKinsey](#) with “bringing City Christians into Church of England fold”:

*“A group led by the Church of England’s most senior Bishop has appointed McKinsey to draft a five-year plan, aimed at boosting the appeal of England’s state religious institution among Christian financial services executives aged between 20 and 35.”*

The choice of McKinsey is even more baffling than that of the Vatican which saw McKinsey tasked with modernizing its ‘communications operations’. Clearly, Catholicism is not the only religion to prioritize the regulation and the revamping of their communication and media strategy in the age of social media. The public image of a religion is now a more sensitive matter than ever before, and a key factor in growth and global influence. However, one only has to look at [Ted Chiang’s](#) article in the New Yorker to realize McKinsey’s involvement might actually be problematic:

*“A former McKinsey employee has described the company as [“capital’s willing executioners”](#): if you want something done but don’t want to get your hands dirty, McKinsey will do it for you. That escape from accountability is one of the most valuable services that management consultancies provide. Bosses have certain goals, but don’t want to be blamed for doing what’s necessary to achieve those goals; by hiring consultants, management can say that they were just following independent, expert advice.”*

For a deeper look into McKinsey I urge you to go through the lists of articles and comments listed [here](#) by the New York Times reporter Mike Forsythe. One could also read the book below (again, if you are religious you should probably read this because the organizational structure and processes envisaged by McKinsey are the organizational structure and processes some religions are now keen to adopt):



Clearly, there are some huge ethical concerns in using such a consultancy firm in order to derive strategies for growth (I should also note here that ‘communications operations’ and ‘international accounting’ would seem to me to constitute aspects essential to any strategy for growth).

Nevertheless, these extremely expensive and possibly risky strategies (in terms of opening a religious community up to the business intelligence gathering of a company like McKinsey) are not the only religious strategies for growth out there.

Take, for example, Pentecostalism and the Charismatic movement, both branches of Evangelical Protestantism that emphasize direct personal experience of God through the descent of the Holy Spirit. The growth strategies of Pentecostalism and the Charismatic movement have been recently mapped by Elle Hardy in her book [“Beyond Belief: How Pentecostal Christianity Is Taking Over the World”](#). These strategies differ significantly from the practice of outsourcing organizational strategy and growth to consultancies or accountancy firms. Due to the decentralizing of religious authority in Pentecostalism a great diversity of strategies of all sorts have emerged: from revivals to non-denominational mega-churches harnessing the power of music, TV and internet media; to [apostolic networks](#); the rise of [The Prosperity Gospel](#), the promise of healing through things such as the laying of hands and intercessory prayer, and even the confluence with right-wing populist movements such as those of Viktor Orbán, Rodrigo Duterte, or Donald Trump. These strategies have met with remarkable degrees of global success in terms of activating growth in enrolments (which might indicate that even when successful, strategies for growth might not be a good idea). I recommend Elle Hardy’s podcast episode as an introduction to this:

<https://newbooksnetwork.com/elle-hardy-beyond-belief-how-pentecostal-christianity-is-taking-over-the-world-hurst-2021>

- *“The Prosperity Gospel (PG) is a fast-growing theologically conservative movement frequently associated with Pentecostalism, evangelicalism, and charismatic Christianity that emphasizes believers’ abilities to transcend poverty and/or illness through devotion and positive confession. The PG is popular among impoverished communities, where at best it is considered to offer the poor a means of imagining and reaching for better lives (at times accompanied by sound financial advice), and at worst is criticized as predatory and manipulative, particularly when churches or pastors require heavy tithing. Members of the socioeconomic elite may also be drawn to PG messages, which affirm the religious and spiritual legitimacy of wealth accumulation and reinforce a worldview in which financial success is an indicator of moral soundness.*
- The “health and wealth” gospel has been prominent wherever Pentecostalism has flourished, beginning in the United States (represented by figures such as Kenneth Hagin, Joel Osteen, Creflo Dollar, and Rod Parsley), and spreading over the past three decades to Latin America, Africa (Enoch Adeboye, Ray McCauley), and Europe (Ulf Ekman). Its roots lay in the American Pentecostal movement and in the post-World War II healing revival movement. Ideas about financial prosperity were introduced by Oral Roberts, whose “Blessing Pact” asked subscribers to contribute funds to his preaching. He later introduced the “Seed-

Faith” model, in which the faithful made a donation to the televangelist preacher with the expectation of receiving a blessing, as in, planting the seed in his ministry with expectations of material return. Television and Internet media have been instrumental in the wide reach of the Prosperity Gospel, as well as large-scale events and “megachurches.” [\(Source\)](#)

Let’s throw few more examples in.

Another strategy with which we are all familiar is that of the door to door campaigns of Jehovah’s Witnesses. These are very adroitly used to map street by street and house by house religious receptivity and make-up. Marketing companies and political campaigns used to employ this technique in the past. However, this was before the days in which the relevant digital data could have been bought from data brokers and used for psychometric and demographic profiling (and targeting) of individuals, households, and any other groups derived from market segmentation. It is a much cheaper but still somewhat effective strategy, and one which draws on the psychological mechanics of needing to be saved before the imminent arrival of the end of the world.

Last but not least, one cannot ignore the very successful growth strategies of extreme fundamentalist groups – unfortunately, a most impactful offshot of mainstream religions in the political and public sphere. These are the most violent examples of religious resistance to the current world order. The reasons for their existence are both real and imagined and directly connected with challenging and re-shaping the domain of politics and global governance:

- to defend cultural, national, and religious sovereignty, identity and principles.
- to advance the dream of raising a political-religious state (numerous formulas apply) that might also be expected to function as a particular kind of libertarian, ethnic, gendered, or racial state.
- to respond to the manifold excesses of big finance, militarism, and the global economy (namely, to the forces of materialism and imperialism).
- to respond to the perceived crisis of the family as a social institution.
- to safeguard holy sites and their sanctity.
- to defend local and regional autonomy from the operations of multinationals – usually sanctioned by the central (federal) government.
- to either defend and improve current socio-economic status or, in the worst cases, arrest the decline of wages.

- to engage in a battle between good and evil at ‘the end of times’ (Armageddon) with Satan represented by American federalism or American imperialism, global multinationals, any institutions thought to approximate a future world government – such as the United Nations and WTO, and most of the states considered to be subordinate to them [for example, Israel or any state oppressing Muslims (including Muslim states other than Saudi Arabia) for al-Qaeda; and Japan for Aum Shinrikyo] etc.

What I am trying to explain here is that violent fundamentalist religious groups are, while directly engaged in a violent anti-globalization struggle, also more religious than most religious people would like to think. In that sense, such extreme groups also represent the phenomenon of religion, which makes them a responsibility for any and all religions.

Osama Bin Laden, for example, intended to preserve the integrity of the Muslim holy sites and force the withdrawal of the United States from Muslim lands by declaring jihad. Overall, the rejection of the “logic of capitalist globalization and modernization based on Western values” (p.124) in favour of matters of faith explains why a significant number of al-Qaeda’s cadres were highly educated professionals trained in the technical, scientific and medical fields. The social origins of al-Qaeda in a sector of the Muslim intelligentsia and Middle Eastern business groups quite familiar with technology and finance also explains why the key strategies for growth revolved around the use of social media and “the use of wealth to play the global financial markets” (p.133) in licit and illicit ways. In the end, it was the operation of this financial network through offshore accounts etc. (later revealed to have been deeply connected to companies linked to the US government and to the US economy) that facilitated the transfer of funds needed to build autonomous training camps and run operative cells. To put it succinctly, it was the ability to operate on global financial markets without any meaningful oversight that gave al-Qaeda its material (as opposed to symbolic) power to take on the United States government at global level and engage in acts of terrorism elsewhere. (For this and the entire section on violent fundamentalist/religious groups I have relied on Chapter 2 from “The Power of Identity” by Manuel Castells).

Although equally versed in the use of technology and social media to grow their movements, a key strategy for the extreme Christian right groups in the US has been to draw the many movements directly opposed to the authority of the federal government into a wider coalition. In particular, this common opposition to the federal government as the main driver of

globalization and builder of the New World Order has resulted in a strong (and paradoxical) alignment between extreme libertarian organizations (such as the American militias) and Christian fundamentalism (the Christian Patriots, for example) – “a movement that aims at theocracy and therefore would seek government imposition of moral and religious values on its citizens”. (idem, p.97)

Finally, a key strategy in all violent fundamentalist groups has been the use of conspiracy theories to attract new recruits and motivate militancy. Key here have been conspiracy theories about the emergence of a New World Order or world government run by a cabal with the aid of the United States federal government, Israel, UN, WTO, IMF, multinational corporations and other subordinate states (see ‘The Protocols of the Elders of Zion’, conspiracies of the Christian Patriot movement in US, and those promoted by the Japanese religious cult Aum Shinrikyo in the 1990s, or, more recently, Qanon, etc.).

These are only some of the strategies for growth adopted by different religions and religious groups. At this point, I would like to take a step back and ask the following question: what kind of conclusions can be derived from all this?

The first conclusion is the realization of how confusing the meaning of religion must appear to someone watching all of this from the outside. Can we imagine how it would feel, in a world in which every organization and business is trying to capture your attention and allegiance, for religions to compete in doing the same? Religions must find a way to stand apart from the modus operandi of the attention economy, and even more, find ways to safeguard individual freedom of thought and the essential powers of the human will without concern for a religious strategy for growth.

The second conclusion is that many religious strategies for growth, and maybe even the concept itself, seem to be too self-righteous, absolutist, and assertive, unethical, dysfunctional, dogmatic, completely wild, promoting terrible ends, or in some other way problematic. This and the competition between them only serves to delegitimize the role of organized religion in society. **A key problem, therefore, is neither materialism nor the culture of higher education institutions, but the quality of the strategic involvement of religions in the public domain.**

The third conclusion is that religions seem to be moving more and more towards adopting the marketing strategies and organizational culture of business and social media companies and entrepreneurs. This has already resulted in major religions ceding control over their restructuring processes to big consultancy firms.

Fourth, a certain conclusion emerges here about how we should examine or study religion as a social institution. The rest of this post will seek to develop this notion, so bear with me if you will.

There are clear differences between the strategies for growth of the Catholic Church and the Church of England (the McKinsey & Deloitte approach), of the Pentecostal movements, of Jehovah's Witnesses, and of violent fundamentalist groups like al-Qaeda and the Christian Patriots, just to mention the few examples I was able to touch on.

However, what they all have in common is that growth is an existential issue and oftentimes the key strategic concern that frames issues of finance, the development of human resources, and the gaining of influence in shaping the world. There are also very strong motivations for pursuing a strategy of growth that have to do with religious beliefs (for example, the wish to better the world, a dominant strand of evangelism, or notions like jihad).

The insight I get from this is that to understand a religion as an institution (rather than as Sacred Text or the interaction of the Divine with history, for example) one must examine 1) its current organizational culture, 2) the extent to which its strategy for social change differs from or is identical with its strategy for growth, and especially, 3) the nature of its strategy for growth – if this is the element most emphasized. Why? Because most often than not the other key functions and activities are subordinate to the organizational culture and its strategy for growth.

From a pragmatic perspective, however, other factors directly related to the strategy for growth should also be taken into account.

The first factor concerns the manner in which the Scriptures are being interpreted. This determines the final aims of a religion, the long-term strategy or methodology to achieve them, and the sequence of steps or priorities for the present times. Whether or not one should actually have a strategy for growth, and of what kind, depends on such interpretations.



However, let me provide a clearer example of how particular interpretations of Scriptures can be of great consequence at organizational level.

Take, for example the taxonomy highlighted in this interesting [article by Yong Huang](#): ‘exclusivism’, ‘inclusivism’, ‘universalism’, and ‘particularism’. I will use here the definitions suggested by Huang:

- “The exclusivists insist that only one religion is true and all others are false.”
- “The inclusivists maintain that only one religion represents the absolute truth and all others have only some measure of it.”
- Universalism assumes that different religions are “different parochial expressions of some [divine] universal essence”.
- In particularism “different religions are regarded as different in their fundamentals” and in need of recognizing these fundamental differences in order to tolerate each-other.

Whichever option is selected would impinge on the main features of the organizational culture, and on the importance and characteristics of the strategy for growth – if such a strategy is deemed necessary. Unlike with any other institutions then, the organizational culture of religions must proceed from their Revelation or Sacred Texts, via an act of hermeneutics.

Second, once the immediate, medium, and long-term aims of a religion have been determined and made public to the believers, success or failure in delivering them can become a way to assess the performance of the religion and of its religious leadership. Since progress towards such aims is the general preoccupation of the religious leadership, failure or lack of progress can significantly alter organizational culture and modes of leadership to ensure delivery. In other words, once set, targets can take on a life of their own and, before you know it, you can find yourself in a very strong audit culture.

Third, there are some questions about whether or not a strategy for growth is needed and whether it should be envisaged as the key strategic concern. Do we need a theory for growth if we have a theory of development? Do we need a theory for growth if we have a theory for social change? A theory for social change focuses on inner and outer transformation and the world rather than on the growth of one’s organization. A development theory allows for

autopoiesis and open-endedness. In contradistinction, a theory for growth is one led by manifold targets and key performance indicators relentlessly driving performance and, thus, producing an audit culture.

Chris Shore and Susan Wright have offered a general definition of audit culture that I find quite useful:

*“The spread of the principles and techniques of financial accounting into new systems for measuring, ranking, and auditing performance represents one of the most important and defining features of contemporary governance. ... increasingly, the principles and practices of modern accounting and financial control are being applied to contexts far removed from the world of bookkeeping and corporate management. It is the widespread proliferation of these calculative rationalities of modern financial accounting and their effects on individuals and organizations that we term ‘audit culture.’”* [Shore, Cris, and Susan Wright. “Audit Culture Revisited: Rankings, Ratings, and the Reassembling of Society.” *Current Anthropology* 56, no. 3 (2015): 421–44.]

Besides constituting the fruit of a very materialistic business and financial culture and of economic assumptions that religions tend to be extremely critical of, audit cultures come with some serious consequences. This raises the question of whether audit cultures might not be a questionable way to reform the organizational culture, and indeed, the culture of a religion. The matter might be more complex than the question suggests, but here are some reasons why the issue is worth raising:

I. **excessive centralization** – indeed, this might be the primary reason for (and the main consequence of) the existence of audit cultures in the digital age.

Prior to the rise of digitalization, as Brynjolfsson & Benzell have argued, the information needed for decision-making was dispersed in many locations and areas of activity. Eliciting such information in the form of knowledge therefore required “the participation of large numbers of people, directly or indirectly, in decision making.” (Brynjolfsson, Erik, and Seth G. Benzell. 2018. [‘The Centralization of Information and Authority in the Digital Economy’](#). Stanford Digital Economy Lab.)

Digitalization and technological solutionism, however, gives the strong impression that these limits to information centralization and knowledge production have been surpassed, allowing those at the centre to believe they can attain certainty and exert direct rule from distance:

*“The rise of AI, big data, and digital networks are challenging the twin facts that historically limited information centralization. Digital networks make it possible for detailed data, including the increasingly ubiquitous sensors that comprise the Internet of Things, to transfer information almost instantly and costlessly. Meanwhile, modern digital technologies, including AI systems and their cloud connected embodiments, can continuously and cheaply upgrade their decision-making functionality, and by many metrics, already vastly exceed the computational power of the human brain. The digitization of information and decision-making capabilities can centralize information and in turn authority.”* (Brynjolfsson, Erik, and Seth G. Benzell. 2018. [‘The Centralization of Information and Authority in the Digital Economy’](#). Stanford Digital Economy Lab. p.1.)

Not surprisingly, a 2021 survey of more than 160 executives revealed that these executives associate digitalization with “the move toward more centralized, data-driven decision making and with stronger hands-on roles for headquarters and top managers.” [Nell, Phillip C., Nicolai J. Foss, Peter G. Klein, and Jan Schmitt. 2021. [‘Avoiding Digitalization Traps: Tools for Top Managers’](#). Business Horizons 64 (2): 163–69.]

II. Another fundamental problem of audit cultures is that **measurement always occurs through proxies that are far removed from the substance of what is being measured**, the more so if these proxies are represented in numerical form and statistics. Take a university department, for example: the finances of that department, the size of the campus and the amount of buildings, the size of the department, the ratio of students per teacher, the number of publications in highly-rated journals, the number of students progressing to the next year of their degree, the number of students graduating, the number of students finding employment within 6-12 months, the degree classifications obtained at graduation, some Likert scale survey about student satisfaction – all these are interesting indicators but together they do not offer any reliable insight into the quality of that department, its research, teaching, or the educational experience provided overall. Despite this, we pretend that they do, in order for the leaders of nations, HE systems, and universities to have a way to rank university departments nationally and globally in order to allocate funding and run higher education sectors as markets. Arguably, what audit culture produces in this case are data

representations and visualizations providing the illusion of knowledge and, therefore, the illusion of control. The danger is that leaders take this simulacra for reality and then react by introducing waves of reform (“governance by dashboard”), or worse, see this auditing process as an opportunity to take full control and introduce their own political agendas – thus generating massive disruptions by attempting to steer entire systems of higher education on the basis of very little information of real value.

The main issue here is that we begin to assume that the simulacra or quantitative approximations produced by the auditing culture are the real thing, the substance of phenomena, when in truth such measurements are generally much too narrow and way too removed to capture what truly matters:

*“As Michael Power (1994) observed, ‘we have lost the ability to be publicly skeptical about the fashion for audit and quality assurance’ (41) to the extent that they have come to appear as natural and benign solutions to the problems of performance, management, and governance.”* [Shore, Cris, and Susan Wright. “Audit Culture Revisited: Rankings, Ratings, and the Reassembling of Society.” *Current Anthropology* 56, no. 3 (2015): 421–44.]

If this is the case with education, how much more problematic do things get when an auditing culture is being applied to the complex issues of developing spirituality or advancing spiritual development?

III. A consequence of the above is the creation of **a culture of compliance** which leads to demotivation – for what is the point of creativity, alternative thinking, or critique, when most strategies and forms of decision-making have been centralized, are far removed from view, backed up by sophisticated audit systems and analyses, and not open to scrutiny or for discussion despite being highly imperfect or even flawed? Few things are as demotivating as knowing already from the beginning that the process of change or reform being introduced is essentially flawed and could be significantly improved, and then realizing that the highly centralized organizational culture will not allow for any changes to that process, no matter the feed-back, until the process has run its course.

IV. **Burnout** is the normal consequence of an audit culture that 1) strives to exponentially increase productivity while cutting or keeping costs the same, which 2) appears at all times

obsessed with growth, and which 3) demands a ‘culture of compliance’ that is highly demotivating.

V. Shore and Wright (2015) also highlight other negative effects of the audit culture:

“1. **loss of organizational trust** (O’Neill 2002; Power 1994); [due to the centralization of decision-making but also the resulting incompetence]

2. **elaborate and wasteful gaming strategies** (House of Commons 2004; Shore and Wright 2000; Wright 2009);

3. **a culture of compliance and large compliance costs, including the appointment of new specialists preoccupied with creating positive (mis)representations of performance** (Miller 2001); [the public image of the institution matters more than the reality of its performance]

4. **defensive strategies and blamism that stifle innovation and focus on short-term objectives over long-term needs** (Hood 2002);

5. **deprofessionalization, a disconnect between motivation and incentives, lower employee morale, and increased stress and anxiety** (Bovbjerg 2011; Brenneis, Shore, and Wright 2005; Wright 2014);

6. **“tunnel vision” and performing to the measure, with a focus solely on what is counted, to the exclusion of anything else** (Townley and Doyle 2007);

7. **and the undermining of welfare and educational activities** [anything of substance really] that cannot be easily measured (King and Moutsou 2010)”.

VI. Last but not least, one of the most significant consequences of the audit culture is that it produces incentives that negatively impact the structure, organizational culture, and type of leadership of the organization in the long run. Let’s assume we start with a partially flawed or questionable project associated with a culture of compliance and the refusal to take in any divergent feedback. In such a context those who either don’t see the flaws in the project, are the most compliant, not very knowledgeable in that area, or simply primarily interested in increasing their social status or pay will stick with the project and work on delivering the set targets, no questions asked no matter the likely results. At the same time, those

knowledgeable or experienced enough to recognize and highlight the flaws present in the project will likely either:

- depart from the project once realizing that management will not consider other options.
- become marginalized or excluded for their views.
- experience ‘a disconnect between motivation and incentives, lower employee morale, and increased stress and anxiety’, that is, demotivation and stress in the role.
- become seen as too critical or negative to be allowed any position of real responsibility in the future.
- try to do their best, asserting some degree of local independence, while awaiting for the current strategy or plan to fail lamentably in some way, so that the whole process can be reconsidered or started anew.
- engage in some kind of gaming of the system in which the required targets are reported as ‘delivered’ but with the minimum of quality and with the minimum of effort invested.

Now let us assume that several cycles of this kind have taken place in succession. What are the likely results? That some of the key expertise has left the project or has been marginalized and is not making any significant contribution to it resulting in the loss of knowledge, innovation, creativity, and problem-solving. That those showing compliance and dedication and/or gaming the system for personal gain (social status or pay) will have eventually ensured the delivery of a project that weakens the entire institution because of major flaws leading to poor results (a reality that is almost always papered over to protect the image of the institution), only to be later recompensed for this with progression to higher leadership positions. This paradoxical outcome has become such a prevalent occurrence there is even a term for it: ‘failing upwards’ = ‘to advance in one’s career despite a failure’.

What then is the overall result of all this?

Over time, the loss of expertise, the demise in the quality of leadership, and the exponential rise in social positioning and competition for status (or pay) will likely weaken the institution until an irreversible point of crisis has been reached. At that point, the top leadership will either become removed or substantially reformed, giving others in the second layer of leadership a go. The problem here, however, is that due to how job progression has

been shaped by the audit culture and centralization, the new leadership might not be able to operate from outside the existing paradigm either – leading to a repeat cycle.

At this point, I feel I have to make a basic but important observation about the notion of an audit culture. The key thing to realize here is that the benchmarks and indicators produced by the audit culture also function as key incentives. **And it is the incentive structure of an organization (symbolic and material), not abstract principles about the primacy of either competition or cooperation, that essentially shape human behaviour, culture, and social systems.** In that sense, if a religion seeks to change how institutions and societies operate, the change required must come at the level of incentives; that is to say, the incentives and regulatory frameworks of governments, businesses, and even universities must come under scrutiny. Who and what gets rewarded and who and what do not (the rewards might be symbolic or even intangible, such as trust, appreciation, or being allowed to have an opinion) are crucial aspects of policy and administration that have extremely significant consequences for the viability of institutions and entire social systems over several cycles. Because of the changes in the management strategies of the financial world, the key incentives are now built-in the audit culture through set targets and performance indicators.

As we have seen, the dominant tendency is for the same type of incentive structure to be extended to religious institutions. Based on what we have seen, this is likely to introduce patterns where institutional crises occur over several cycles, and where issues such as burnout, the loss of expertise, and the gaming of the system for personal gain are a constant feature in each cycle. Part of this would be related to the fact that incentives are automatically associated with the audit culture and the audit culture itself constitutes an intrinsic expression of the world of business-finance and of multinational corporations (MNCs), that is, of a culture that tends to be highly centralized and materialistic to a considerable degree.

### **Instead of a Conclusion**

The issue of growth and debates about growth have been around religion, or rather, religious leadership, for a long time – but mostly as a matter internal to the administrative circles. As a consequence, public or academic discussion of this has been subdued even within the confines of a given religion. Understandably, there is little desire for religious people to look at religion in this mundane way – in terms of the management systems and organizational structures they operate with. This could also be easily construed as impiety or lack of faith



when done from the outside of religious administrative circles, particularly as, in general, all forms of religious leadership are associated with claims of divine guidance or inerrancy.

However, what should be clear is that within the administrative circles of religion the issue of growth has been so significant as to have resulted in a primary focus on mass conversion and on a search to understand how to trigger such phenomena across the globe.

The recent history of Christianity provides, in my view, an accessible and interesting case-study.

One can start, for example, with the 1933 book “Christian Mass Movements in India” written by J. Waskom Pickett, an American Methodist minister and missionary to India. Pickett had been asked in 1928 by the [National Christian Council of India, Burma, and Ceylon](#) “to make an extensive study of the phenomenon in India of ‘Christian mass movements,’ that is, mass conversion of certain sectors of Indian society.” ([source](#)) The resulting study later inspired another fellow missionary, Donald A. McGavran to write books such as “How Churches Grow” (1965) and “Understanding Church Growth” (1970s) and, then, to later establish the [“Church Growth Movement”](#). As with McGavran’s books, this movement within evangelical Christianity sought to trigger mass conversion and grow churches based on applying statistical analysis, research and sociology to the missionary work underway in different locations in the United States and abroad.

Whatever the merits of the Church Growth Movement (which itself emerged as a critique of missionary practice), and I am sure this is an issue of some complexity and one which cannot be tackled here, the movement has come under some intense scrutiny. Critics from other Christian groups have suggested, for example, that “the movement is ‘only about numbers’ and ‘success’ oriented”. Inasmuch as such critics have also put their own arguments into writing, a public debate around the topic of growth as mass conversion has developed that reaches until the present day:

- Newton, Phil A. (May 2007). “The Package Matters: Problems with the Church Growth Movement”. *Areopagus Journal*. Apologetics Resource Center (Troublesome Movements in the 21st–Century Church).
- Prewett, Rebecca (1994). [“Online Conversations About... Seeker-Sensitive Churches”](#). Archived from [the original](#) on 2007-10-20. Retrieved 2007-10-03.

- Armstrong, John H. (May–June 1994). [“Problems related to seeker-sensitive worship”](#). *Reformation & Revival Journal*. [Carol Stream, IL](#): Reformation & Revival Ministries. **3** (3).

What should we make of this debate?

Of interest here are the diversity of opinions and perspectives on what a Church should be and what the right strategy for growth should imply, and the diversity of models for growth competing with each-other.

This niche literature could contain great lessons for religions or religious groups aiming to walk a similar path while avoiding its pitfalls.

This literature also confirms how central the issue of a strategy for growth or mass conversion can be for a religion or its religious leadership and, as a consequence, for what it means to be religious as an individual.

The overall problematic of growth for those who believe spirituality can be adequately measured and delivered through data collection and targeted programs has been clearly stated by Fred Hayes Smith in his PhD dissertation from 1985 entitled [“Measuring Quality Church Growth”](#):

*“In this age of church growth studies, church surveys, seminars addressing this spiritual issue and that church problem, more and more attention is focusing on the spiritual quality of the church. The question is being asked with increased frequency, ‘Is my church growing spiritually?’ As a minister I realize that the members of the church I pastor are interested more in spiritual quality than numerical growth. In researching spiritual life I have discovered that other pastors and churches are also interested in where they are spiritually. It just seems to be a part of human nature to compare oneself with others (2 Cor. 8:8; Moberg 1979:3,4; Moberg 1982:8,9; Schaller 1983:2).*

*For various years there has been an expressed need for some type of instrument to measure the level of spiritual maturity in a church. But most who have expressed this need also realize the complexities of the issue.*

*For when the time comes to move from ‘talk’ to ‘doing’ a whole new set of dynamics evolves. And questions begin to rise, questions that tend to become barriers. Questions such as, ‘What kind of instrument should it be?’ ‘What will be measured?’ ‘Can spirituality be measured?’ ‘How does one measure spirituality!’ ‘Is this judging?’ ‘Will one instrument be valid for all Christians?’*

*It is my thesis that measuring spiritual quality is not only a valid effort, it is a necessary effort and one that can be effectively accomplished.*

*A criticism often heard concerning the Church Growth movement is that it emphasizes quantity growth to the supposed neglect of quality growth. One explanation for this neglect is that presently there exists no effective instrument by which quality growth in a church can be measured. The absence of such a measuring instrument can be attributed to many reasons. Some of the problems inherent in developing such an instrument are: 1) the fact that the universalness of a measuring tool is limited by denominational barriers; 2) the issues of “judging,” subjectivity, commitment, and the “quality vs. quantity” debate; 3) what variables are to be used in order to measure the level of spiritual maturity; and, 4) what kind of survey is needed to adequately measure spiritual maturity in a church.”*

Smith himself believed that the spiritual maturity of a church could be measured through a survey with 12 categories and further statistical work applied to the results, as outlined in his [PhD dissertation](#).

It is likely that such attempts are a lot more sophisticated today and will be soon powered by AI, if this has not happened already.

However, whether spirituality can be measured and whether a universal methodology for triggering mass conversion can be found remain very bold, hopeful, and open questions, despite strategies of growth developed from such notions having become part and parcel of the audit cultures of different religions or religious groups in recent times.

One thing seems certain. If religions want to change the world they must do so through constructing alternative organizational cultures, incentive structures, regulatory frameworks, management styles, policy systems, and (digital) infrastructures of knowledge. These are the domains where the moral and material foundations of the world are being re-constituted.

The problem is that they are least equipped to do so.

PS:

A wonderful member of staff from the Theology department has shared with me the following resources – which go well together: <https://nyupress.org/9781479814299/beyond-doubt/>

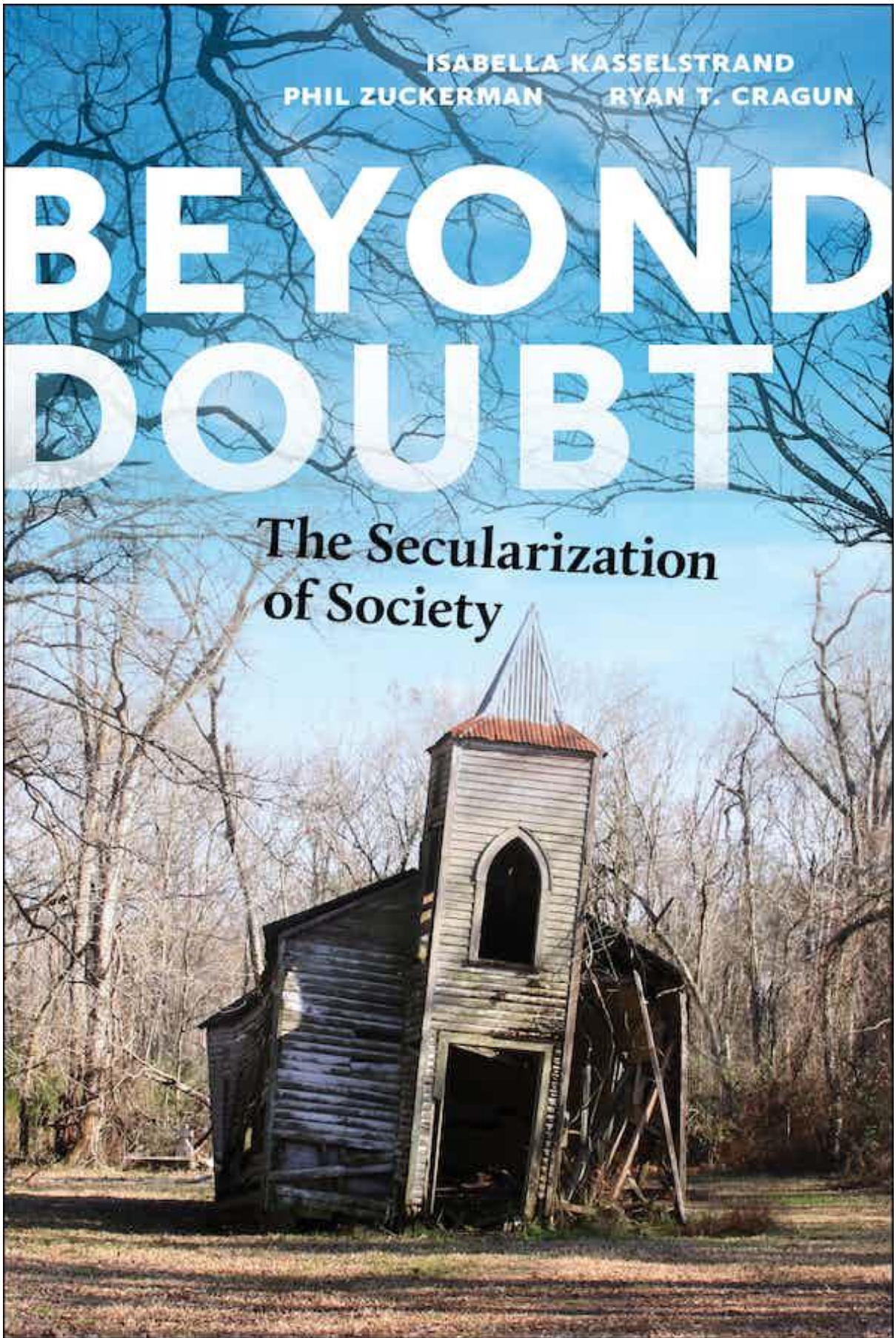
This is a very recent piece of work (2023) providing robust empirical support for the secularization theory through analysis of data from many nations around the world. It has been described to me as a global study arguing that ‘secularization is now undeniable’.



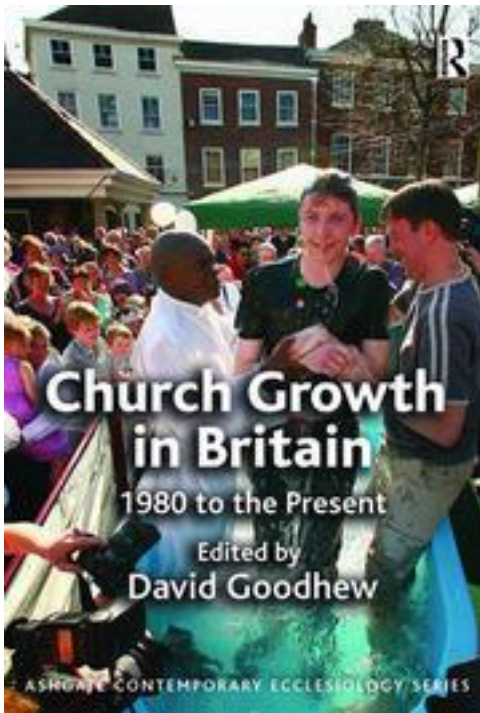
ISABELLA KASSELSTRAND  
PHIL ZUCKERMAN RYAN T. CRAGUN

# BEYOND DOUBT

*The Secularization  
of Society*



and <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/edit/10.4324/9781315260297/church-growth-britain-david-goodhew> (I find this fascinating – a splendid resource showing that despite the reality of secularization some individual churches of different denominations are actually quite successful at still finding ways to grow → the book employs case-studies to outline what could be viable growth strategies for churches in Britain)



-----Continues below-----



## Theories of social change? Part 3: Baha’i inspired theories for social change



There is a coherent line of thought that unites the three pieces in this series. This will become apparent as I review some of the key claims advanced so far.

First, in [Part 1](#) I proposed a distinction between the two types of theories one would have to identify in order to be able to read the reality of any given social context: the dominant ‘espoused theory’ and the dominant ‘theory-in-use’:

- *“dominant ‘espoused theories’ are the theories that are dominant or have most acceptance at the level of thought and ideas within a particular setting and which derive from professional domains of knowledge and practice;*
- *on the other hand, dominant ‘theories-in-use’ are the dominant theories or constructs actually guiding decision-making, action, and implementation and the entire social system in a particular setting and which have the (distortional) imprint of the ruling elites.”* [I have used the word ‘distortional’ here to refer to the fact that the ruling elites (or the leadership of an organization) tend to ‘edit’, alter, reposition the theories they adopt in ways that are not usually consonant with the organic development of these theories, or with their foundational principles and aims. Besides discarding essential features, this type of ‘editing’ also involves forcefully mixing such theories

or even fusing them with all sorts of other theoretical features, traditions of thought, pure ideological concerns, and management fads – elements with which such theories would rightly be deemed incompatible from an academic or professional point of view. The example I have given for this (see [Part 1](#)) has been the particular way in which the learning theory of constructivism has been ‘edited’ from above within the sectors of European and UK Higher Education.]

I have then asserted the following about the dominant ‘theory-in-use’ in the Bahá’í community at this point in time:

*“From 1996 until today it could be said that the dominant ‘theory-in-use’ has been the development theory of FUNDAEC and Farzam Arbab as adjusted towards the goal of growth or ‘entry by troops’ via the Ruhi institute. While undergoing a shift from critical pedagogy approaches and constructivism towards an alignment with analytical philosophy and foundationalism (for example, ‘ontological foundationalism’) this two-level theory (rural community development and growth of a religious community) was also reconstituted as the underpinning theory/methodology for expansion and consolidation, social action and participation in public discourses – deemed integrated lines of activity for advancing the movement of clusters (for an expanded discussion see [here](#)).“*

Second, in [Part 2](#) I have argued that the actual day-to-day approach to social change of the Bahá’í community is something quite well defined and relatively easy to identify. I then suggested that the essence of it could be summed up as follows: the methodology for social change of the Bahá’í community is largely identical with its methodology for growth.

Inasmuch as this observation or statement might be surprising to some, I have offered the following clarification:

*“This explains why the main educational program of the Bahá’í community has been developed around the concept of large-scale expansion and consolidation or “entry by troops” [see *The Ruhi Institute – “Learning about Growth. The Story of the Ruhi Institute and Large-scale Expansion of the Faith in Colombia”* (1991)] and why our energies and plans are focused on developing ‘programmes of growth’ and ‘intensive programmes of growth’ in all clusters via the institute process (that is, via the Ruhi materials). Of course,*



*things are more complex than that but this, meaning, the development of clusters, is what we believe will truly change the world – our main strategy for social change.”*

The Bahá'í community, it can thus be concluded so far, has a clear methodology for growth, and this is underpinned by a dominant 'theory-in-use' – with both elements also constituting the main approach to social change. While, after decades of development this strategy for growth and, in particular, the dominant 'theory-in-use', are still crystallizing, the current general structure of each is quite clear.

What is not as clear though is the third element: the dominant 'espoused theory' for social change or, even, the 'espoused theories' for social change that might emerge from the intellectual field of the Bahá'í community.

In relation to this third element, I have advanced the following observations (see [Part 1](#)):

1. The Bahá'í intellectual field is so uneven and fragmented that it would be hard to attempt to identify any dominant 'espoused theory' at the moment. It would be difficult to even just map the theories directly or indirectly relevant to the topic of social change.
2. Considerable intellectual and institutional efforts have been more recently undertaken to present revised versions of the dominant 'theory-in-use' as an 'espoused theory' all could find attractive. Michael Karlberg's "[Constructing Social Reality. An Inquiry into the Normative Foundations of Social Change](#)" is the most popular example of this. I have discussed this [elsewhere](#).
3. At the same time, Bahá'ís in the intellectual field and elsewhere have been urged to constantly operate from within the conceptual framework of the 'theory-in-use' so as to advance it while also reconfiguring it as the dominant 'espoused theory'. In this sense, it could be said that all Bahá'ís are expected to contribute to a single theory – the 'theory-in-use' guiding all the activities of the Bahá'í community. This is a challenge in terms of scholarship because each academic field is a constellation of theories, conceptual frameworks, models and paradigms and each has its own autonomy in how such constellations emerge and interact and which of their key elements and advanced zones of research spring up as driving forces for the shape and direction of the field.

4. There are also some problems with theory-building here. Providing a more abstract description of the methodology in use for the expansion of the Bahá'í community and attempting to draw quick equivalences with established bodies of theory is simply not enough to conjure up a theory for social change (or anything else) that would meet the requirements of theory-building within the academic disciplines.
5. Other complications derive from the manner in which theory-building is sometimes attempted within the religious domain as a direct superimposition or transposition of a belief system and religious faith over the domains of academic disciplines and scientific reason. This is not how dominant 'espoused theories', or even just 'espoused theories' work. What constitutes an 'espoused theory' will always be primarily determined by its currency on the marketplace of ideas, that is, by its relevance within its own field of inquiry and across multiple domains of knowledge. Such a theory would have to gain ascendancy within the academic/intellectual world based on its own merits, that is, through the validity and explanatory power of its epistemic claims across diverse fields of inquiry.
6. The issue of the transposition of theory from religious practice to the academic fields is also a more specific one. In other words, something that started as a rural development theory and became a religious programme of growth based on faith and on activating faith cannot be easily translated into a comprehensive philosophical and/or sociological theory based on the procedures of reason and the scientific method. In such a context, the 'theory-in-use' in the field of religion (whether or not a rigorous theoretical construction yet) cannot simply become a dominant 'espoused theory' within the domain of the academic disciplines – which suggests efforts at revision and further development are needed on all sides.

How then, do we get a dominant 'espoused theory' for social change or a constellation of such theories from different academic disciplines to emerge in the intellectual field of the Bahá'í community?

I think there must be a recognition that, at this point in time, the second part is more needed than the first. A dominant theory must emerge from a wider group of options and organically from within the developmental processes and interactional dynamics of different academic fields. Inasmuch as the academic disciplines are undergoing continuous change, the Bahá'í intellectual field must be able to keep up with them and be able to function at the cutting-

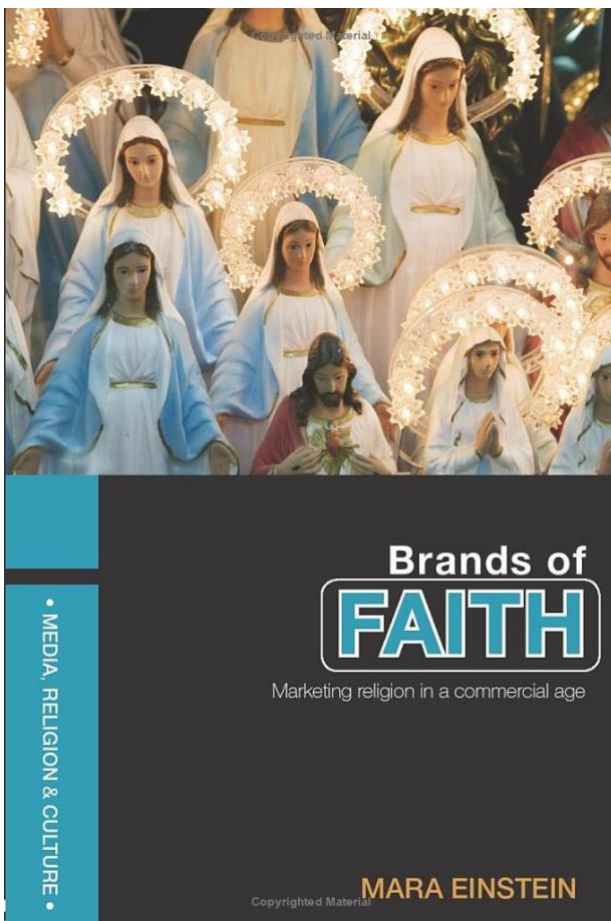
edge of such domains of inquiry. It is also the case that such a dominant ‘espoused theory’ would have to constitute a synthesis of a diverse range of theories from different fields, or in other words, an integrative super-theory (see [Part 1](#)). Many options are available but none of them are possible without the development of Bahá’í inspired fields of study.

It is in relation to such concerns that I would like to highlight three key challenges, five directions of thought I find inspiring, and where I see an essential gap in the existing Bahá’í literature.

### **Three challenges:**

1. Can we develop Bahá’í inspired fields of study in an adequate manner? The issue is not just one of resources, but also, one of the model of scholarship in use, meaning, of how the relationship between science and religion is understood to result in a model of scholarship attuned to the needs of the age. I have discussed a possible example of this [here](#).
2. Inasmuch as the strategy for growth constitutes the main priority there is a risk that alternatives, developments, or adjustments to it, and, therefore, to the theory of social change will only emerge from experimentation with growth and alternative growth models. That is to say, only work that advances growth and growth models will play a role in determining the strategy and theory for social change. That only such work will count. This also raises the very problematic topic of incentives which I have touched on in [Part 2](#).
3. Such a dynamic between growth and social change seems to have been the reality of evangelical religions for a very long time and it would seem important for us to look at what has resulted from this. The Christian context, for example, has been marked by a centuries-old argument between those advocating for social change and those championing growth and mass conversion and for whom social change was never of real strategic concern. The idea of using statistics and the social sciences to find ways to identify a growth model that would trigger mass conversions all over the world was first developed in the 1930s and then significantly refined in the 1960s (see discussion of the Church Growth Movement [here](#)). In fact, Christian evangelical movements in the US started to calculate the financial benefits of each conversion in order to determine strategies for growth as soon as the rise of information technology allowed it (with donations per conversion, for example, as one of the many data points). Their

models, one must infer, are a lot more sophisticated now. In recent times, the Catholic Church and the Anglican Church have started outsourcing their organizational strategy (including the strategy for growth) and many key operations to big consultancy firms like McKinsey and Deloitte (see [Part 2](#)) thereby adopting their audit culture. Such models, strategies and audit cultures will, in all likelihood, be now powered by AI. I believe this is not a unique phenomenon but a universal process of change introduced by the wider society into the domain of religion as the result of neoliberalism (what Michael Guest has called ‘[Neoliberal Religion](#)’) and the dynamics of ‘informational capitalism’ ([“The Information Age” trilogy](#) – Manuel Castells). After all, audit cultures and management practices are related and they can be the backbone of institutions, in time re-creating culture as a whole. We have the advantage that we can look at other religions and see what this has meant for them so far, although it is all continuously unfolding and at greater and greater speeds:



**Five directions of thought I find inspiring on the theme of social change (or really, what I would like to study if I wanted to develop this theme of social change further from here):**

1. Nader Saiedi's "[Logos and Civilization](#)" – there are many reasons for this but mainly for an introduction to the vision of Bahá'u'lláh for the renewal of civilization from the individual to the global level. This is a paragraph that is absolutely essential for my work (and ideally, for future Bahá'í scholarship) but which has been mostly ignored: *“The most significant aspect of Bahá'u'lláh's system, in addition to the emphasis on the reality and importance of both individual personality and social structure, is the introduction of the global unit of analysis, which is absent from nineteenth-century social and political theory. In fact, the first systematic social and political theory to explicitly address the material aspect of this global level of analysis has been the world system theory developed in the second half of the twentieth century, and that theory, while influential, remains an exception in sociopolitical theory.”* (p.331) What is a pity is that there is no work in which Nader Saiedi would compare philosophical, social, and political theories (say, Kant, Hegel, Marx, Weber, Nietzsche, Bergson, Heidegger, Schleiermacher, Gadamer, Mannheim etc.) with themes in the Bahá'í Writings or a work in which he would discuss the project of the Enlightenment in direct relation to the Bahá'í Revelation. However, one can anticipate such arguments by reading his earlier work '[The Birth of Social Theory: Social Thought in the Enlightenment and Romanticism](#)'. As someone interested in Bahá'í conceptions of social change I look at these books as books that I would want to read together.
2. Roshan Danesh's "[Dimensions of Bahá'í Law](#)" – it offers a Bahá'í perspective on social change from within the discipline of law and from the perspective of Bahá'í law. Right now, the part that has captured my attention is his use of categories from Lawrence Lessig to suggest that [“Bahá'ís should privilege action at the level of social meanings, as distinct from social forms and social norms, in their efforts to effect social change in the broader society”](#). (p.173) This is a huge issue to discuss and it is hard to argue against this not being the Bahá'í perspective in relation to law as an instrument for social change – an argument that unfolds throughout the book.

3. Behrooz Sabet's model for scholarship and integrative curriculum model in [Integrative Approach to Knowledge and Action – a Bahá'í perspective](#). I have touched on the the importance of his model of scholarship and its three stages [here](#). I also like consulting his talks on [What a World Civilization Looks Like from a Bahá'í Perspective](#) and [Some Answered Questions of 'Abdu'l-Bahá at a Glance](#) – they help understand his writing.
  
4. The two series of presentations by Steven Phelps: [“Science, Religion, and a New Narrative”](#) at Stanford and [“The Verge of the New”](#) at the Norwegian Bahá'í Summer School – because of a cosmological/evolutionary perspective but, primarily, because he seeks to define notions such as spirit, religion, science, reason, God, prophethood, and human being etc. in new ways based on the Bahá'í Writings in conjunction with theories in physics and cosmology. It would be ironic to think that religions and religious people like ourselves have generally been left behind precisely on these topics. On the other hand, if these terms receive a new meaning then everything changes in terms of what a religion has to offer, including in terms of social change.
  
5. Derek Smith's [“Centering the ‘Pupil of the Eye’: Blackness, Modernity, and the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh”](#), Gayle Morrison's [“To Move the World: Louis G. Gregory and the Advancement of Racial Unity in America”](#), and the 1984 book chapter of Richard Thomas entitled “A Long and Thorny Path: Race Relations in the American Bahá'í Community” (in Lee, Anthony A., editor. [Circle of Unity: Bahá'í Approaches to Current Social Issues](#).) – because they offer something essential on issues of social change that keeps getting missed and this should not happen anymore.

Other things that interest me at the moment (which is to say I have also bought them) are the works of Jack McLean on Shoghi Effendi, those on epistemology by Jean-Marc Lepain (see the edited volume “Studies in Bahá'í Epistemology”, for example), Mikhail Sergeev's book on religious cycles, William Hatcher's “Love, Power and Justice: the Dynamics of Authentic Morality”, Michael Penn's take on love, will and knowledge and the human spirit in “Our Common Humanity” and very importantly, Ludwig Tuman's “Mirror of the Divine” –

because aesthetics and art are in my view fundamental to social change and my assumption is that at this moment we are very much repeating the history of proletkultism and socialist realism as covered by Irina Gutkin in [“The Cultural Origins of the Socialist Realist Aesthetic”](#) (If somebody ever asks me to write something on this maybe I will – it is not a lazy comparison). I have not mentioned Paul Lample – [“Revelation and Social Reality”](#) because that for me falls under the dominant ‘theory-in-use’; but it is essential here as well – which makes it a very unique work.

I am not sharing these thoughts as recommendations because I expect you have identified or will identify better options for yourselves according to your field, specialization, and inclinations. There is a lot out there to creatively draw on and I hope to be surprised.

### **Where I see an essential gap in the existing Bahá’í literature.**

This is where it becomes obvious (if it wasn’t already) that my way of thinking makes me an outlier, with Paul Hanley and Augusto Lopez-Claros the closest (but not similar) in terms of perspective: the first because of a focus on the global challenges that will ensue from reaching 11 billion people on this planet by 2100, and the second because of his focus on current global governance challenges, [this talk](#), and the [Global Governance Podcast](#). I have not included them in the five directions of thought simply because few intellectuals have the stomach to take on these issues without having reached them on their own.

I think there are five main problems with our Bahá’í intellectual-cultural space: 1) an ambivalent attitude to Bahá’í scholarship: “is it important? do we need it? I am not sure” 2) outdated theories and thinking (for example, that markets or global governance can simply be adjusted by introducing a set of moral or spiritual principles as a regulatory framework (also usually, those constituting the belief system of a given religion) – an idea promoted by all main branches of Christianity in past centuries in relation to the economy, but to no avail in practice), 3) that very few read Bahá’í scholarship (there is also an issue of quality when it comes to what is being printed); this also applies to Bahá’í intellectuals who themselves tend to not read each-other unless there is some pre-existent close affiliation – this stems from a more complex problem which has to do with issues of intellectual formation, 4) that Bahá’í scholarship does not seem to much inform administrative (or community) thinking and practice while the opposite is the case and 5) a tendency to rely on cultural and philosophical explanations and ignore the disciplines of economics, finance, politics, sociology, STS



(Science and Technology Studies), geography, critical management studies, and many others – meaning the main social transformations in the fields of economics, politics, work, technology, and the rise of influential social movements in the last 60 years or so are not taken into account. How then does one want to account for processes of social change? One must first get a complex understanding of the current processes of social change shaping the world, of where our societies are right now. This is where there is a massive gap within Bahá'í literature and this disconnection seems to permeate everything, acting like a sort of collective mental barrier. It is for this reason that there is no Bahá'í work that touches on capitalism except "[Eleven](#)" by Paul Hanley, a work which technically deals mainly with consumerism and the relationship between that, agriculture, environmental degradation, and poverty. It is for this reason that the principle of the oneness of mankind is not rightly understood as a social-political category (see [here](#)).

It is also for this reason that no work has touched on how neoliberalism and informational capitalism have surreptitiously shaped religions, for example, by inducing them to adopt audit cultures, the myth of growth (by this I am referring to the economic and business notion that has come to define our understanding of progress), and management techniques of financial capitalism that in time align religious cultures to the culture and values of late capitalism, meaning, the very reverse of the processes of social transformation religions would want to trigger. [This is materialism!](#) The real dangers are things like this which we cannot see well because we haven't analyzed the world and its transformations during the internet era and now the same forces of transformation are trying to reconfigure us. [In my view, the adoption of audit cultures is likely the most significant transformation to occur within the domain of religion](#) – an uninterrupted or continuous process starting in the 1960s but exponentially accelerating in the 21st century and with no end in sight. How no one has attempted to raise this issue within the Bahá'í community in the last 50 years or so shows that the Bahá'í intellectual space functions in a world of its own.

FEDERAL RESERVE NOTE

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MATHEW GUEST

# NEOLIBERAL

THIS NOTE IS LEGAL TENDER FOR ALL DEBTS, PUBLIC AND PRIVATE



12 *See front cover for*

# RELIGION

FAITH AND POWER IN  
THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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Department of the Treasury

ONE DOLLAR

*Paul D. Johnson* 12

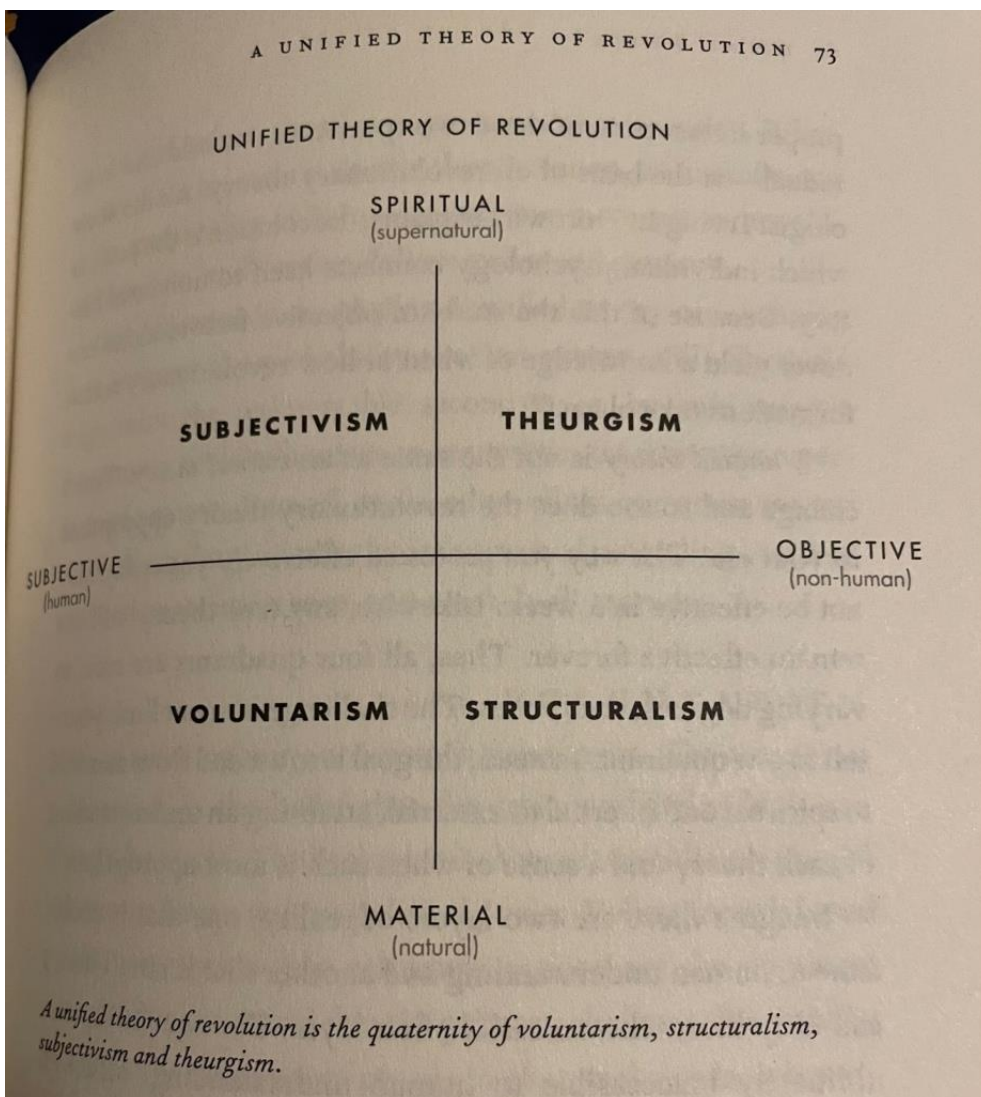
Department of the Treasury

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BLOOMSBURY

The same gap explains why we remain largely unaware and in denial about [the global challenges of the 21st century](#) – with the exception of a handful of souls that have been working their entire lives on issues of climate change or on reforming the UN – meaning professionals with a very high degree of expertise (that we don't trust).

Another way to express this gap is to say that in the terms of Micah White's [theory for global social change](#) we are missing the quadrant on Structuralism and we are very weak on Voluntarism which means we are floating somewhat suspended in Subjectivism and Theurgism with some intention to move for growth in Voluntarism. And that seems to be our theory for social change as things stand, but let's agree to disagree so interesting new ideas can come in.



## Theories of social change? Part 4: Matrix (or a matrix for representing the phenomenon of religion)



Let's start with this excerpt from the 2023 book "Beyond Doubt. The Secularization of Society" by [Isabella Kasselstrand](#), [Phil Zuckerman](#) and [Ryan T. Cragun](#):

*"Having demonstrated that Europe has indeed seen a decline in belief in God, is this decline limited to western Europe—the region of the world that critics of secularization have often claimed to be the only one that is experiencing a decline? Again: No. The wide variety of countries that have seen declines in belief in God is striking: Sweden, South Korea, the Netherlands, Estonia, Norway, Great Britain, Denmark, Hong Kong, France, Japan, New Zealand, Finland, Australia, Germany, Iceland, Belgium, Switzerland, Spain, Luxembourg, Austria, the United States, India, Uruguay, Singapore, Italy, Chile, Canada, Ireland, Northern Ireland, Poland, Malaysia, Turkey, Colombia, and Indonesia all witnessed declines of at least 2.5 percentage points. Countries with a decrease of more than 20 percentage points include the Netherlands, Norway, Australia, Belgium, Sweden, Great Britain, Spain, New Zealand, the United States, Iceland, and South Korea. In some of these countries, the drop was astonishing. For example, between 1982 and 2018, belief in God in Great Britain*



*declined by 34 percentage points, from 82 to 48 percent. Sweden saw a decline from 60 percent in 1982 to 36 percent in 2017. And in Belgium, 87 percent believed in God in 1981, which subsequently declined to 61 percent in 2009. Clearly, even though levels of belief in God are high in most of the world, secularization has occurred in the realm of belief, and is not limited to religious practices and identification." (p.66).*

This sets the context for the series of thoughts below.

I was thinking that I could tentatively represent the phenomenon of religion by using a theoretical model with three interactive features (or interconnected feed-back loops) from which strategy would emerge:

1. a knowledge infrastructure (a model of scholarship, a digital infrastructure, and a theory for social change),
2. a social change field of theory and activity (always connected with the first and constantly constructing and re-constructing the theory for social change in use)
3. organizational structure (leadership, leadership structures, development of administrative and legal architecture, institutional innovation, management theory, finance, project management, goals, evaluation, etc.)

The aim of this tripartite structure would be to understand the Revelation and translate it into practice. Growth could simply be a by-product of this and not necessarily a way to create an audit culture for the measurement and management of the spiritual development of communities. If anything, contributions in knowledge and social change could take priority over successes in growth but none of these areas respond well to audit cultures.

Looking at other religions, one can see how they go through cycle after cycle in which they lose the balance over these elements. The knowledge infrastructure is usually the first domain to be de-emphasized, left behind, or in some way or another break down (I have pointed before to Thomas O'Dea's "American Catholic Dilemma"). In most cases, a strategy and model for growth emerges from one of the levels of organizational structure and almost entirely replaces the social change dimension (I have talked before about the "Church Growth Movement" and the use of McKinsey by the Catholic and Anglican Churches). Next, in response to the effects of this, alternative religious movements sometimes emerge that return the social change dimension back to the agenda. The two examples here are the [Social](#)

[Gospel](#) in Protestantism and the [Liberation Theology](#) movements. ([The Social Gospel](#) "ideology would be inherited by [liberation theologians](#) and civil rights advocates and leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr"). These alternative movements then subside, and a growth agenda once again returns with better technological means, now solidifying the field of religion as divided between a dominant conservative arm and a liberal or progressive arm. Arguably, the [latest research](#) seems to suggest that these dynamics, and paradoxically even the emphasis on a growth agenda, have generally not only failed to arrest the decline in numbers of believers (except for some forms of [Pentecostalism](#) discussed in another entry on this blog) but have also resulted in a general distrust and shunning away (not from religious topics but) from organized religion. This trend that has become the main cultural orientation towards religion in the past decades has also been mirrored internally through a process of differentiation that might well be of greater significance. A rapidly expanding gulf can now be observed between a nucleus of active believers institutionally inserted into administrative roles and a large body of believers who prefer to remain relatively dissociated from organized forms of religion and the religious community, despite still harbouring feelings of religious belonging and a conscious intent to derive inspiration from their religious texts. This explains the large differential between the number of people recorded to have a religious affiliation in national statistics and the actual rate of church attendance or involvement with organized religion.

Is there anything to learn from this?

Theoretically, the issue seems quite simple: just keep the balance between the three elements.

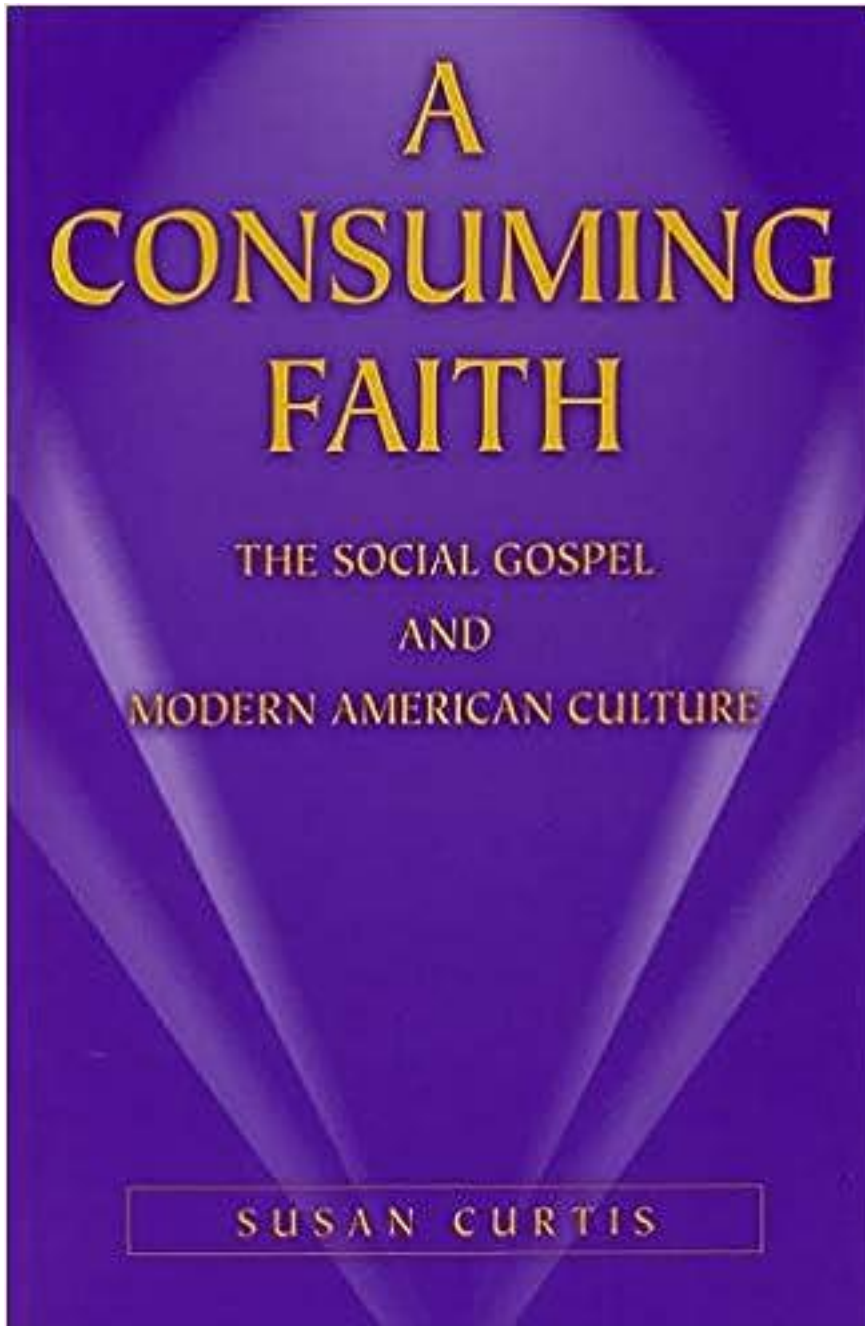
However, history shows the process tends to quickly become unbalanced, mirroring a similar type of general dynamic across religious domains, and one which produces very context-specific results that are difficult to reverse.

What also seems interesting to me is that some of these dynamics very much parallel the challenges of the modern university, where a growth agenda (with a strong audit culture) has overtaken the social transformation role and is weakening the knowledge infrastructure.

This to me says there is something about the key social forces in society that shapes both religions and secular institutions in the same way.

This might be too reductionist a scheme to fully rely on, but I think it works in raising some concerns and maybe pointing out some probable solutions.

Dr. Tim Hutchins showed me [this](#), which is what then led me to these thoughts:



## Theories of social change? Part 5: The three waves of the Bahá'í episteme (or the three waves of the dominant 'theory-in-use')



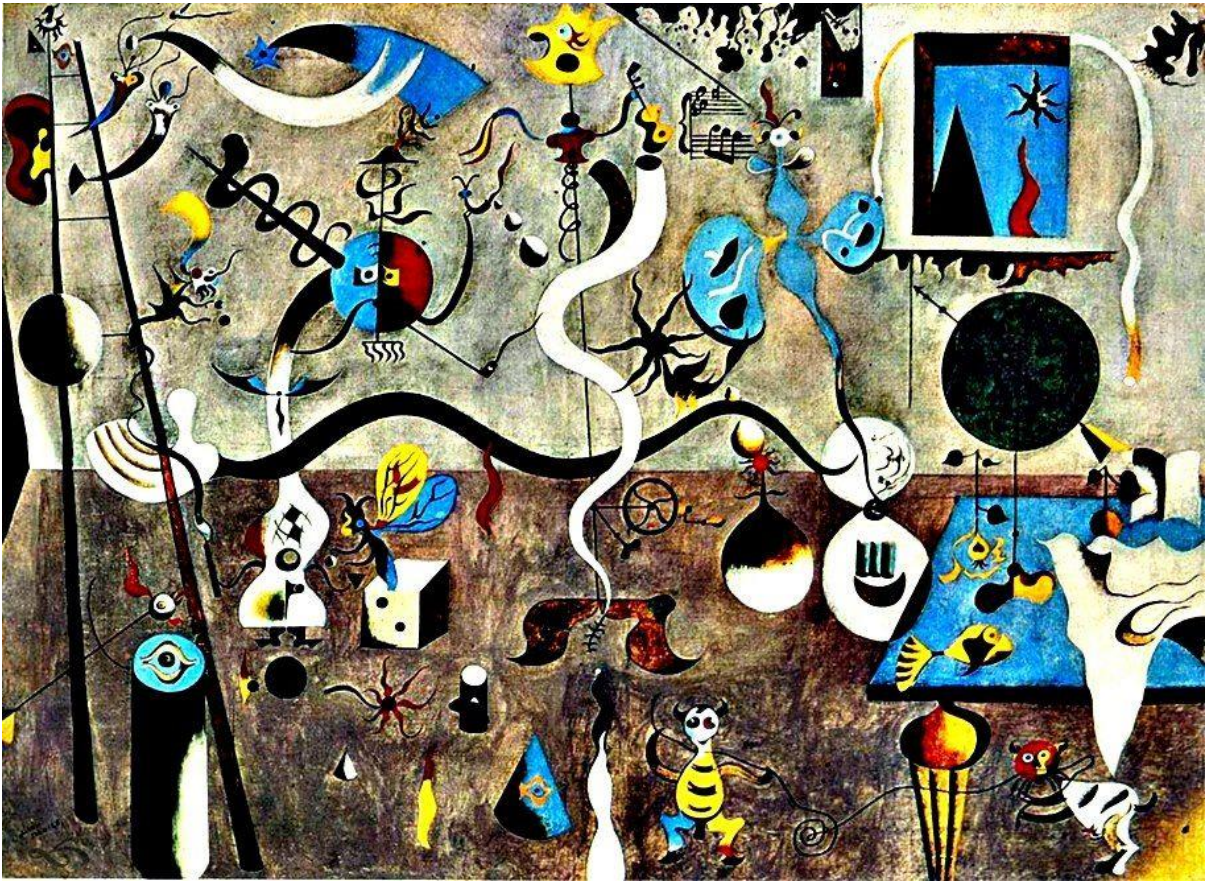
# EPISTEME

I have explained the notion of dominant 'theories-in-use' and 'espoused theories' in my mini-series on theories of social change. I wish what I am going to say now was something someone else could have told me earlier. It would have saved me a lot of time.

Strangely, a lot of serious Bahá'í intellectuals have never read these books I am going to highlight, with the exception of the one by Paul Lample. Even more perplexing, this applies to even those Bahá'í researchers who specialize in fields of expertise directly affected by such developments. I think the reason for this blind spot is that it is generally assumed that these books are just individual contributions, only reflective of an individual's perspective and nothing more, so to be judged on nothing but strict disciplinary grounds. Not quite, in my view. These are books written to represent the episteme of the Bahá'í community, the institutional perspective, as anyone operating in administrative levels is well aware.

A historian will have to at some point write the story of these last few decades and uncover the processes through which this new Bahá'í episteme, or should I say conceptual framework for Bahá'í scholarship and for all the activities of the Bahá'í community, was formed.





## The First Wave

The first wave of this new episteme, or the origins of this dominant theory-in-use, can be traced back to two key texts (in a sense everything is an addition or alteration to this which is why I think Farzam Arbab will be considered the Bahá'í scholar with the most influential impact on the future of the Bahá'í community in the first three centuries):

- The Ruhi Institute – *Learning about Growth. The Story of the Ruhi Institute and Large-scale Expansion of the Faith in Colombia* (1991).
- Farzam Arbab – “Promoting a Discourse on Science, Religion and Development” from *The Lab, the Temple and the Market* (2000).

## The Second Wave

The second wave is largely represented by a work that explains how the FUNDAEC/Arbab vision can be understood/adopted as the vision of the Administrative Order:

- *Revelation and Social Reality: Learning to Translate What Is Written into Reality.* by Paul Lample. West Palm Beach, Florida: Palabra Publications, 2009.

### **The Third Wave**

The third wave is then represented by books which now take this integrated but still somewhat abstract and incomplete account (let's say 'evolving') of a conceptual framework for all the activities of the Bahá'í community in order to extend it more precisely as the key paradigm for specific fields of study. This is why I call this a dominant theory-in-use. The aim is to derive how this conceptual framework needs to look in key areas of scholarship and practice while also aiming to readjust or upgrade the original dominant theory-in-use. Also, a key aim is to try to explain through the language of the academic community and to the outside world the institutional model of thought (or the conceptual framework) of the Bahá'í community.

Naturally, the first piece of work in this category is a book that both reveals and significantly revises the philosophical underpinnings of the conceptual framework of FUNDAEC through recourse to analytical philosophy (I have hinted at this [here](#) and [here](#)). It is normal for the third wave to commence here, since, after all, this FUNDAEC model is the model from which everything started and which represents the current *modus operandi*.

- 1. Sona Farid-Arbab (2016). *Moral Empowerment: In Quest of a Pedagogy.* Bahá'í Publishing.

However, one must realize this book was in the writing much earlier...the writing of it must have started before 2010. This is also the first book to explicitly point to an alignment with analytical philosophy, as far as I know.

- 1. Sona Farid-Arbab (2012) [\*Moral empowerment : elements of a conceptual framework for education.\*](#) Doctoral thesis , Institute of Education, University of London.

The second book, with contributions from a member of the Universal House of Justice, a former member of the Universal House of Justice, the former Director of the Office of Social and Economic Development, and others then or later representing key institutions such as ISGP, ABS North-America, the BIC, and the ITC related Bahá'í Internet Agency etc. I leave

it to the historians to untangle these connections; my point in touching on them is to indicate why this type of research frames a dominant ‘theory-in-use’; although that determination must be ultimately made via analysis of the texts highlighted here. So, what is this second book?

- 2. Cameron, Geoffrey, and Benjamin Schewel (eds). (2018) *Religion and Public Discourse in an Age of Transition Reflections on Baha’i Practice and Thought*, Wilfrid Laurier University Press.

The third book in this series is:

- 3. [Julia Berger \(2018\) \*Divine Polity: The Baha’i International Community and the United Nations. Doctor of Philosophy \(PhD\) thesis, University of Kent.\*](#)

This has been rendered into a 2021 publication, but I would start with the original and then go through the published book:

- 3. Julia Berger (2021) *Rethinking Religions and Politics in a Plural World. The Baha’i International Community and the United Nations*. Bloomsbury.

Key here is the concept of ‘organizational substrate’ and its relationship with determining the Bahá’í episteme as part of the work towards ushering in a ‘divine polity’.

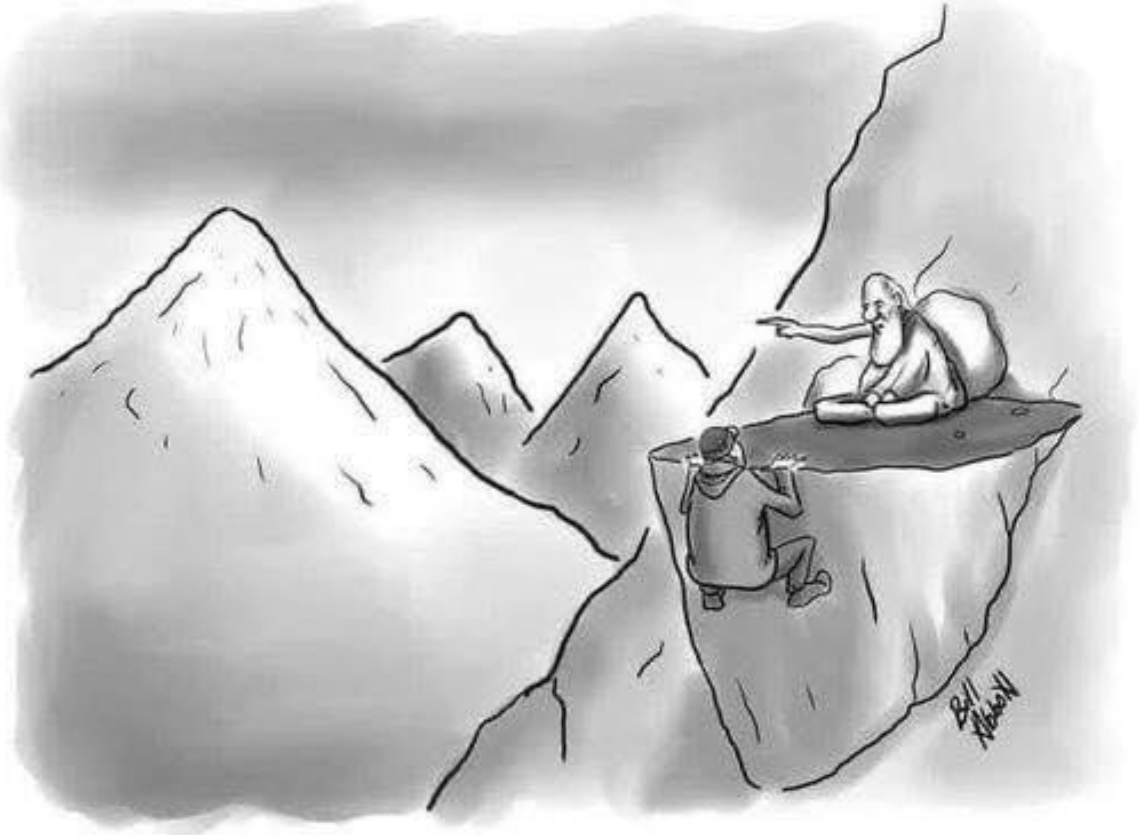
Last but not least is the only book I know to have been published by ABS North America (I have discussed this book [here](#)):

- 4. Michael Karlberg (2020) *Constructing Social Reality. An Inquiry into the Normative Foundations of Social Change*. Association for Bahá’í Studies.

There might be some books that I am missing as a lot more authors have been part of this collective effort. Now, I don’t expect anyone to simply trust my assertions about these texts. However, I am arguing, or putting it forward that these texts, when considered together (and they are in alignment), form, structure and drive the current Bahá’í episteme. In fact, I would even go as far as to suggest that without reading them together, one would remain relatively in the dark about the Bahá’í episteme, with grand surprises as a future consequence.

I find it amusing/perplexing to hear Bahá'í academic discussions on all sorts of topics that seem to presuppose an intellectual field that operates completely outside this episteme, or who are advancing research in their own fields completely unconcerned with the claims of these particular texts; and/or who do not read administrative practice as essentially anchored and mirrored in these texts. There might be great research and practice there but if it ignores the current Bahá'í episteme and the paradigms it advances for one's own discipline (yes, we are still largely talking about a dominant theory-in-use rather than a dominant espoused theory, but that is no excuse) – what kind of Bahá'í scholarship is that as great as it might be? It seems to me, shall I say it, utopian or outside history, in avoidance mode? – without that sort of engagement.

-----continues below-----



*"I'm Disillusionment. Enlightenment is over there."*