Strong Foundationalism in the Bahá'í Faith? With an Analysis of Michael Karlberg's 'Ontological Foundationalism'

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- with questions from Ney Grant

Introduction

On 17th of February 2022, I jotted down some quick thoughts in a blog post for fear I might forget them. I knew I had no time to develop them, but they seemed important to me. The blog post was entitled *Ontological Foundationalism and Nonfoundationalism – 'anti-relativism' positions in the Bahá'í Faith*[1] and has been included at the beginning of this paper. At the time, I thought the matter closed. The next day, however, I received a set of online questions from Ney Grant concerning my comments on Michael Karlberg's book *Constructing Social Reality. An Inquiry into the Normative Foundations of Social Change*. Ney Grant is a postgraduate student with the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Chicago with a clear interest in Bahá'í scholarship. I felt obliged by the standards of academic practice to answer these questions although I was heavily pressed for time. After seven weeks (whenever I could find some free time), this is the result of that effort.[2]

The structure of the paper follows the logic of the questions asked by Ney Grant. I have given two answers: one concerned with the general argument of the book and its theoretical underpinnings, and the other focused on the consultative methodology proposed by Karlberg. The second answer constitutes the most important part of this paper.

One could skim through the first part of the paper by reading through the sections 'The General Argument of the Book', 'Agonism,' 'Interrogating Ontological Foundationalism and Karlberg's Notion of Power' and 'Conclusion to the First Answer.' As for the second part of the paper, one could read first the conclusion and then the section on 'Karlberg's Notion of Consultation and Bahá'í Consultation.' In both sections, I have tried to make sure the conclusion summarizes as much as possible the discussion until that point (the penultimate subsections are an exception to this as they are difficult to summarize).

[1] https://fsb2017.wordpress.com/2022/02/17/ontological-foundationalism-and-non-foundationalism-two-anti-relativism-positions-in-the-bahai-faith/

[2] I am extremely indebted to Dr. James Monkman for agreeing to help with editing this convoluted material at short notice. As always, Dr. Monkman was able to make suggestions that resulted in improving the substance of the argument in different key areas.

Ontological Foundationalism and Nonfoundationalism – 'anti-relativism' positions in the Bahá'í Faith

There are also positions that might be deemed to fit a qualified relativist outlook (such as the metaphysical relativism of Moojan Momen) but those are not the object of discussion here.

The following was an impromptu comment after watching a video presentation (its significance lies in that it constitutes a form of spontaneous incredulity/amazement which then must examine itself):

"You just can't say that relativism is one feature of a detrimental mindest as Todd Smith does in *Cultivating Transformative Habits of Mind*. How would it sound to say foundationalism or essentialism is one feature of a detrimental mindset? the same with individualism ... and collectivism? nuances are important. And isn't that creating a dichotomy? - normal thought has to work through both relativism and foundationalism - that is the whole beauty of having to think at this level, of having to qualify both and other positions and bring them together in something that might work at a slightly more complex level. And maybe the whole notion of a 'detrimental' mindset is unhealthy. Who is it directed at? Who has this mindset? One could just speak instead of general tendencies of thought in society or frame it in some other way."

As Todd Smith[3] puts it, "the habit of falling into relativism" (min.23) is one of the "habits of mind that are particularly detrimental and that actually serve to perpetuate certain crises that humanity is facing or certain conditions that are not conducive to our advancement" (min.4) (the implication here being that it brings about disunity). This "dogmatic" habit of the mind (relativism) stands in direct opposition to the habits that have transformative power, and which have been delineated in the Bahá'í conceptual framework as the ones we should cultivate instead (min.3).

[3] Bahá'í Blog. *Cultivating Transformative Habits of Mind - Dr. Todd Smith (Grand Canyon* Bahá'í *Conference 2020)*. 2021. *YouTube*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IYiGKSunwfc.

The presentation from Todd Smith and the quote above triggered the following reflection.

It is a bit strange that Todd Smith would frame his presentation in such a way considering the more subtle ways in which he writes about relativism in *Articulating a Consultative Epistemology: Toward a Reconciliation of Truth and Relativism* (2009). He actually spends a lot of time in there attempting to construct a methodology (which could be seen as a qualified relativism) that can distinguish between the validity of different truth-claims (and which is complex and merits engaging with). In this paper with Michael Karlberg, Smith proposes a methodology for distinguishing between the different levels of social construction involved in assertions we make about reality. In other words, he proposes a metholodogy by which, if there is agreement between different paradigms on a particular assertion, then that agreement can be taken to confirm a lower level of social construction being present there than in other statements (the argument is much more complex, but on these lines).

Suppose then that this methodology, which he calls consultative epistemology and has clear merits, is right or valid overall (although the fact that many paradigms or groups agree on a specific point does not necessarily guarantee that point is not false – see, for example, the geocentrist model; and other issues could be raised). The key thing then is that this methodology, if we find it without fault or free of significant errors, could possibly distinguish in some contexts between different relative truths, with some being less relative than others.

From this foundation, however, it is claimed that: "A consultative epistemology affirms the verticalist position that foundational truths exist, that some truth claims are more valid than others, and that some paradigms are better suited than others for the investigation of specific aspects of reality." (91)

However, and this is the key issue, while the paper has put forward some interesting reasoning for why some truths might be shown to be more valid than others and some paradigms more useful in relation to particular aspects of reality than others, **NOTHING HAS BEEN SAID ABOUT HOW THIS APPROACH PROVES THAT FOUNDATIONAL TRUTHS EXIST**. All that has been discussed (if we follow the methodology) is that some relative truths can be considered to be more or less relative than others if we adopt multiple paradigms and other techniques of that kind. In other words, if a new paradigm emerged or we would learn to combine and be more successful in the use of

different paradigms and techniques, then the likelihood is that we would eventually be able to identify new 'truths' with more precision than the ones we had previously identified as 'foundational truths.' But that would mean that those prior truths were actually not foundational truths to start with - in the sense of constituting essential aspects of reality that are independent of the observer etc. (see also the definitions of ontological foundationalism and of normative foundational truths in Karlberg's book *Constructing Social Reality*)

On the one hand then, Smith understands, for example, that horizontalists can acknowledge the possibility of a foundational reality - the issue for them is that an unbiased, universal, and objective way of identifying such a reality, or what it is, has not yet been proven to exist; thus, we can only have incomplete, partial, relative, biased knowledge producing approximations that might be better, much more sophisticated and complete than other previous ones, but only that.

On the other hand, however, Smith suggests that his consultative epistemology shows how such a foundational reality or foundational truths can be identified objectively, or with certainty, when in fact, no such discussion or supporting argumentation occurs in this paper.

Why is that? Most likely because it is taken for granted that such foundational truths exist and that they exist in the Writings of the Bahá'í Faith. Here another unspoken assumption also seems to be present, that the consultative epistemology is how such truths can be verified, meaning by using the consultative epistemology previously described, but in reverse.

This, of course, is an impossibility. If you have already selected the values, or what the foundational truths are – you can't then run a consultative epistemology from the ground-up to confirm them. *Scientific or philosophical truth must be treated as an end-result of the procedures of scientific and philosophical reason and not as an initial value inputed into the system (unless as an acceptable premise or hypothesis according to the language and concepts of science or philosophy but even that requires following scientific and philosophical procedures for obtaining access to that status of premise or hypothesis for a particular value).*

These issues appear even more clearly in Michael Karberg's book *Constructing Social Reality* (2020) where the main line of thought seems to be that the same 'consultative

epistemology' can be employed to transpose Bahá'í 'eternal verities' as foundational normative truths in the frameworks of science and philosophy etc. This approach is referred to by Karlberg as 'ontological foundationalism.' The idea that science or philosophy would operate under the sign of a spiritual truth or a 'foundational normative truth', because over time certain validating "truth-claims" (p.17) could develop, or because diverse insights could produce a "relative attunement" (p.18) to such a truth fails to consider a fundamental aspect. Namely, that science or philosophy can only accept a truth based on their own methodologies and processes. To make such a demand as Karlberg seems to suggest is to ask scientists to adopt our framework of religious belief and to make it foundational for science.

A similar tendency appears in Sona Farid-Arbab's book[4] (2016) which could be read to highlight 1) the need to introduce spiritual values from the Bahá'í Faith, considered to constitute objective and ontological truths, into the educational disciplines and 2) the notion of objective and ontological truths (and of a language that mirrors them) as key notions in Bahá'í pedagogy (which then deprioritizes constructionism and learner centered and problem-posing approaches in education). This is a more complex and different conversation to be had somewhere else as the arguments are more nuanced. The book can and should be also seen to constitute a potent critique of current forms of education from the perspective of 'spirituality.'

All these works are examples of forms of strong foundationalism, despite the fact that they claim a middle position between foundationalism and anti-foundationalism. In my experience, this sort of thinking is becoming quite the norm in the Bahá'í scholarship spaces in the West – seemingly most strongly in North America. To some extent this might be because Smith and Karlberg played and still play an important role in ISGP and ABS but that cannot be the sole reason – these different traditions usually have a history and the field of Bahá'í studies has much larger dynamics.

I find this strange inamuch as in *Revelation and Social Reality* (2009), Paul Lample argued quite convincingly that the Bahá'í position is truly a moderate one, more akin to the position of Richard J, Bernstein in his book *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics and Praxis* – which seems to me a much more complex position to take on this

[4] Farid-Arbab, Sona. *Moral Empowerment: In Quest of a Pedagogy*. Bahá'í Publishing, 2016.

issue. I really recommend reading pages 161-179 in Lample (2009). Bernstein's approach is summarized in this way by Lample[5] (172):

"Drawing upon the work of a number of individuals, he proposes an approach whose features include the importance of dialogue among a community of inquirers, practical reasoning born of experience [phronesis], and ability to refine human understanding through action over time."

This approach, Lample presents as 'nonfoundationalism':

"A nonfoundational approach to knowledge, like relativism, recognizes the legitimacy of different points of view and the limitations on certainty. Unlike a relativistic approach, however, it permits judgments about inadequacy or error." (178) Although Lample similarly operates with an extreme variant of relativism and does not consider that qualified ones also exist, or could exist, (such as Smith's which could be seen to constitute a qualified relativism were it not for the assumption that his method of 'consultative epistemology' can identify and confirm foundational truths), his position on the limitations on certainty and objective knowledge is clear.

Lample also says:

"While reasons do not prove something absolutely, they support judgment." (172)

"The absolutist dimensions of foundationalism are absent in the Bahá'í conception of knowledge." (176) and "Any attempt to impose a foundationalist or relativist perspective on the Bahá'í community must ultimately fail." (188)

So from 2009, when a version of strong foundationalism and a version of nonfoundationalism were both part of the main Bahá'í discourse, the trend in the North American Bahá'í community in terms of scholarship and maybe general culture has been to move (with 2016,

[5] Lample, Paul. *Revelation & Social Reality: Learning to Translate What Is Written into Reality*. Palabra Publications, 2009.

2018, and 2020 as key years in terms of publications) from nonfoundationalism to forms of strong foundationalism[6]:

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

2018: Cameron, Geoffrey, and Benjamin Schewel. 'Religion, Spiritual Principles, and Civil Society'. *Religion and Public Discourse in an Age of Transition Reflections on Baha'i Practice and Thought*, Wilfrid Laurier University Press. [see chapters by David Palmer, Michael Karlberg, and Sona Farid-Arbab]

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

This is extremely important because it directly affects the conceptual framework for all activities – the core terms, but more essentially, the methodology. If you already know what the foundational truths are you tend to think what is currently needed is to have them promoted widely, and to find paradigms, theories and thinkers that can be used to justify them in the academic fields– what Benjamin Schewel calls 'identifying strict equivalences' (see Wilmette Talk[7]) – while rejecting to operate with or discarding those that do not (this idea is very much present in Farzam Arbab's thinking). If you think you do not quite know what your foundational truths are or what they might mean, then the approach is likely to be primarily hermeneutical – establishing ways to research the Writings via open dialogue with sciences and philosophy so as to create complex interpretative frameworks that can order the universe of statements in the Writings into some kind of conceptual model.

Benjamin Schewel, for example, has quicky touched on these issues in 2018:

"**Scholarship is its own world of discourse and that the purpose of that discourse, from the Bahá'í perspective, is not to somehow make it mirror what the Bahá'í Writings say**. I mean, it's its own field, has its own arguments, its own structure and we can trust that in the long term, if what the Bahá'í Writings describe is true, if that's just pursued, that scholarship

[6] The foundationalism of Ian Kluge which is also pretty strong and has both flaws and interesting arguments, has also been reclaimed as supportive of this trend.

[7] Wilmette Institute. *'Seven Ways of Looking at Religion' | Ben Schewel*. 2018. *YouTube*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=osHWriK1dac.

in a rigurous and kinda rationally robust way, it will evolve in ways that make it resonate more and more with the vision that is in the Bahá'í writings. But the Bahá'í Writings, ultimately are not trying to be scholarship. Bahá'u'lláh was not a philosopher, He was not a historian. He is presenting words that are meant to transform humanity and civilization. And so, I think **not trying to kinda draw strict equivalences between scholarship and the Bahá'í Writings**, but allowing any kind of conversation and exchange, discourse, mutual insights to be drawn and shared, for me, at least I find the most productive way of advancing."[8] (I am not giving the minute because the whole session is worth listening to).

In passing, I should mention it here that I prefer reading Haleh Arbab particularly because she tends to either omit the more controversial aspects that surface within accounts reflecting a strong foundationalism or to reconstitute them into more acceptable forms that acknowledge hermeneutical concerns:

"*For now, we are only concerned with a first step in research, in forming as thoroughly as possible a picture of the state of knowledge in an area of inquiry. The material for the study of our group, then, would be the studies conducted by others, their observations, their thoughts, and their conclusions.*

This approach might sound like a literature review in a university course, but our task is really far more complex. The question before us is this: If a group of people with training in relevant fields examines the body of observations made about the phenomenon in question, scrutinizes the analyses already offered by others, sorts through their conclusions, and at the same time explores the Bahá'í Writings for ideas that shed light on the issues at hand, will their understanding of the phenomenon be greater than prevalent understanding? Will they bring an appreciable number of new insights into the area of inquiry because they benefit from the light of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings?

[A] whole set of issues related to capacity needs to be addressed. Here are a few examples of such issues. It seems important that the group engaged in an area of inquiry avoid the simplistic problem-solution mentality: 'Humanity has such-and-such a problem; our task is to look in the Bahá'í Writings and come up with a solution.' This kind of mindset is not the

[8] Wilmette Institute. *'Seven Ways of Looking at Religion' | Ben Schewel*. 2018. *YouTube*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=osHWriK1dac.

most appropriate for inquiry into the pressing issues we are facing. There are, of course, many principles and concepts in the Bahá'í teachings that need to be brought to bear on any one of the problems of humanity. But these principles have to be applied, and fruitful application necessarily involves a long process in which many different actors must cooperate. Further, identifying the principles that must govern such a learning process is only one among the many challenges that have to be met. Thus, a mindset according to which enunciation of principles is equated with 'giving solutions' will also fall short of helping the kind of inquiry we are proposing."

In the end, the challenge for foundationalists remains that of answering the following set of questions:

How do you select what the normative foundational truths of the Bahá'í Faith are? And how do you select and identify what their meaning is so that others can accept them as foundational truths based on reason? How is this method objective? Does it follow the 'because-Bahá'u'lláh-said-so' school of thought? - in which case the limitations put forward by Abizadeh apply.[9]

This is not to say that scholarship from a position of strong foundationalism does not have its merits - for at least giving us the motivation to explore complex issues and pushing the limits of what is possible as a thought experiment (and maybe much more - unfortunately, I do not have the space to highlight here the many positives of the works mentioned), but should it constitute the main approach of the Bahá'í community at this point in time - when we are opening channels of communication with different academic disciplines, entering the realm of public discourses, developing participatory approaches and initiating open forms of collaboration with the outside world in the field of social transformation - or should we revisit Lample and Bernstein and maybe others (in addition to the sources already mentioned above) and start the discussion again?

Questions from Ney Grant

[9] Abizadeh, Arash. *Because Baha'u'llah Said So*. 1995, https://bahai-library.com/abizadeh_moral_reasoning.

Question 1

"I'm a bit confused because, in my reading of Karlberg's book on social change, he seems to be very clear about the lack of capacity for his model to offer conviction in foundational truths. To my understanding, he does make the argument that socially mediated knowledge is related to foundational truth but, then, he is quite upfront that conviction in foundational truth itself is not given by this methodology. To believe in foundational truth is still, in his formulation, a leap.

In the intro he mentions that, "It should be noted at the outset that the arguments [and counterarguments etc. etc. in this book] cannot be empirically verified, at least at this stage in history." He goes on to claim that vertical convictions should be accepted for their practical efficacy - an interesting claim - but not because they're empirically justified.

Your main point stands that models like Karlberg's are asking scientists to entirely reorient their relationship to truth towards something more religious because his whole book relies on the idea that conviction in mediated foundational truths is essential for progressive change. So, your critique of this supposed necessity, and of this whole line of approach in Bahá'í scholarship, is still very illuminating for me.

But I am wondering, considering that Karlberg is upfront about the lack of capacity for his system to actually supply "faith" in a mediated relationship between social knowledge and foundational truths, and given the idea of "attunement" rather than say direct human access to direct truth, why would it be disingenuous to call this a middle point between foundationalism and antifoundationalism?"

Question 2

"I guess my point is this: it seems to me that Karlberg isn't saying, "here, this method offers a way to establish the existence of foundational truths." But rather, "IF you decide to believe that foundational truths exist, this book offers a way to assess the attunement of knowledge to that truth."

Would you agree with that?"

About Ney Grant:

Ney Grant is currently a master's student with the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Chicago. Before returning to school he worked as a case manager in inpatient mental health. Although that job was very hard to leave, he had long considered working in education, perhaps at the community college level, and the call to academia eventually won out. He also strongly considers contributing to Bahá'í studies in some capacity in the future.

Response

These are brilliant questions, and it will take a bit of time to answer them at that precise level.

Glossary

I prefer to begin by highlighting some of the key terms of Karlberg and the manner in which he employs them so that unnecessary confusion is as much as possible prevented.

1) “Normative truths” or “normative foundational truths”

According to Karlberg (p.3), *normative truths* “denote the existence of objective features or properties or governing principles of reality that underlie and inform *the way things ought to be”*; these can also be called *spiritual principles,* which is how Bahá’ís refer to them. These constitute “foundational aspects of reality” (p.1), “truths, or laws, or properties, or indelible features of existence that exist independently of the degree to which we comprehend them.” (p.3) These are “transcendent truths” that “exist independently of human comprehension.” (p.3)

2) “Ontological foundationalism”

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

3) “the relative embodiment of normative truths in the construction of social reality” (pp.32-40)

“If social constructs can embody normative truths to varying degrees, then there may be strategies or approaches by which the relative embodiment of normative truths can be more purposefully increased over time.” (p.4)

There are two claims here in addition to the main thesis of ontological foundationalism. The first claim is that normative foundational truths are something that social processes naturally embody to various degrees – the same way the seed becomes embodied in a tree (the concept of “latency” is invoked here). The second claim is that the methodology he proposes can consciously and purposefully help the embodiment of normative foundational truths into social constructs and, from there, into all forms of social life.

Disclaimer

The following should not be taken to constitute a review of Michael Karlberg's book *Constructing Social Reality*.[10] That would only distort and overlook the merits of different chapters in the book. For an overall assessment I recommend you read the book itself (the preferred option) or look for an overall review published as an academic article. My concern here is simply with ontological foundationalism and the claims relating to it as these are presented in *Constructing Social Reality.* I was asked a series of very legitimate questions that I felt obliged to answer. Doing so led to this sort of analysis as a way of providing a specific enough answer. I had and continue to have no intention to write a review of Michael Karlberg's book. My interest does not lie with Karlberg's book per se but with the effects that a strong variant of foundationalism given centre stage might currently have on Bahá'í culture and scholarship. If the way in which Ney Grant has formulated his questions can be deemed to resemble a hermeneutics of faith where the approach is to trust the broad arguments of the author and travel with them towards larger findings, my approach is rather more reflective of a hermeneutics of suspicion in which the text is read against itself and at a granular level. I would argue that both types of hermeneutics are legitimate and that both have a role to play. In my opinion, a good review of the book would have to acknowledge both dimensions.

Preamble:

First, let me just point out that the themes of social change, social transformation, social justice, or that of 'constructing social reality', cut across most of the social sciences, the humanities, the arts, and applied sciences (even when seemingly unconnected, as is the case with the postgraduate degrees in *Infrastructure Engineering* or *Infrastructure Planning and Management*). Such themes have long been affiliated with the titles of MA and PhD programs, but this has been more recently extended to undergraduate programs as well. In the United Kingdom, for example, the first *BSc degree in Social Change* was introduced in 2019

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

at Queen Mary University of London[11], clearly indicating that that field has become professionalized.

The same can be said about those practitioner fields that consist of academic subdisciplines and areas of practice. Two such examples are the field of development and the field of business consultancy, with the latter incorporating particular subdisciplines ('critical management studies') or courses in business studies (such as the Oxford University Said's Business School's *MSc in Major Programme Management* aimed at "experienced programme managers tackling the world's greatest challenges"[12]) that connect directly with the theme of social transformation. Equally well-known examples are certain subdisciplines in Political Science such as 'peace and conflict studies', 'policy studies', and courses aimed at working with NGOs, or UN agencies (for example, in the field of 'humanitarian and disaster relief/management' or in 'post-conflict reconstruction'), Law degrees in 'humanitarian law' or 'conflict resolution', and educational programs such as 'social justice and education' or 'education for peacebuilding in post-conflict contexts', etc.

Finally, we have the domains of practice themselves, that expand much outside the particular academic disciplines that might inform them. The area of governance or government (with all the governmental and non-governmental organizations involved and all the political formations present in that sphere), the area of social-economic development (with development agencies from state agencies to UN agencies, to charities, to development banks), the diverse social movements in existence, and finally, the domain of religious practice.

These observations are important because Karlberg states that his book is primarily concerned with *normative foundational truths*[13] as prescriptive truths ('the way things ought to be') and not descriptive truths ('the way things are'), which might imply connections with the domains of philosophy and ethics. In reality, however, Karlberg's argument is so broad

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[11] Booth, Robert. 'UK's First Degree Course in Social Change Begins'. *The Guardian*, 26 Sept. 2019. *The Guardian*, https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/sep/26/uks-first-degree-course-queen-mary-university-london-in-social-change-begins

[12] *MSc in Major Programme Management | Saïd Business School*. https://www.sbs.ox.ac.uk/programmes/degrees/msc-major-programme-management. Accessed 5 Apr. 2022.

[13] According to Karlberg (p.3), normative truths "denote the existence of objective features or properties or governing principles of reality that underlie and inform *the way things ought to be";* these can also be called *spiritual principles,* which is how Bahá'ís refer to them.

that it has direct relevance to all the academic fields and areas of practice mentioned above and all the hybrid forms existing between the two. For example, on page VIII in the introduction, Karlberg explains that his book explores ways in which we can move beyond 'binary conceptions' to resolve the tensions existing between "truth and relativity, knowledge and power, science and religion" and that the book is envisaged as a "contribution" to "the long-term work of laying the intellectual foundations for a new social order."[14]

Second, let me advance the observation that Karlberg, like other authors, sees his book and scheme of thought as compatible with and advancing or exploring in some way the very conceptual framework which guides the current activities of the Bahá'í Faith. My argument here is that, for Karlberg, these two are inextricably linked, which is why he employs a presentation of the discourse and practice of the worldwide Bahá'í community to support his claims. There is a sense in which this very conversation we are having concerns much more than Karlberg's own framework; that in some way, it concerns some of the main ways in which the conceptual framework tends to be currently understood as a set of spiritual principles or truths that should guide the activities of the Bahá'í Faith. It also concerns the Bahá'í methodology for social change that this conceptual framework implies. This is so not only because Karlberg writes in this vein, but because his writing is matched by a decade and more of institutional work in framing, conceptualizing, promoting, and explaining the elements of the conceptual framework and its applications from the vantage point of agencies such as the Association for Bahá'í Studies (ABS) and the ISGP (The Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity). Moreover, as he says on page 5: "The route considered in this book derives in part from grounded insights that have been systematically generated from the experience of the Bahá'í community over the past century and a half."

Overall, it can be said that the book has been and is of great interest to many because it addresses a concern (social transformation) for which there is such a wide audience, while also tackling two key issues in the Bahá'í Faith that have not been addressed directly in recent Bahá'í scholarship (a research gap can be acknowledged here): 1) the theme of social transformation which is now the central theme of the current and future plans of the Universal House of Justice and 2) the precise ways in which we should understand and employ the conceptual framework guiding the activities of the Bahá'í Faith. Nonetheless,

[14] I will provide more context for this particular perspective later in this Preamble.

what must also be said here is that Karlberg reads what could be called the current Bahá'í conceptual framework from the perspective of strong foundationalism.

Karlberg (pp.189-190) highlights his conceptual framework as one "**that reconciles truth and relativity**, knowledge and power, and science and religion in rational and constructive ways."

If one is even relatively familiar with the FUNDAEC's conceptual framework as outlined by Sona Farid-Arbab[15] in *Moral Empowerment* (2016) or by Farzam Arbab in various talks, or with the conceptual framework as analyzed by Paul Lample, or with the notions of a conceptual framework introduced by the ABS and the ISGP, or, more fundamentally in this case, with how Karlberg and Todd Smith[16] describe the conceptual framework informing the Bahá'í 'culture of learning', one immediately recognizes these three elements as having been taken from those models (other elements such as 'learning in action' or 'the oneness of humankind' are not explicitly mentioned here as part of Karlberg's conceptual framework but are part of it in the background). These three elements are: "the generation and application of knowledge", the theme of "power and knowledge", and the theme of "the compatibility of science and religion." For the purposes of this preamble, I want to focus our attention on how the first element is coopted by Karlberg (these three elements will receive further treatment at different points in this paper).

The reconciliation of truth and relativity that Karlberg proposes falls under the larger criterion of 'the generation and application of knowledge.' Under this umbrella, authors such as Arbab have called for Bahá'í scholarship to be primarily concerned with the re-evaluation of the theoretical foundations of existing social structures in light of the truths of the Bahá'í Revelation. More specifically, Arbab has argued that Bahá'ís should investigate what to keep and what to discard from the current systems of thought so that the very defective intellectual foundations of our civilization (an aspect assumed to be most present in the social sciences) could be radically revised. [17]

[15] Farid-Arbab, Sona. *Moral Empowerment: In Quest of a Pedagogy*. Bahá'í Publishing, 2016.
[16] Karlberg, M and Smith, T. 'A Culture of Learning.' Stockman, Robert H., editor. *The World of the Bahá'í Faith*, Routledge, 2022, pp. 463–79.
[17] "It seems to me that one of the first sets of questions we need to ask when we contemplate the future evolution of the intellectual life of the Bahá'í community is this: Bahá'u'lláh refers to the present order as 'lamentably defective' (Tablets 11:26)—how defective do we think 'lamentably defective' actually is? Which

Karlberg adopts this general criterion in the categorical and maximalist form given to it by Arbab, but interprets it even more strongly from the standpoint of ontological foundationalism. In doing so he reinterprets this larger criterion as 'the tension between truth and relativity.' Through this interesting and subtle move, the assertion of Bahá'í truth becomes a task contiguous with the assertion of foundational truths in a relativist world. Karlberg's motivation, therefore, might not be that of locating a middle point between foundationalism and anti-foundationalism as much as that of asserting foundational truths and spiritual or religious truths. This is something our reading of his works would have to verify. In a sense, it is understandable why if you are fully convinced you have identified a set of normative foundational truths your strong conviction would carry you this way. Whether or not this theoretical orientation bears heavily on the line of argument and the methodology he proposes 'as a middle point between foundationalism and antifoundationalism' remains to be seen. Whatever the case, in the investigation of reality, the primary principle and intention must be the search for truth, wherever it may lead. If my primary intention, for example, was that of asserting the relativity of truth because I somehow almost religiously identify with such a perspective, this very strong conviction would bear against me in my attempts to locate without bias a methodology at a middle point between foundationalism and anti-foundationalism. In my thinking, I would have to seriously balance out such a pull factor to stay relatively neutral. The same challenge is faced by advocates of strong foundationalism. The pull is very strong towards ascertaining normative foundational truths and deriving everything from there as secondary. The main epistemological issue can easily become their promotion for recognition as absolute (given) values rather than their open-ended study or analysis.

Of course, Karlberg need not have taken this very difficult road, beset with such challenges. One could have proceeded to assert foundational truths in a minimalist way (like William Hatcher has done in *Minimalism: A Bridge between Classical Philosophy and the Bahá'í Revelation*). To state this another way, one could have instead adopted a modest or weak foundationalism. A *modest foundationalism* would have ascribed to basic beliefs "a level of positive epistemic status independent of warranting relations from other beliefs" but not more

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constituents of the present order are defective, and which ones are not? Which parts are we to keep, and which are we to reject completely? How deep into the foundations of the present order do we have to go to find the real causes of its defective ways? (p.11) Should we not also look for fundamental defects in the knowledge system that defines today's world?" (p.14) Arbab, Farzam. *The Intellectual Life of the Bahá'í Community*. 2016, https://bahai-library.com/arbab_intellectual_life_community. Accessed 11 Mar. 2022.

(such as the attributes of being "infallible, incorrigible, or indubitable").[18] A *weak foundationalism* (see Laurence BonJour's book *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*) could have affirmed that "some non-inferential [a type of nonargument characterized by the lack of a claim that anything is being proved] beliefs are minimally justified" because "coherence is required for the basic beliefs to serve as premises for other beliefs."[19] But this is not the case with Karlberg for whom basic beliefs are 'infallible, incorrigible, or indubitable.' According to Karlberg (p.3), *normative truths* "denote the existence of objective features or properties or governing principles of reality that underlie and inform *the way things ought to be";* these can also be called *spiritual principles,* which is how Bahá'ís refer to them. These *normative truths* constitute "foundational aspects of reality" (p.1), "truths, or laws, or properties, or indelible features of existence that exist independently of the degree to which we comprehend them." They are "transcendent truths" that "exist independently of human comprehension." Therefore, and this is important to remember, when Karlberg speaks about 'normative truths' the meaning intended is that of 'spiritual truths', 'transcendent truths', and 'normative foundational truths.' What I have simply pointed out here is that the ontological foundationalism of Karlberg constitutes an instance of strong foundationalism.

Now, I would neither equate the above perspective of Arbab, nor the particular take on it by Karlberg, as the way in which the Universal House of Justice has referred to the criterion of 'the generation and application of knowledge.' This might sound strange, but my perspective on this is that nuances exist and that they are significant (this opinion is, of course, open to challenge). One description of this criterion appears in a 2013 letter by the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada (p.2) directly addressing the operation of the Association for Bahá'í Studies:

"One of the critical aspects of a conceptual framework that will require careful attention in the years ahead is the generation and application of knowledge, a topic that those gathered at the conference of the Association for Bahá'í Studies will explore in August. At the heart of most disciplines of human knowledge is a degree of consensus about methodology – an understanding of methods and how to use them appropriately to systematically investigate

[18] *Foundationalism | Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. https://iep.utm.edu/found-ep/. Accessed 11 Mar. 2022.
[19] Idem.

reality to achieve reliable results and sound conclusions. Bahá'ís who are involved in various disciplines – economics, education, history, social science, philosophy, and many others – are obviously conversant and fully engaged with the methods employed in their fields. It is they who have responsibility to earnestly strive to reflect on the implications that the truths found in the Revelation may hold for their work. The principle of the harmony of science and religion, faithfully upheld, will ensure that religious belief does not succumb to superstition and that scientific findings are not appropriated by materialism."

We notice here the broad and flexible terms in which the Universal House of Justice casts the theme of 'the generation and application of knowledge': 'It is they [those engaged in Bahá'í scholarship] who have responsibility to earnestly strive to reflect on the implications that the truths found in the Revelation may hold for their work.'

In another letter written by the Universal House of Justice to an Association for Bahá'í Studies the following advice is given:

"The House of Justice advises you not to attempt to define too narrowly the form that Bahá'í scholarship should take, or the approach that scholars should adopt. Rather should you strive to develop within your Association respect for a wide range of approaches and endeavors."[20]

Although Lample has argued quite convincingly in favour of nonfoundationalism over foundationalism or relativism, it can be observed that the broad and flexible manner in which the Universal House of Justice casts the theme of 'the generation and application of knowledge' allows for the testing of a multiplicity of perspectives. All three perspectives, foundationalism, nonfoundationalism and anti-foundationalism, are seemingly allowed for.

This does not mean to say, however, that outside more specific guidance given by the Universal House of Justice, the interpretations provided via such perspectives, or the perspectives themselves, should be identified as identical or antithetical with the conceptual framework guiding Bahá'í activities. One's take, or an agency's take (be it FUNDAEC, the ISGP or even the ABS) on the conceptual framework of the Bahá'í Faith might not be the

[20] *19 October 1993 – [To an Individual] | Bahá'í Reference Library*. https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/19931019_001/1#367721103. Accessed 11 Mar. 2022.

same with the conceptual framework of the Universal House of Justice (or of the Bahá'í Faith), even when the attempt is to mirror it most faithfully. All these conceptual frameworks are distinct but interrelated and evolving through relative experimentation. It is, therefore, key not to confuse the two categories, while also important is to have an open space where different interpretations or ways to employ the conceptual framework of the Bahá'í Faith can be tested out.

If correctly applied the principle of the harmony of science and religion likely offers enough support for adjudicating between these different perspectives (and for keeping them in check), or at least between the merits of the particular interpretations they might give rise to at a specific point in time. In this way, advances in knowledge and a more unified and balanced outlook are possible.

First Answer

You mention that Karlberg says in the introduction: "It should be noted at the outset that the arguments [and counterarguments etc. etc. in this book] cannot be empirically verified, at least at this stage in history." You also say that based on this and in general "he seems to be very clear about the lack of capacity for his model to offer conviction in foundational truths." (p. 6) In consequence, you ask why his model couldn't be called "a middle point between foundationalism and antifoundationalism." These are very important issues to examine.

I. The General Argument of the Book (as relating to Ontological Foundationalism)

To start with, let us examine the first statement from the introduction in its context and in the context provided by the structure of the book. We will then analyze each element of this line of thinking that frames the general argument of the book in relation to ontological foundationalism.

The statement reads:

"It should be also noted at the outset that the argument in this book and skeptical counter-arguments rest on different ontological and epistemological premises that cannot be empirically verified, at least at this stage in history. **Equally rational arguments based on equally plausible premises yield different lines of logic that lead to divergent conclusions**. Contrasting arguments must be assessed based on their internal coherence and their consistency with the evidence at hand, no matter how provisional that evidence currently is. Readers are invited to assess the argument in this book by these standards and compare them in this way to the arguments of skeptics. Normative arguments of this kind must, ultimately, be assessed by their fruitfulness as we test them against reality. … **Ultimately, the relative fruitfulness of divergent arguments cannot be fully assessed until significant numbers of people commit to them and translate them into social practices on a large scale so that future generations can offer their verdict with the benefit of hindsight**. In the meantime, the initial assessment of such arguments – including the arguments of skeptics – requires an element of **rational faith** in the underlying premises. Therefore, we would do well to ask ourselves: Which argument, appears, in advance, to be the most rational, compelling, coherent, fruitful? Which argument seems to warrant our allegiance and support as we test it against reality? Which arguments lead to hypotheses worth testing? With these questions in mind, it is important to recognize not only the role that logic and provisional evidence play in the initial assessment of such arguments, **but also the role that intuition plays. When faced with a set of equally rational theses founded on equally plausible premises, supported by equally reasonable interpretations of provisional evidence, intuition becomes our interim guide**. There is nothing irrational about this. The systematic generation of knowledge has always depended on it. This is even

true in the natural sciences, the history of which is laden with commitments to premises that were, at the outset, intuitively attractive and rationally compelling but unprovable." (pp.6-7)

Karlberg is not saying here that his arguments cannot be empirically verified at this stage in history as a way of asserting that "he is quite upfront that conviction in foundational truth itself is not given by this methodology" and that "to believe in foundational truth" would constitute a leap. He is instead moving the discussion away from the territory of empirical verification as a way of suggesting that his foundationalist premises cannot be weighed against skeptical premises (which in this case means 'relativist') on that territory. So, in that sense, foundationalist and relativist premises have equal claims to truth in relation to empirical verification.

Then he argues that "equally rational arguments based on equally plausible premises yield different lines of logic that lead to divergent conclusions." Here he is stating that a well-argued line of logic that started from a foundationalist premise cannot be compared or contrasted in any meaningful way with a well-argued line of logic that started from an anti-foundational premise. These perspectives or lines of logic cannot be compared, neither can they interrogate each-other, because they are distinct, like "apples and oranges."[21] In this sense, what is being implied, although not explicitly stated, is that foundationalist and relativist premises have equal claims to truth in relation to philosophical or epistemological verification.
These claims are also emphasized in the key chapter on methodology entitled *Reconciling Truth and Relativity*:

"This chapter provides a rational and coherent framework for reconciling this tension [between truth and relativity] – one that rests on a set of clearly stated premises that not everyone will accept. **But rejection of this framework requires the acceptance of other premises that are no more empirically verifiable than the premises articulated above, as will become clear later in this book.** In the meantime, suffice it to say that the choice is not between a rational and proven set of premises and an irrational and disproven or extraneous

[21] "A comparison of **apples and oranges** occurs when two items or groups of items are compared that cannot be practically compared, typically because of inherent, fundamental and/or qualitative differences between the items." https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apples_and_oranges

set of premises. **Rather, the choice is between two sets of equally rational premises with profoundly different social implications.**" (p.48)

From here on, Karlberg allows for the notion that each line of logic can be checked for internal coherence and consistency with evidence, although this assumes separation between these lines of logic. However, he quickly makes it clear that this method is not capable of leading to conclusions either. Instead, he states that "normative arguments of this kind must, ultimately, be assessed by their fruitfulness as we test them against reality." (p.6) Then, in the conclusion to his introduction, he explains why this is extremely difficult and not possible to do at the moment:

"**Ultimately, the relative fruitfulness of divergent arguments cannot be fully assessed until significant numbers of people commit to them and translate them into social practices on a large scale so that future generations can offer their verdict with the benefit of hindsight**." (pp.6-7)

So, now that we have contextualized the statement from the introduction you have mentioned in your first question, what do we take from this?

These foundational premises cannot be interrogated empirically, they cannot be interrogated on the plane of philosophical or epistemological reasoning (because "equally rational arguments based on equally plausible premises yield different lines of logic that lead to divergent conclusions"), and they cannot be interrogated at present within the fields of development or social action (so, in the fields of practice) because such an application would have to run at large scale and over a long period of time in order to display any meaningful results. In other words, the foundational premises advanced by Karlberg cannot be challenged in the present or the near future. Ultimately, what is being asserted is that the only territory for the testing of foundational and non-foundational premises and models is in the field of social action and, here, large-scale social projects running for a considerable period of time are the fundamental requirement. Karlberg is even more explicit about this in the last chapter of the book:

"Ultimately, all premises must be assessed by their fruitfulness as we test them against reality. **The premises examined in this book cannot be tested until sufficient numbers of**

people translate them into social practices on a large enough scale that their fruitfulness can be assessed." (p.190)

At this point, it is neither accurate nor inaccurate to state that based on this discussion "he seems to be very clear about the lack of capacity for his model to offer conviction in foundational truths." Nevertheless, there are portions in the introduction that could be taken to challenge this statement.

Because foundational premises "cannot be fully assessed until significant numbers of people commit to them and translate them into social practices on a large scale so that future generations can offer their verdict with the benefit of hindsight", Karlberg (p.6) maintains that in the meantime, an element of "rational faith" in the underlying premises is required at least during the initial and interim phases. He then justifies this through an argument allegedly based on reason (and scientific reasoning):

"When faced with a set of equally rational theses founded on equally plausible premises, supported by equally reasonable interpretations of provisional evidence, **intuition becomes our interim guide**. There is nothing irrational about this. The systematic generation of knowledge has always depended on it. This is even true in the natural sciences, the history of which is laden with commitments to premises that were, at the outset, intuitively attractive and rationally compelling but unprovable." (pp.6-7)

On page 42, Karlberg also refers to this type of intuition as "an innate moral sense" for which he claims there is a body of empirical evidence which he references at the end of the book: "And a body of empirical evidence seems to point toward the existence, in our species, of some kind of **normative intuition or an innate moral sense**." A certain conclusion to this line of thinking thus begins to emerge: We have in front of us a set of foundational premises that cannot be examined or challenged until we have started believing in them through recourse to our 'intuition', have committed to translating them into social practices on a large scale, and this has been achieved to a considerable degree. Karlberg's supporting argument here seems to be that intuition plays as important a role as logic in science and the scientific method (or an important role once different competing logics cancel themselves out), and that both intuition and logic must be tested against reality (p.7). In other words, this demand that

Karlberg makes of the different actors in social transformation, which seems very similar to a religious demand, is claimed to be scientific.

Obviously, there is an assumption here that our intuition, or our 'innate moral sense', naturally apprehends 'normative foundational truths' and their relevance, and that this intuition plays a key role in the scientific enterprise. But is there also an assumption that, as our 'interim guide', intuition, or our innate moral sense, can confirm foundationalist premises over anti-foundationalist ones well ahead of that moment when a full evaluation will have finally taken place? This aspect seems partially confirmed by how anti-foundationalists are depicted in the introduction for not having recognized the existence of spiritual truths through either reason or intuition (Preface, pp. IX-X):

"This book therefore invites the reader to consider, with an open mind, the intuitive premise that there are *foundational normative truths* – what some might call moral or spiritual truths – that enable and constrain human agency in complex but important ways. Most people alive accept some version of this premise. The rejection of this premise by skeptical modern intellectuals, operating within a purely materialist framework, departs from a rational and intuitively compelling view that has probably been held, in one form or another, by most of humanity for millennia."

Inasmuch as 'skepticism' is another term for relativism or anti-foundationalism, the term "skeptical modern intellectuals" is a precise reference to relativists or anti-foundationalists. Read in the context of the book the term is also directed at the materialist intellectuals who do not admit of realities that transcend what is measurable at the material level. That both these groups fall under the label of the "skeptical modern intellectuals, operating within a purely materialist framework" is confirmed by chapter five which includes all such orientations under the heading *Materialist Frames of Reference*.

Interestingly, not only does Karlberg depict this capacity of intuition as 'an innate moral sense' for the recognition of foundational normative truths, but twice in his book he describes this sense as inoperative when clouded by egoistic tendencies:

"If we accept the premise that foundational normative truths exist, a compelling case can be made that human intuition, **when it is not clouded by ego or perverted in other ways**, is capable of some initial, rudimentary recognition of, and attunement to, such truths." (p.42)

And again:

"**In relation to normative intuition, egoism can be understood as a form of ignorance, or irrationalism, characteristic of the untrained mind**. … Egoistic tendencies, it seems, can be transcended through the development of altruistic qualities. **It can thus be argued that efforts to quiet the ego through the development of altruistic qualities helps attune the faculty of intuition with foundational normative truths**. Let us refer to this outcome as the development of the capacity for *normative discernment*." (p.63)

Why would an intuitive premise that (certain) foundational normative truths exist, so in favor of foundationalism, be more valid than an intuitive premise that (such proposed) "foundational normative truths" do not exist, so supporting anti-foundationalism?

And why would a judgment be made that "skeptical modern intellectuals" by virtue of their anti-foundationalism, have departed from this compelling use of intuition, which we should remember, is equivalent with the notion of "an innate moral sense"? Are skeptical modern intellectuals deficient in their "innate moral sense"? Is their failure to accept and adhere to foundational normative truths a moral failure? Is it being suggested, as indeed it seems to be the case, that their intuition has been clouded by their ego because of materialism? Is their mindset of relativism unhealthy? Or as Todd Smith[22] puts it, is "the habit of falling into relativism" (min.23) one of the "habits of mind that are particularly detrimental and that actually serve to perpetuate certain crises that humanity is facing or certain conditions that are not conducive to our advancement" (min.4) (the implication here being that it brings about disunity)? Does this "dogmatic" habit of the mind (meaning, 'relativism') stand in direct opposition to the habits that have transformative power, and which have been

[22] *Cultivating Transformative Habits of Mind - Dr. Todd Smith (Grand Canyon Bahá'í Conference 2020) - YouTube*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IYiGKSunwfc. Accessed 12 Mar. 2022.

delineated in the Bahá'í conceptual framework as the ones we should cultivate instead, as Todd Smith (min.3) has recently argued?

What we are witnessing here is the strong pull of ontological foundationalism away from a position that could be at a middle point between foundationalism and anti-foundationalism. Also clearly present is the assertion that, in the long interim period before a large-scale full evaluation can take place, intuition (or our innate moral sense) can act as our "interim guide", in the sense that it can confirm foundationalist premises over anti-foundationalist ones. This throws into question the statement that "[Karlberg] seems to be very clear about the lack of capacity for his model to offer conviction in foundational truths."

It is at this point that a more broad and direct discussion can be initiated. This discussion will proceed by careful examination of the main elements framing the general argument put forward by Karlberg in the introduction of his book. This general argument is closely associated with ontological foundationalism and provides, to some extent, the structure of the book.

I.1. *Non-Verifiable Equivalent Premises?*

Claim No. 1: that the premises in favor of foundationalism are no more verifiable than the premises in favor of anti-foundationalism, meaning they are equivalent premises (both have equal claims to truth) until the end results of large-scale implementation come in. While foundationalism is a position that cannot be proven yet, so is anti-foundationalism.

This entire line of thought seems to be borrowed from the analytical philosopher Thomas Nagel who allegedly makes a similar case about 'value realism' as opposed to 'anti-realism.' This is discussed by Karlberg on page 124:

"Nagel admits that value realism is not a position that can be proven at this time. But the same is true of the opposite position that values have no real existence. Furthermore, Nagel argues that 'the burden of proof has often been misplaced in this debate,' and 'a defeasible

presumption that values need not be illusory is entirely reasonable until it is shown not to be.' On this note, Nagel demonstrates that no logically coherent or empirically verifiable proofs have been marshalled against value realism, and he thus returns to his call for intellectual humility. Value realism, as well as the denial of value realism – or anti-realism – remain equivalent premises at this stage in our understanding of normativity. The ultimate test of each will be their relative fruitfulness in producing results that improve the human condition."

This argument that both Nagel and Karlberg seemingly put forward can be challenged as unbalanced in a key respect. The issue is this: that to argue that no values have real existence does not require you to propose a particular type of non-value and build a theory around it that can be tested. However, theories in the social sciences or philosophy that have started from a particular type of value proposed to be objective and have real existence, have each time been proven partial and subjective upon further investigation. In other words, it is the constant failure to prove that values of any kind are objective and fundamental features of reality that has resulted in the widespread view that values cannot be objectively determined, or namely, that we cannot prove that they have real existence (although they might). This negative type of verification, repetition after repetition, is why value realism and ontological foundationalism of a strong kind are on such problematic ground. They have been repeatedly discredited in the forms which they have taken so far. Still, normative values can be delineated, if by 'normative' we understand them as only the result of scientific procedures, social consensus, and human construction, but not as absolute, objective values or features of reality etc. And such relative 'normative values' could guide us quite well, if only our political processes respected the best findings of science and philosophy. "Intellectual humility" is not a winning argument here either, because some could associate humility more with not claiming that your truths are universal, objective, and divine when they are not, or you cannot prove they are. If I claim that my truths are universal, objective, and divine and you argue they are not, if I claim such truths exist, and you claim they do not, the burden of proof is on me, because I am making a very significant and large claim. A claim that would require universal acceptance and even forms of obedience, if true.

Cultural relativists have not suddenly woken up to the ideal value of anti-foundationalism or anti-realism. (They do not generally seek to promote such an ideal value. They likely would be quite happy to find or be able to recognize an acceptable form of certain or definite

foundationalism. At times, they are themselves looking for a modest or weak foundationalism that would not lead to oppression). They have only reached that position, step by step, after deconstructing all sorts of allegedly universal and objective truths, and showing them to be very subjective, partial, contextual, and contingent; the issue being much compounded by the fact that such 'universal' and 'objective' truths could also be shown to have underpinned massive historical forms of oppression. When Putin invaded Ukraine on the 24th of February 2022, for example, this had much to do with a particular type of strong foundationalism or essentialism made explicit in a July 2021 essay entitled *On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians* and included for mandatory study by the Russian military. In it, Putin argues that Ukrainians, Russians, and Belarusians are one people, historically belonging to the triune (Imperial) Russian nation, which effectively denies the existence of Ukraine as an independent nation. From this essentialist perspective, "modern Ukraine was wholly and fully created by Bolshevik, communist Russia"[23], and therefore has no foundation. It is an artificial creation, a non-state. These views have been endorsed by none other than 'His Holiness' Kirill, the Patriarch of Moscow and all Russia, meaning they have also received religious sanction. Had Putin and Patriarch Kirill displayed and promoted more cultural relativist views instead, the denial of the existence of Ukraine as an independent nation, and its subsequent invasion, would have been less likely to occur.

Julia Berger provides another useful example here. In her account of the work of the BIC[24] on gender equality, Berger[25] (pp.222-223) notes how conservative alliances across many denominations and faiths have engendered such conflict, competition, and polarization on this issue at the UN (particularly in relation to family planning, the rights of women, gender and sexuality, abortion and birth control) that religions such as the Bahá'í Faith have had to struggle with the resulting image being ascribed to all religions: "The overarching presumption has been that of religion as an anti-modern, anti-secular, or anti-democratic voice in the gender equality discourse and in society in general." (p.223) Ultimately, such

[23] Roth, Andrew, and Julian Borger. 'Putin Orders Troops into Eastern Ukraine on "Peacekeeping Duties"'. *The Guardian*, 21 Feb. 2022. *The Guardian*, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/21/ukraine-putin-decide-recognition-breakaway-states-today.

[24] The 'Bahá'í International Community' is the NGO officially representing the worldwide Bahá'í community at the United Nations.

[25] Berger, Julia. 'A New Politics of Engagement: The Bahá'í International Community, the United Nations, and Gender Equality'. Cameron, Geoffrey, and Benjamin Schewel (Eds.). *Religion and Public Discourse in an Age of Transition Reflections on Bahá'í Practice and Thought*, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2017, pp. 221–54. *Open WorldCat*, https://muse.jhu.edu/book/57468/.

contention, adversarialism, and the resulting 'ideological gridlock' on issues of gender equality has been traced back to how faith-based organizations see themselves as promoting or defending normative foundational truths (ontological truths):

"As the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) notes, 'conservative religious actors see religious moral principles as timeless and non-negotiable, while feminists and other human rights advocates argue for pluralist and rights-based alternatives.'" (p.228)

Bahá'ís cannot be innocent of these problematic aspects of foundationalism. The heavier burden of proof, therefore, rests with those proposing foundational normative truths. It is reasonable, thus, to observe that forms of knowledge that imply certainty, and for which implications are much greater, should require a higher standard of proof than forms of knowledge that do not imply certainty and which do not automatically claim universal acceptance.
Furthermore, no discussion of foundationalism can take place outside this long, problematic history in which strong foundationalism and terrible oppression have been inextricably linked. This is why the burden of proof for any attempt to advance universal, objective, eternal, or foundational truths is, and has to be, as high as it is today. To use the words of Nagel and Karlberg, it is their terrible historical un-'fruitfulness', particularly since the Enlightenment, that imposes a heavier 'burden of proof' as requirement.

I.2. *Foundationalist and Anti-foundationalist Premises Can Only Be Fully Assessed Through Generational Large-Scale Implementation*

Claim No. 2: that foundationalist and anti-foundationalist premises "cannot be fully assessed until significant numbers of people commit to them and translate them into social practices on a large scale so that future generations can offer their verdict with the benefit of hindsight." (pp.6-7)

On the surface, for those who are not much concerned with the complexities of theory or the intricate nature of ideologies, this claim might seem sensible and logical. However, this line of thinking doesn't quite deliver on its promise of ensuring a final verdict that produces certainty or imparts a considerable degree of objectivity.[26]

Two contrasting philosophical arguments, theories, or systems do not measure each-other only in the field of large-scale social application; in fact, it would be difficult to argue that they can ever be evaluated in that manner because of the sheer complexity of the factors involved. Such dynamic complexity escapes scientific monitoring, overwhelms scientific evaluation, and transcends even the actual body of theory from whence it originated. I am not suggesting here that we should not try to constantly investigate and evaluate such systems and hold them to account. We need to do this as much as possible, from as many standpoints as possible. I am simply arguing that the judgment of history between capitalism, communism, and pre-capitalist societies – that whichever system is still alive is the better one – has usually been taken as the ultimate (though clearly imperfect) proof of validation because other forms of evaluation are too complex, diverse, and partial to be reconciled. Is the Anglo-Saxon societal model better than the Nordic Scandinavian model? Are both better than the Singapore and Taiwan models and better than the Chinese and Vietnamese ones? The truth is, and this is the problem, that the large-scale application of theories at the level of society cannot act as an objective, neutral evaluation, because social phenomena at large scale are unbelievably complex and any evaluation implies a particular perspective. Even simply comparing Freire's pedagogy with the Anisa Model and with the work of the Ruhi institute in terms of their direct impact on society is extremely difficult and any final conclusions would be highly controversial for the advocates of those models. It is much easier to compare the three models as curricular models or theoretical structures alone, without the consideration of their impact on society (although exploration of such a feature would clearly be a useful addition).

Suppose, however, that we would try to assess such conceptual models in terms of their impact on society. How easy would it be to claim that their impact is directly related to

[26] Another issue here is that such assessments can be extremely subjective as evaluations of works in progress tend to be largely internal in nature, and even in those rare instances where outside independent monitorization or expertise is brought in, the agencies invited are frequently selected based on their closeness in likeliness or mutual ties and granted only limited access.

normative or normative foundational principles? Normative (foundational) truths, if present in such models, do not suddenly jump out at us, announce themselves in their most truthful and complete form, and assert direction of large-scale processes of application. Rather they remain obscured, unknown, misunderstood, and distorted in the messiness of social reality and social dynamics, always intersected by tensions between conflicting tendencies as to their interpretation (or approximation), but hopefully still with the power to inspire understanding, moral susceptibilities, unity, and social action. How would one differentiate between the worth of normative principles as theoretical concepts and their worth as evaluated by the way in which they have been understood/misunderstood and applied/misapplied? Would we like to suggest that the worth of the principle of the oneness of humankind as the Bahá'í community, or an agency thereof, has implemented it over the decades is how the conceptual value of the principle should be judged? Or, to put it in even more stringent terms, how can one be sure that the normative principles discernible at the level of application are still the same ones with those elaborated at the level of theory? It is rather at the level of theory that such key principles are more clearly discernible, when and if a given theoretical framework has been systematically elaborated from one or a set of such principles, and not simply as an enumeration of indeterminate ideas. However, such construction does not guarantee these principles the status of normative foundational truths either.

The point I am trying to make here is quite simple: two theories, or arguments, or even philosophical systems are much easier to compare and contrast than two large-scale social projects or two social systems allegedly derived from those theories or philosophical systems. I use the word 'allegedly' here because in practice there are many different ways to implement a theory or a political system, and to some extent, it is extremely difficult if not impossible to seek to invalidate a theory or philosophical system because of a particular historical form of implementation (this is not to say that any theory or philosophical system can be absolved of those effects on social reality that can in some measure or another be attributed to it). I recommend here reading the introduction of Leszek Kolakowski to the first volume of his magnum opus, *Main Currents of Marxism*. Kolakowski[27] (p.2) dismisses the three general views on the relationship between modern Communism and Marxism:

[27] Kołakowski, Leszek, and P. S. Falla. *Main Currents of Marxism: Its Rise, Growth, and Dissolution*. Clarendon Press, 1978.

1. as “the perfect embodiment of Marxism, which proves that the latter is a doctrine leading to enslavement, tyranny, and crime”,
2. as “the perfect embodiment of Marxism, which therefore signifies a hope of liberation and happiness for mankind” and
3. “No, Communism as we know it is a profound deformation of Marx’s gospel and a betrayal of the fundamentals of Marxian socialism.”

The part of his argument that is of immediate relevance to our context is this:

“There is abundant evidence that all social movements are to be explained by a variety of circumstances and that the ideological sources to which they appeal, and to which they seek to remain faithful, are only one of the factors determining the form they assume and their patterns of thought and action. We may therefore be certain in advance that no political or religious movement is a perfect expression of that movement’s ‘essence’ as laid down in its sacred writings; on the other hand, these writings are not merely passive, but exercise an influence of their own on the course of the movement. **What normally happens is that the social forces which make themselves the representatives of a given ideology are stronger than that ideology, but are to some extent dependent on its own tradition.** … The problem facing the historian of ideas, therefore, does not consist in comparing the ‘essence’ of a particular idea with its practical ‘existence’ in terms of social movements. The question is rather how, and as a result of what circumstances, the original idea came to serve as a rallying-point for so many different and mutually hostile forces; **or what were the ambiguities and conflicting tendencies in the idea itself which led to its developing as it did**? It is a well-known fact, to which the history of civilization records no exception, that all important ideas are subject to division and differentiation as their influence continues to spread.” (pp.2-3)

The argument is longer and more complex, but it gives a taste of why simple identifications are problematic. Another way to pose this problem is that the Bahá’í Writings do not provide very detailed methods of implementation for their teachings in relation to the world we currently live in. Would we want to say that the validity of the Bahá’í Writings should be fully and completely judged based on their implementation through large scale programs such as those of the institute process, the Ruhi Institute, the ISGP, the BIC, or the ABS?

Another question that can be posed is how easy would it be to differentiate between the implementation of normative foundational truths versus the implementation of normative nonfoundational truths in social action? The concept of justice, for example, could function in both ways not only at the level of theory, but also, at the level of social action where actors might not necessarily differentiate between the two.

If my objections to Claim No. 2 stand there are two important consequences:

One is the general observation that two theories, arguments, or even philosophical systems are much easier to compare and contrast as theoretical formulations than as two large-scale social projects or two social systems allegedly derived from those theories/philosophical systems. Furthermore, it would be necessary and simply good practice for such theoretical comparison to occur before attempting a verification of such theories through implementation at large scale.

Secondly, if as I have argued, the verification of premises via the evaluation of large-scale implementation projects is deeply problematic and unable to provide certainty or objectivity, then, according to Karlberg's scheme, intuition and a particular type of pragmatic reason (to be discussed) automatically become the sole methodology for exercising choice in favor of foundationalist premises. This issue will receive treatment in the sections ahead.

I.3. Foundationalist and Anti-Foundationalist Premises Cannot Be Interrogated on The Plane of Philosophical or Epistemological Reasoning. Part 1

Claim No. 3: that foundational and anti-foundational premises cannot be interrogated empirically and cannot be interrogated on the plane of philosophical or epistemological reasoning (because "equally rational arguments based on equally plausible premises yield different lines of logic that lead to divergent conclusions" etc.)

Let us take the statement that the lack of empirical verification for foundational and anti-foundational (or, rather, nonfoundational) premises is a given (although, as the emotion of moral elevation[28] shows, some degree of verification should be possible even if the burden of proof might require it to be used in conjunction with other forms of verification).

As we have seen, Karlberg's initial argument (before the use of 'intuition' later tips the balance) suggests that there is no way to adequately distinguish between the validity of foundationalist and anti-foundationalist premises. This is both an overall argument (large-scale implementation over time is needed before adequate assessment can occur) and a specific argument: "Equally rational arguments based on equally plausible premises yield different lines of logic that lead to divergent conclusions." (p.6)

Here Karlberg is stating that a well-argued line of logic that started from a foundationalist premise cannot be compared or contrasted in any meaningful way with a well-argued line of logic that started from an anti-foundational premise. These perspectives or lines of logic cannot be compared, neither can they interrogate each other, because they are distinct, like 'apples and oranges.' In this sense, what is being implied, although not explicitly stated, is that foundationalist and relativist premises have equal claims to truth in relation to philosophical or epistemological verification, in the sense that such verification cannot proceed or cannot distinguish between the claims of either.

But is this truly the case? I would rather argue that, to a large extent, it is precisely on the territories of philosophy and epistemology (and, of the other academic disciplines related to the theme of social transformation which have been highlighted in the preamble) that the initial arguments in support of such premises (foundational or anti-foundational) should be first evaluated. There are diverse ways in which this can be attempted. One example is for the philosophical, epistemological, or sociological arguments in support of certain proposed foundationalist premises to be interrogated from the traditions (each with different possible branches) of foundationalism and anti-foundationalism (assuming all philosophical

[28] *Moral Elevation and Moral Beauty: A Review of the Empirical Literature - Rico Pohling, Rhett Diessner, 2016*. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1037/gpr0000089. Accessed 12 Mar. 2022.

orientations, including nonfoundationalism or postfoundationalism,[29] can be considered to fall within such a twofold classification). However, because Karlberg does not mention this option of verification through philosophical and epistemological reasoning (or through the reasoning of any particular social science) as a possibility, the implication is that to interrogate or evaluate the proposed foundationalist premises from an anti-foundationalist position, or from another foundationalist position altogether, is either impossible or ineffective.

It is with some surprise, therefore, that we realize that in chapter five of the book Karlberg proceeds to interrogate materialist and anti-foundational theories and philosophies (and their premises) through his own foundationalist premises and conceptual framework.[30] If he claims that foundationalist and relativist premises have equal claims to truth in relation to philosophical or epistemological verification, and are, therefore, impervious to it, why does he do it? If he does it, why doesn't he account for the possibility of such philosophical verification in his delineation of how the validity of foundational and anti-foundational premises can be evaluated?

One counterargument here would be to suggest that premises are just premises. They exist alone, as if suspended in a void. They just arrive, so to say, and then are processed through the method of philosophical investigation with different types of machinery (foundational or anti-foundational in assumptions) producing divergent but equally valid outcomes. One type of machinery cannot evaluate the premises or outcomes of the other. This argument must be ruled out, however, because Karlberg has proceeded with evaluating anti-foundational premises and theories from his foundational vantage point and its related premises in chapter five.

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[29] *Postfoundationalism | Encyclopedia.Com*. https://www.encyclopedia.com/education/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/postfoundationalism. Accessed 6 Apr. 2022.

[30] Of note here is that he does not specifically assess non-foundational premises and positions in terms of how they have been translated into social practices "on a large enough scale that their fruitfulness can be assessed." For example, in his assessment of "physicalism" Karlberg relies on the foundational position of 'value realism' (p.123) and other concepts of Nagel – a philosopher who has been deemed to represent a perspective similar to that of the Bahá'í Faith in key areas (and one almost identical with ontological foundationalism if we judge this by Karlberg's reading of Nagel).

Another counterargument could be that there are no premises here or rather what are being compared are foundationalism and anti-foundationalism as systems. It is these two very systems that are the premises. In this sense, one system cannot simply invalidate the other in the realm of philosophical and sociological reasoning. Rather, they must meet in the arena of practice and the results thereof compared. For now, a particular kind of pragmatic reason and intuition tilt the balance in favor of foundationalism, but a true assessment can only occur after social experimentation at large scale has taken place over a long period of time. This argument must also be discarded, for it would be illogical for Karlberg to then proceed with evaluating anti-foundational premises and theories (arguably, the entire Western philosophical tradition) from his foundational vantage point and its related premises.

There are also other problems with this counterargument that need to be highlighted here. The first is that it seems to assume a sort of Manicheist battle between the ontological foundationalist forces of religion and the forces of materialism represented by the materialist philosophies of the anti-foundationalists. One side must win, because only one of these systems can be true, and, therefore, good. Either objective truths (and in this case, spiritual truths) exist or they do not. Another associated assumption here would be that the conceptual framework of the Bahá'í Faith, and in particular the ontological foundationalism now associated with it, represents the testing ground, the standard, and once implemented at scale at the level of social reality, the definite proof against any type of anti-foundationalism. All of this, of course, would be tremendously silly. We need foundationalism, nonfoundationalism and anti-foundationalism at all times, as each of them, and, each of their specific theoretical subsets or philosophical traditions, capture in a unique way something essential about how we frame knowledge and seek to interpret reality. They represent different essential ways and traditions of building theoretical models or conceptual frameworks[31]; they constitute different

[31] "As a theory of belief-justification, foundationalism distinguishes between 'basic' beliefs, which are justified without reference to other beliefs, and 'non-basic' beliefs, which are justified by their inferential relation to basic beliefs. In this view, basic beliefs emerge out of and are immediately justified by experience (whether rational or empirical); inferential justification then flows in one direction—from basic to nonbasic beliefs. One can imagine a 'pyramid' of knowledge secured by its firm foundation. Nonfoundationalists typically hold to a form of coherentism, which is the main competitor of foundationalism vis-à-vis the debate over the justification of belief. The favorite images here are a 'web' of interconnected beliefs or a 'raft' that must be repaired while afloat. Foundationalism has difficulty defending its criteria for the basicality of a belief and accounting for the interdependence of all human beliefs; nonfoundationalism, insofar as it maintains strict adherence to coherent relations among beliefs as the only criterion of justification, has difficulty indicating the truth of its beliefs outside the system." *Postfoundationalism | Encyclopedia.Com*. https://www.encyclopedia.com/education/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/postfoundationalism. Accessed 6 Apr. 2022.

epistemological orientations. Foundationalism seeks the underlying structures of reality and certain knowledge, anti-foundationalism seeks to understand what knowledge is, how it is constructed and whether its character prevents or engenders oppression, while nonfoundationalism seeks to bridge and bring together the first two. This is valid inside and outside the Bahá'í community. These systems of knowledge cannot and should not annihilate each other; it is their tension and interaction that advances the process of knowledge. To assume such dualistic gnosticism, or any traces of it, is not compatible with the Bahá'í Faith and the Bahá'í Writings, in my view.

Yet another counterargument could then assert either that:

1) the premises Karlberg proposes 'have just arrived', as if appearing from a void, and have not yet gone through the machinery of philosophical reasoning, while the anti-foundationalist and materialist positions and premises Karlberg interrogates have already gone through this process to a significant extent. The first cannot yet be evaluated but the second can.

Or

2) the premises Karlberg proposes are indeed derived from or associated with a conceptual framework (they 'haven't just arrived'), but that this conceptual framework is too incipient at the moment and has not yet itself gone through the machinery of philosophical or epistemological reasoning (or that of the social sciences). If making such a conceptual framework and its derived premises visible at the level of theory presupposes their rendering through the languages of philosophy, social sciences, and the sciences, this has not occurred yet. Therefore, the conceptual framework in use cannot yet be evaluated but Western philosophies can.

The problem with these counterarguments is similar in that they face the following objection: Why would someone proceed to assess from such an initial and incipient position of 'raw' premises, or from a conceptual framework that has not yet been theorized at a philosophical, epistemological, or scientific level, other well-developed philosophical discourses, and their premises (and in fact most of the main Western philosophical traditions)? How could we trust such a raw theoretical apparatus that operates seemingly from outside the provinces of

philosophy, science, and social science? How could such a conceptual framework even legitimize itself within the discourses of philosophy, science, and social science?

We are here in an unusual dilemma.

Either we agree that Karlberg has employed certain foundational premises and/or his conceptual framework as the standard for assessing anti-foundational theories and premises and their limitations (See chapter entitled *Materialist Frames of Reference*) when this possibility was seemingly dismissed from the very start as impossible or inefficient. This would then constitute a problematic of the following type: no one can assess your premises and, thus your framework, but you can employ your own foundational premises and framework to assess those of others and to make universal judgments about them. It should be observed here that such an occurrence would constitute exactly the sort of thing that anti-foundationalists critique foundationalists for.

Or we concur that Karlberg admits his foundational premises and/or conceptual framework are too inchoate to withstand philosophical engagement etc., in which case we have to account for why he has proceeded to interrogate all the main Western philosophical traditions from such a position.
Both these scenarios disprove the affirmation that his model could be called ‘a middle point between foundationalism and antifoundationalism.’ In the first case, because his theoretical standpoint advantages foundationalism and disadvantages anti-foundationalism. Namely, it does not allow for the critical evaluation of foundationalism from an anti-foundationalist (or any other philosophical) perspective, but it employs it freely in relation to materialistic or anti-foundationalist positions. In the second case, because a conceptual framework or set of premises too inchoate to withstand philosophical engagement etc. cannot obviously adjudicate between the diverse claims of foundationalist and anti-foundationalist schools of thought.

I.4. Pragmatic Reason Tilts the Balance in Favor of Normative Foundationalism

Claim No. 4: "At best, *normative foundationalism* (or normative realism) and *normative anti-foundationalism* (or normative anti-realism) are equivalent and equally plausible premises at this time, neither of which yet warrants an extremely high degree of confidence. But when we consider how predictable the effects of applying or violating various normative principles are, it seems reasonable to conclude that the weight of initial evidence tilts in favor of normative foundationalism." (p.127)

As hinted at in the introduction of the book, not only intuition but also pragmatic reason (or rather, a particular type of it) can function as an 'interim guide' for discerning between the validity of foundational and non-foundational premises. Even in the absence of any other real criteria for comparing foundationalist premises against anti-foundationalist premises, Karlberg now explicitly states, one criterion can still be found to distinguish between their validity for the time being:

"At best, *normative foundationalism* (or normative realism) and *normative anti-foundationalism* (or normative anti-realism) are equivalent and equally plausible premises at this time, neither of which yet warrants an extremely high degree of confidence. **But when we consider how predictable the effects of applying or violating various normative principles are, it seems reasonable to conclude that the weight of initial evidence tilts in favor of normative foundationalism.**" (p.127)

Only now do we have in full view Karlberg's reasoning about the extent to which foundationalist and anti-foundationalist premises can or cannot be verified. The above statement is a remarkable statement in more than one way.
1) Firstly, it seems to suggest that normative foundationalism and normative anti-foundationalism should indeed be seen as constituting different premises. But this would be absurd. These can be seen to constitute either different systems of knowledge, like science and religion, or a sort of classificatory framing used to differentiate between many types of philosophical schools. Either way, one does not assess either normative foundationalism or normative anti-foundationalism as an overall system of thought, because such large and complex structures of thought are impossible to measure, or measure against each other. Can one objectively assess logical positivism as a school of thought (meaning, also in a way that produces universal agreement)? Can one objectively assess the Frankfurt Critical School as a philosophical tradition? Can then these be compared against each other with a high

degree of objectivity? Can one objectively assess the impact that logical positivism as a school of thought has had on social reality? Can one objectively assess the impact that French poststructuralism or the Hegelian school of thought, or that Marxism, has had on social reality? If anything, this second set of questions is even more difficult to answer than the first because it should be obvious that complex structures of thought are generally easier to investigate in their aspect as theory than in terms of how they impact social reality. And how would one judge Platonism, which is the basis of much Western philosophy, with all the good and the bad derived from it? Are totalitarian forms of communism not heavily Platonic? Can one compare analytical philosophy against continental philosophy and make a final judgment of which one is accurate? Can one objectively assess realism versus idealism and find a winner? Can one compare interest-based views of politics (realism) with institutional-based views (institutionalism) and with norms-based accounts of politics and find a winner that guarantees objectivity and certainty to the point of dismissing the other two perspectives altogether? How could then one claim that foundationalism and anti-foundationalism as systems of knowledge could constitute premises that one could distinctly evaluate objectively? What would the methodology for evaluating all the schools of thought falling under any of these philosophical traditions be? How would that methodology account for the effects on reality of such theoretical traditions? If this methodology drew on the ontological foundationalism of Karlberg, how would that be an objective and neutral way for discriminating between the merits of anti-foundationalism and foundationalism as overall projects or knowledge systems? The idea that the verification of theoretical premises via the evaluation of large-scale projects does not occur from amidst a particular theoretical perspective (located in general terms within one of the three traditions: foundationalism, nonfoundationalism or anti-foundationalism), but somehow, from a neutral and objective standpoint, is highly questionable and shows a lack of basic theoretical sophistication. To suggest such an idea requires an account of how a neutral and balanced position betweeen foundationalism, nonfoundationalism, and anti-foundationalism could be found from which to make such estimations.

2) Secondly, let us carefully consider this sentence: “when we consider how predictable the effects of applying or violating various normative principles are, it seems reasonable to conclude that the weight of initial evidence tilts in favor of normative foundationalism.” If by normative principles what is meant is principles that have prescriptive value (that specify how things ought to be) such principles exist in all anti-foundational schools of

thought. They might be contingent, limited to a particular sphere of action or geographical zone, the result of temporary collective consensus or the intersection of forms of subjectivity, etc. but they certainly do exist as principles. Every school of thought has normative principles, even though these might not be the normative foundational truths or spiritual truths Karlberg advocates for.

"Do not kill" for example might feature as a normative principle in both systems of thought, although for some, killing, violence and oppression have been strongly associated historically with social systems relying on strong versions of foundationalism. Anti-foundationalism, which is in many ways a very new and modern phenomenon (though with an ancient tradition), has emerged precisely in response to contemporary forms of oppression deemed to be associated with foundationalism. It has emerged as an analysis of what in the Western tradition of thought, largely foundationalist until that time, has made the large-scale oppression of the past four centuries possible. It was an attempt by both Western intellectuals and Third World intellectuals to identify the mechanisms in the apparatuses of knowledge that kept producing the same result: oppression (wars, colonization, structural racism, patriarchal systems, etc, but also economic, racial, social, political, cultural, and even religious exploitation within the borders of the same country). It was concerned with how violence was first conceptualized and made possible at the level of thought, with how structures of control or exploitation operated at the level of consciousness first, and with how Western structures of thought and language could be somehow freed from such tendencies or prevented from displaying them again in the future. All this is to say that the evaluation of normative foundational principles as highly beneficial in terms of their social and historical effects is never as simple or as straightforward as Karlberg makes it sound.

A more specific claim could be made here that foundational normative principles are universal while nonfoundational ones might not be, and that this makes a huge difference in terms of their positive impact on social reality. But this difference can go both ways: a universal principle could generate much good, or much evil. On the other hand, universal principles can still be affirmed from a nonfoundational position based on negotiated consensus such as via a social contract.

Another claim could yet be advanced that without the kind of belief that normative foundational premises or truths inspire, any nonfoundational normative principles would be lacking an essential ingredient, namely the commitment to truly abide by, implement, reflect,

and defend the principles in question. Again, this can go both ways: strong belief in principles can be both a source of good and evil. At the same time, it is simply wrong to claim that an anti-foundationalist would be less committed to their notions of justice than a foundationalist would be to theirs. Similarly, commitment has very little to do with a complex understanding of moral values or justice and how they could best be applied in everyday life. In fact, the tendency in many might be to stop interrogating their values, and the complexity surrounding their application, if these were assumed to constitute eternal and objective truths. In such circumstances commitment begins to blind understanding, and the imitation of tradition sets in. A similar argument can be made in relation to the statement that normative foundational truths are more successful in bringing about stability and order than normative nonfoundational truths. This is to impose a heavy reductionism on the complexity of human existence and an argument of this kind would be very difficult to construct in a rigorous manner. At the same time, it is easy to point out that the presumed stability of the Cold War, Communist societies, empires, or even the Middle Ages (if it could ever be classified as 'stability') was not in any way ideal or preferable. And why wouldn't anti-foundationalist insights into order and stability be given credit? If indeed, agreement on foundational normative truths will continue to remain highly unlikely, isn't one solution that of experimenting with more flexible approaches to truth, consensus, stability, and order?

Another claim could yet be made that the forms of culture or society where anti-foundationalism dominates are much more problematic or malign than forms of culture or society where the dominating force is foundationalism. As highlighted before, this is not something that can be quantified in any objective way in either the first part of the statement (that either anti-foundationalism or foundationalism dominates the forms of a particular culture or society) or the second (that one of these would be more harmful than the other, in general terms). It is even difficult to argue that within current societies, foundationalist and anti-foundationalist premises or orientations are not inextricably linked and superimposed. Which country, society or social form could be considered an anti-foundationalist country, society, or social form par excellence, and which a foundationalist one? Such categorizations are extremely difficult to put forward, and quite nonsensical except when in civilizational terms. Here, the 'ideational', 'idealistic', and 'sensate' systems of truth of Pitirim A. Sorokin[32] might be an example for consideration. However, civilizational assumptions of this

[32] Sorokin, Pitirim. *The Crisis of Our Age*. Oneworld, 1992.

kind are extremely difficult to verify at the level of data, as is the presumed superiority of any one such system over the others.

This hypothetical discussion has sought to anticipate ways in which one might try to support a particular type of truth-claim. Namely, that, when truly scrutinized by reason, the effects of applying foundational normative truths to social reality tilt the balance in favor of normative foundationalism. However, Karlberg does not really develop such a discussion (whether he would like to, it remains unclear). In a sense, his No. 4 Claim simply takes itself as self-evident. And what emerges from this is that Karlberg seems indeed unable or unwilling to recognize that anti-foundationalism can also generate normative (prescriptive) truths even if these are not 'foundational' in the sense of existing independent of the observer, being objective features of reality, eternal, and so on. His truth-claim that the application of normative truths to social reality tilt the balance in favor of normative foundationalism rests entirely on this strange conception: that anti-foundationalists reject any kind of normative principles or that their normative principles have no standing in comparison with normative foundational principles. Anti-foundationalists, however, do not argue that the notion of justice[33] in social affairs is not important or that it does not exist, as Karlberg implies; they simply argue it is socially constructed and contingent, rather than an objective, universal and eternal truth:

"We do not need to answer the question 'What is the essence of justice?' to observe the effects when we apply, or violate, the principle of justice as we construct social phenomena. When altruistic people strive to apply the principle of justice in their social endeavors, does this not lead, quite predictably, to the intersubjective experience of well-being and empowerment by those who are impacted by those endeavors? When egoistic people ignore the principle of justice in their social endeavors, does this not lead, quite predictably to the intersubjective experience of suffering and oppression by those who are impacted by those endeavors? … If we know things by their effects and by our ability to predict those effects, then there seems to be considerable evidence supporting the existence of normative truths [it should be remembered here that Karlberg uses the phrase 'normative truths' explicitly as a

[33] What the above passage also highlights is a very monolithic definition of justice – as a sort of good that is either recognized, by moral people, or not recognized, by immoral people – but this is to open another topic. Another assumption here is that we can objectively distinguish between altruistic and egoistic people, and about what they might, rightfully or wrongfully, consider justice to be.

reference to ‘normative foundational truths’]. But to grasp this, we need to move beyond naive conceptions of science, knowledge, and truth”. (p.126)

Suppose the ‘justice’ argument above was without fault. Why would such a form of evaluation tilt the balance in favor of foundational normative truths and away from nonfoundational normative truths? Is that because the assumption from the very start has been that the principle of justice is, and can only be, a foundational normative truth?

If that is the type of reasoning at play, then the following statement is clearly not supported: ‘**But when we consider how predictable the effects of applying or violating various normative principles are, it seems reasonable to conclude that the weight of initial evidence tilts in favor of normative foundationalism.**’

Why? Because the normative principles Karlberg mentions above could equally be normative nonfoundational principles, like a nonfoundational principle of justice. And Karlberg has not explained why such normative nonfoundational principles do not matter, or indeed, why the effects on reality of principles claimed to be normative foundational truths can only be positive and never negative (there is also an assumption here than when we assess the effects of normative foundational truths, we possess some kind of divine or perfect knowledge about what such normative foundational truths might be and about how to objectively evaluate the results of them being applied to social reality).

I.5. Foundationalist and Anti-Foundationalist Premises Cannot Be Interrogated on The Plane of Philosophical or Epistemological Reasoning. Part 2 (with a Discussion of Chapter 5: *Materialist Frames of Reference*)

Claim No. 5. That foundational and anti-foundational premises cannot be interrogated on the plane of philosophical or epistemological reasoning (because “equally rational arguments based on equally plausible premises yield different lines of logic that lead to divergent conclusions” etc.)

This dismissal of the role of reason constitutes in my view the most far-reaching element in Karlberg's overall argument. This is part of the reason why Karlberg's stance on how to assess foundational and non-foundational premises against each other adopts the specific trans-rational and mystical form given to it in his book. I am aware at this point that we have not discussed his consultative epistemology in much detail and that there is hope that this methodology transcends such problems. Such analysis will be provided in the second part of this paper.

As we have seen, Karlberg's initial argument (before the use of 'intuition' later tips the balance) suggests that there is no way to adequately distinguish between the validity of foundationalist and anti-foundationalist premises. This is both an overall argument (large-scale implementation over time is needed before adequate assessment can occur) and a specific argument: "Equally rational arguments based on equally plausible premises yield different lines of logic that lead to divergent conclusions." (p.6)

But is that truly so?

After all, it is with some surprise that we realize that in fifth chapter of the book Karlberg proceeds to interrogate materialist and anti-foundational theories and philosophies (and their premises) through his own foundationalist premises and conceptual framework.

I would in fact argue that to a large extent, it is precisely on the territories of philosophy and epistemology (and of the other academic disciplines related to the theme of social transformation) that the initial arguments in support of such premises (foundational or anti-foundational) should be first evaluated.

Is it true that such premises cannot be verified epistemologically, philosophically, or through the type of reasoning characteristic of the social sciences? That might be true, but only if such premises remain unidentified and devoid of any content. However, premises do not live in the ether, neither they do fall from on high in the pure form of truth, like clear-cut or distinct objects. If these premises are derived from the Bahá'í Writings or from any Sacred Text, they exist not in the ether and in a pure and separated form, but as threads and patterns of a textual structure of great complexity. In other words, any such premises require hermeneutical

exegesis both in terms of how they are selected from within a very holistic[34] text and in terms of how their significance as premises is justified through reason (these two processes are in fact inseparable). This aspect is missing in Karlberg's theoretical model. There is no work being done in relation to the specific premises or the general notion of premise being advanced. Because there is no elaboration, there can be no epistemological or philosophical verification. Let's take the notion of 'normative foundational truths.' Have we examined this notion in the Bahá'í Writings, or have we simply taken its existence for granted? Has there been prior groundwork on what the Bahá'í Writings have to say about the nature of truth? What is truth in the Bahá'í Writings? What kinds of truth are there? How do we know them? With what degree of certainty? What forms of knowledge have access to what types of truths or understandings? What are the concepts of reason and faith in the Bahá'í Writings? How does 'intuition' feature as an epistemological concept in the Bahá'í Writings? What is the significance of the principle of the harmony of science and religion when applied to such premises? What is the Bahá'í methodology for social change and how does it relate to moral development? What is the relationship between moral development and the assertion or acceptance of 'normative foundational truths'? Is moral development based on moral reasoning or rather on submission to 'normative foundational truths'? Or is there a sort of relationship between the two but with one aspect more emphasized than the other? What kind of Bahá'í epistemology, ethics, or philosophy are we talking about that would confidently provide us with both a general premise and with specific premises in relation to the notion of 'normative foundational truths'? How are certain 'normative foundational truths' identified through the prism of Bahá'í epistemology, ethics, or philosophy? Can they be identified in such ways and with what degree of certainty and objectivity?

Without such theoretical elaboration and investigation of the Bahá'í Writings the notion of 'normative foundational truths' being advanced would likely emerge from a very narrow grounding and from a very incipient and precarious conceptual framework (and we note here that a conceptual framework should imply an ordering of themes and propositions into a meaningful and coherent whole and not simply an enumeration of religious terms that have not been translated into philosophical and scientific concepts). This is the problem we stumble across here. Because no conceptual framework has yet been elaborated in the

[34] Holistic = "characterized by the belief that the parts of something are intimately interconnected **and explicable only by reference to the whole**." Definition from "Oxford Languages" (Oxford English Dictionary).

languages of philosophy, epistemology, ethics, and social sciences – the ontological foundationalism of Karlberg emerges primarily as a statement of belief accompanied by some subsidiary principles. The analysis provided so far highlights the following first principle and its corollary as central to his general argument:

First principle: absolute normative foundational truths exist, they are clearly transparent to us, and their assertion and acceptance is fundamental to our forms of knowing and to our social order. We observe here that this first principle is completely identical with the notion of ontological foundationalism. In other words, ontological foundationalism is taken as a self-evident truth that needs no elaboration. Its justification, its philosophical elaboration, is simply itself.

Corollary: that anti-foundationalists reject any kind of normative principles, that anti-foundationalists do not have any kind of normative principles (it is often omitted or unacknowledged that anti-foundationalism can also generate normative prescriptive truths even if these are not 'foundational' in the sense of existing independent of the observer, being objective features of reality, eternal, and so on) or that, if they do, their normative principles have no standing in comparison with normative foundational principles (why it would be so it is not explained).

The obvious implication here is that anti-foundationalists need to accept the existence of 'normative foundational truths', which of course, implies accepting, now or later, a concrete list of particular 'normative foundational truths' as well.

Furthermore, because of this lack of elaboration and theoretical development, all major Western schools of thought are assessed through this narrow grid as deficient. These schools of thought are therefore deemed inadequate for not accepting that normative foundational truths exist (and for not accepting one or several of its subsidiary principles), that is, for not accepting ontological foundationalism.

"In discussing each of these traditions, it is not my purpose to dismiss them as baseless. Rather, it is to show how each offers some valid insights from within their own frames of reference, or in relation to the material dimensions of social reality that they seek to explain and navigate. … **Yet the frames of reference that characterize and delimit each of these**

traditions do not encompass all aspects of social reality – including latent social phenomena with normative dimensions – that we need to factor into the generation of knowledge." (p.116)

Let us then quickly review the critique that Karlberg advances against different Western philosophical schools of thought from the position of ontological foundationalism.

I.5.a. Physicalism

I have already hinted at how in the section on *Physicalism* Karlberg employs the arguments of analytical philosopher Thomas Nagel to make his case against materialist thinkers (the alignment of ontological foundationalism with strands of analytical philosophy is a constant feature in this book). However, the main argument of Nagel constitutes to a large extent a reflection of the first principle and its corollary highlighted above (except that Nagel differs from Karlberg through his emphasis on 'ethical reasoning'). This is confirmed by Karlberg himself:

"With this argument, Nagel is adopting a position of *value realism* – which is the assumption that normative truths have an existence that is independent of the purely subjective desire of individuals. In other words, he argues for a conception of universal normative truths that can be discerned through detached forms of ethical reasoning that transcend subjective desires, interests, and motivations." (p.123)

However, as Karlberg also confirms: "Nagel admits that value realism is not a position that can be proven at this time." (p.124)

Nagel is interpreted to assert that both 'value realism' and its denial, meaning 'anti-realism', are equally unproven positions. Both will remain equal premises, he is taken to maintain, until their fruitfulness has been assessed through implementation at the level of social reality (we recognize this line of thinking from the general argument of the book). (p.124) Because he is still on thin ice, it is here that Karlberg brings in his notion of 'pragmatic reason':

"But when we consider how predictable the effects of applying or violating various normative principles [normative foundational principles] are, it seems reasonable to conclude that the weight of initial evidence tilts in favor of normative foundationalism." (p.127)

That this form of reasoning cannot be substantiated has already been established. In the end, the argument in favor of normative foundationalism takes both the form of a plea and of an accusation levelled at materialist thinkers:

"Additionally, if we reject this provisional evidence [meaning the one offered via the 'pragmatic reason' argument] due to a narrow materialist bias, then we foreclose the possibility of finding a route out of the grave normative impasse alluded at the outset of this book – the inability to agree on how to live together successfully in an increasingly interdependent world. This impasse now represents an existential threat. If for no other reason, then, it appears pragmatic to operate on the assumption that foundational normative truths exist." (p.127)

What this section on *Physicalism* shows are the limits of ontological foundationalism in launching a philosophical or scientific truth-claim that would support it.

I.5.b. Pragmatism

Pragmatism is not surprisingly criticized for having "rejected the possibility of foundational normative truths." (p.127) This initial assessment receives more nuances few pages later: "…pragmatists tend to reject the view that reliable bodies of knowledge can, through the correct rational and/or empirical methods, be confidently constructed on infallible foundations. … In other words, pragmatists tend to reject epistemological foundationalism while remaining agnostic regarding ontological foundationalism. Or to use the language employed in the first chapter of this book, pragmatists tend to be skeptical about ontological *truth claims* while remaining ambivalent about the existence of ontological *truths*." (p.129) Karlberg then argues that his "concept of *relative attunement*" offers a better alternative to the position of the pragmatists, because it reconciles "a non-foundational epistemology with a foundational ontology" (this is a claim that will be evaluated and called into question in the second part of this paper)

Next, Karlberg advances the following key argument against the pragmatists: "There is no coherent way to argue that contingent normative truths should derive from 'what works' in the absence of foundational or antecedent normative principles that frame our assessment of what works." (p.136) It is curious that Karlberg overlooks this very argument when assuming that evaluation of different premises (foundational and anti-foundational) through large-scale implementation can occur objectively and neutrally, and that this methodology would constitute the only means for achieving certainty. If by 'antecedent normative principles' Karlberg refers to nonfoundational normative principles, then this statement is a rigorous one (pragmatists would have to show that even if they started with such prior normative principles their methodology would allow for valid larger conclusions to be reached and for other contingent normative truths being ultimately identified as of primary importance).

In the end, Karlberg accepts the usefulness of some of the notions pragmatists advance (such as the importance of the practical 'fruitfulness' of any premise) but advises an improvement on the lines of ontological foundationalism:

"But these basic pragmatic commitments can be coupled with the premise that foundational normative truths exist, that we can become progressively attuned to them over time, and that we can construct a social reality that embodies such truths to increasing degrees." (p.137)

The conclusion here is that pragmatists would do well to accept ontological foundationalism. Whether they like it or not, pragmatists cannot operate without some kind of normative principles in assessing the fruitfulness of any premise. While this might be true it does nothing to advance foundationalist claims over anti-foundationalist ones. Rather, it affirms both in equal measure in opposition to the tradition of pragmatism, as this has been understood by Karlberg.

I.5.c Proceduralism

It is important to start with a basic understanding of proceduralism. Karlberg provides the following definition:

"Proceduralism is an approach to inquiry and decision-making that assumes the best we can do in pluralistic societies, in the absence of shared, foundational, or transcendent values, is

agree on procedures that will presumably lead to the best outcomes. Proceduralism is commonly, but not exclusively, associated with the theories of deliberative democracy." (p.136)

Next, Karlberg identifies Habermas as the most influential thinker in this tradition and summarizes his views as follows:

"Like many critical theorists, and most pragmatists, Habermas rejects normative realism – or the existence of foundational normative truths that are external to human subjectivity, social discourse, and processes of practical reasoning. At the same time, Habermas recognizes the need for some kind of normative principles that transcend the values governing specific cultural and historical contexts." (p.137) Here, we have, for the first time in the book, an explicit acknowledgment that anti-foundational normative principles exist too (not ontologically, of course).

To understand the critique that Karlberg tries to advance here his general take on Habermas must be first examined:

"Normative claims, according to Habermas, do not refer to independent or external phenomena. But they still can be the object of reasoning, criticism, and justification leading to normative consensus – or intersubjective validity – under the right conditions.
For Habermas, such conditions include the following: All relevant voices must be included and must have an equal voice. All participants must be free to initiate discussion, share their views, and question others in honest and open ways. And all participants must be free from coercion when they speak. Under such conditions, Habermas asserts that it is possible to arrive at some context-transcending normative principles. Such principles do not exist outside of human reasoning and discourse. Rather, the linguistic structure of human reasoning and discourse can, under the right conditions, yield them. **In this sense, context-transcending normative truths are not ontologically foundational. They are derivative. Yet Habermas submits that they can be universal because the underlying structure of human language and reasoning is a universal species characteristic.** Thus, when language and reason are collectively exercised through the right deliberative procedures under the right deliberative conditions, **the process can allegedly yield context-transcending normative truths**." (p.138)

Karlberg's attack on proceduralism and on Habermas's critical theory centres on his claim that consultation or "deliberative procedures under the right deliberative conditions" can yield context-transcending normative truths. This accusation comes in two parts: that normative nonfoundational truths cannot constitute context-transcending normative truths, and that normative nonfoundational truths cannot be universal in character. Consequently, what is being argued is that Habermas's proceduralism cannot work without the insertion of normative foundational truths.

This is a strange argument as even at a basic level it is clear that 1) if one consults with another person, even that consultation has the capacity to identify a normative principle that would transcend the context of the first person and 2) all it takes for normative nonfoundational truths to be deemed universal is either relative global agreement or dispersion (based on independent reasoning) at universal scale (of course this can never be a perfect universal scale, but it can be a qualified or representative one), of which we have a never-ending array of examples in many areas of life, such as those of international law and of global policy etc. More than that, we also have extremely complex global social formations (talking about large-scale projects) based precisely on such nonfoundational normative principles and the proceduralism thereof. The UN system and the WTO are such examples (this is not to say that certain normative principles in the UN system have not been advanced, at one point or another, as foundational, objective and universal).

The other problem is that normative foundational truths are not simply guaranteed a universal status because of their foundational character. Normative foundational truths (particularly as Karlberg describes them) would have to earn their universal status the same way as normative nonfoundational truths, through complex democratic forms of rational deliberation of the kind described by Habermas (and which could hardly be criticized as deviating from the Bahá'í principle of consultation envisaged in the Bahá'í Writings as essential to the construction of social reality). In other words, the consultation will never go as follows: 'here is a universal truth everyone must accept because this truth has been labelled a normative foundational truth by an authority we should all respect.' Rather the issue will be its burden of proof, its truth-claims, and the forms of justification they engender, meaning, the validity and relevance of its supporting arguments in the face of public scrutiny and possible counterarguments. The same applies to the spiritual truths of religion.

On the other hand, it is not obvious why the crises of our age would be caused by the failure to acknowledge normative foundational truths and not by other factors. How has this been determined and through what Bahá'í inspired philosophy or theory of social change? This crucial statement is never explained. Couldn't it more likely be that the crises of our age are caused by the fact that both pragmatic forms of reasoning and the democratic deliberative practices associated with proceduralism are heavily restricted by the current power structures in our societies? That we have not made enough use of them? Could it rather not be that norm-based forms of global politics are not supported at the national level and are undermined by forms of imperialism and narrow self-interest? Is the problem the lack of normative foundational truths and their replacement by normative nonfoundational truths, or rather, the (sometimes even active) obscuring of our capacity to understand and reflect normative truths in general in our lives (resulting in a lack of will to act based on such normative truths), of whatever kind these may be? After all, most of what are currently considered by Karlberg and others to constitute the normative foundational principles of the Bahá'í Faith are normative principles on which there already is a great degree of agreement in the world at large. The problem is not their lack of presence but their lack of conceptual depth, concrete application, and implementation in individual lives and in the operations of national, regional, and global structures. One could argue that the problem is not so much one of what but one of how. Isn't rather the real issue that we cannot find it in ourselves to abide by our own values or normative principles, and that this is equally true of secular, agnostic and religious people alike? And isn't this reality caused by a lack of knowledge, a lack of understanding of what normative principles are, of what the real issues in the world are, and of how the first can be adapted and applied to respond to the second? In other words, is the root of the problem the lack of normative foundational truths or the lack of moral and philosophical reasoning, of applied ethics, of knowledge in action, of pragmatic approaches and of democratic deliberative procedures, all active elements that underpin humanity's interaction with the level of moral values? Is the real issue the fact that we are lacking the explicit assertion and acceptance of normative foundational truths or that our manner of interacting with normative principles (whether foundational or not) through patterns of thinking, feeling and action has stagnated and has produced a dead and inert culture (rather than one that is alive)? And from this perspective, shouldn't the priority of the Bahá'í community be to repair these forms of interaction and to produce an exemplary moral culture, rather than an attempt to directly insert its presumed normative foundational truths (a topic

that has not yet been given any real, systematic philosophical consideration) into the foundations of Western thought and practice (an exercise that could never go very far before finding its abrupt limits considering the current strength of Bahá'í scholarship)?

In the end, it seems that the issue Karlberg has with Habermas is simply the latter's refusal to consider transcendental truths as a key element of his critical theory. To prove his point, Karlberg attempts to put forward several supporting arguments. The first is the statement that "normative standards internal to a given social formation offer no ultimate basis for challenging social norms within that social formation." (p.139) This argument can be challenged in a number of ways. The first point of contention is that it assumes a very black and white or monolithic view of how normative standards operate in any given social formation. The key normative standards of any culture are always challenged by and operating in connection with other normative principles that seek to replace them. The other part is that the relationship with normative standards is (even in totalitarian cultures) a dynamic one, where moral reasoning constantly assesses their usefulness or problematic nature. The nature of normative standards is thus always relatively fluid, and this is a good thing if progress is to be allowed for. Another simple argument is that social formations are not closed entities, they are open and interacting with other cultures, and thus interacting with other types of normative principles and moral reasoning. Finally, if this critique was valid, it would apply in even a greater degree to foundational normative truths. Except that in such a case, things would likely be considerably worse: a universal society based on foundational normative truths would have 'no ultimate basis for challenging social norms within that social formation' (at least not until the next Manifestation of God arrives). Last but not least, through the universal capacity of language and reason, each culture or 'social formation' can participate in the universal. This is why individuals and national cultures can make significant contributions to universal culture. Habermas is very clear on this point, though he gets ignored here. It is reason that is the avenue for context-transcending norms, and the vehicle is language.

Nevertheless, Karlberg (p.4) dismisses the claim that "the universal structure of human language and reasoning, exercised within an immanent frame, can yield context-transcending normative truths." If this is so what is the point of the consultative epistemology of Karlberg? More importantly, doesn't this deny the capacity for reason to determine context-transcending normative principles or, in other words, the capacity to identify principles of

universal relevance? Isn't it precisely the universal nature of human reason and of human language that make it possible for an individual, or a group, or a society, to develop normative principles that others might recognize as having universal relevance? Isn't this precisely what has happened with the Hippocratic oath, for example?

Finally, Karlberg advances a more specific variant of this critique by recourse to the realist perspective of Maeve Cooke. In short, this argument states that "Habermas's 'denial of the existence of non-linguistic sources of moral validity makes it hard to see how context-transcending moral learning is even conceivable.'" (p.140) I have already given examples of how "cognitive-linguistic structures immanent to a given socio-cultural formation" can produce "radically new forms of normative reasoning." (p.140) Again, this latest claim is more a matter of belief than a reasoned argument and brings nothing new in relation to what has already been said above. The assertion that there cannot be context-transcending norms or universal principles without the imposition of a transcendental source of moral validity has not been backed up with any arguments by Karlberg. In its current form it is simply a matter of unfounded belief (by 'unfounded' I mean currently lacking any forms of argumentation or legitimate proof), as also is the positing of the existence of a transcendental source (that is the origin of transparent universal and foundational normative truths).

I.5.d Agonism

This chapter is not primarily concerned with anti-foundationalism and foundationalism. Agonism tries to account for the failure of Habermas's theory to address the hegemonic and power relations that severely disrupt or make deliberative practices impossible in the real world. This constitutes the most significant critique of Habermas. Strangely, there is no acknowledgment of this aspect of agonism in Karlberg's account.

In this chapter, Karlberg focuses on the 'agonistic pluralism' of Chantal Mouffe, considered to represent a middle point between the minimalist agonism of Hannah Arendt and the maximalist agonism of Carl Schmitt. What, in short, is the critique that Karlberg puts forward? That Mouffe is wrong to adopt a tragic view of the world that stipulates that conflict cannot be removed from political processes, and that conflict is a reality we must accept and control by drawing different social groups into the social contract of agonistic pluralism. Such a method, Mouffe claims, would ensure that conflict will not erupt in violence.

Karlberg's claim is that by adopting this position, Mouffe legitimizes and promotes 'the culture of contest' (a term coined by Karlberg in his previous book *Beyond the Culture of Contest*) that constitutes a dominant feature of Western thought and politics. Mouffe's 'culture of contest' is then seen to derive from two principles:

1. that all social identities are formed "oppositionally", with division and antagonism perpetual features between different social groups. (p.144)
2. "that there are no universal objective values or foundational normative truths that diverse identity groups can discover or rationally agree on." (p.144)

Taken together these principles imply that conflict is inevitable and in some minimal way even desirable "for the absence of conflict could only reflect the permanent exclusion of some social groups through failed democratic processes within a hegemonic social order without viable challengers." (p.145)

The other consequence of Mouffe's theory, according to Karlberg, is that "shared human identity and shared human interests are ontologically impossible, as is a fully inclusive or harmonious social order based on a rational, universal and normative consensus." (p.144)

Although this section of Karlberg focuses exclusively on the 'agonistic pluralism' of Chantal Mouffe, this account could also be read as an implied critique of post-structuralist and postmodernist theories, social constructionism, critical theory, and of those movements or theories considered by those on the Right to be associated with 'identity politics' and with Marxism. I am referring here to race theories, feminisms, queer theory, postcolonial theories, decolonial theories etc. There is clearly a growing tendency in the Western Bahá'í world, and particularly in the North American Bahá'í community, to interpret such movements and theories as problematic and not compatible with Bahá'í scholarship because (and here the thinking is very similar with Karlberg's critique of agonism):

1. they are deemed to bring disunity through their emphasis on particular social identities or markers (such as race, gender, sexual orientation etc.) – this is taken to go against notions of 'oneness', meaning, against the Bahá'í principle of the oneness of humankind

2. they are not espousing the notion of universal objective values or foundational normative truths – which is taken as a full-on rejection of the realm of moral and spiritual values. This is then taken to imply that such movements and theories are just expressions of 'identity politics', which is to say, they constitute illegitimate expressions of a will to amass power for specific groups (at the expense of the majority). From this perspective, such theories and movements are deemed to operate on a notion of power that is incompatible with the Bahá'í conceptual framework (and its notion of 'power') and to be directly responsible for instituting or exacerbating a 'culture of contest' in society.

Such a reductionist reading is very close to the alt-right position of Jordan B. Peterson, reminiscent of American Conservatism and its push to reject or ban "critical race theory" (which in that view operates as an umbrella term for race theories in general) and not far removed from the Conservative British government's assertions that those highlighting the existence of structural or systemic racism are attempting to bring disunity into a relatively unified and just society because of seeking to (unfairly) advance specific claims for power.

Let us quickly say here that Mouffe is a post-Marxist who seeks to address a concern no one working with normative principles has satisfactorily addressed outside or inside the Bahá'í community: namely how to account for the dynamics of power and conflict that are always present in any community. Let us also state here that Mouffe represents an extreme version of anti-foundationalism because she does not seem to agree that intersubjective consensus can be reached through the identification of nonfoundational normative principles. Mouffe is, thus, equally problematic to foundationalists and anti-foundationalists alike. Foundationalists who assume an ontology of conflict and power find her theory relevant while anti-foundationalists who believe in the possibility of identifying universal nonfoundational normative principles find her theory problematic. Although she does believe in a minimalist social contract of sorts, the consensus she proposes concerns participatory political mechanisms and not an overall ideological standpoint. This argument is of interest to the Bahá'ís. In a sense it is like arguing that consultation could be a device for resolving political differences, without assuming the need for such consultative processes to require consensus on universal normative principles as the basis for action (but rather, other forms of consensus).

Let us also quickly make it clear here that Marxist and post-Marxist (and mostly any theories that could be in any way linked to them) contain very strong notions highlighting forms of oneness, such as the notion of 'solidarity.' The same applies to race, gender, and postcolonial theories – where older notions of 'cosmopolitanism' or 'solidarity' combine with newer concepts such as "intersectionality", "allyship", and so on. I present such surface arguments here because they are already somewhat familiar to the general public. A slightly deeper analysis, however, would quickly reveal that most of these theories and movements have sought to bring about better and more just forms of oneness; that they have always been deeply concerned with forms of oneness, and that we would be in great error to ignore them or this key aspect they bring. For the sake of time, I will provide only one such example. The following argument is taken from the book of Adom Getachew "Worldmaking After Empire. The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination" (2019, p.2):

"Drawing on the political thought of Nnamdi Azikiwe, W.E.B. Du Bois, Michael Manley, Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, George Padmore, and Eric Williams, I argue that decolonization was a project of reordering the world that sought to create a domination-free and egalitarian international order. Against the standard view of decolonization as a moment of nation-building in which the anticolonial demand for self-determination culminated in the rejection of alien rule and the formation of nation-states, I recast anticolonial nationalism as worldmaking. The central actors of this study reinvented self-determination reaching beyond its association with the nation to insist that the achievement of this ideal required juridical, political, and economic institutions in the international realm that would secure non-domination. Central to this claim was an expansive account of empire that situated alien rule within international structures of unequal integration and racial hierarchy. On this view, empire was a form of domination that exceeded the bilateral relations of colonizer and colonized. As a result, it required a similarly global anticolonial counterpoint that would undo the hierarchies that facilitated domination.

In three different projects—the institutionalization of a right to self-determination at the United Nations, the formation of regional federations, and the demand for a New International Economic Order—anticolonial nationalists sought to overcome the legal and material manifestations of unequal integration and inaugurate a postimperial world."

So why is it that such aspects would be ignored? I leave this question largely with the reader. Nonetheless, a particular point can be made here. It is highly probable that this sort of

thinking is the result of drawing 'strict equivalences' (to use Benjamin Schewel's term) between certain theories and the Bahá'í Writings, which leads to the acceptance of some theories and the discarding of others.

I.6. Interrogating Ontological Foundationalism and Karlberg's Notion of Power

At the same time as distance is being taken from what could be deemed to constitute anti-foundational theories (post-structuralist, postmodernist theories, social constructionism, critical theory, race theories, feminisms, queer theory, postcolonial theories, decolonial theories etc.) an extremely close relationship has been established with analytical philosophy.

Is the current alignment with analytical philosophy due to a certain understanding of what the key elements of the conceptual framework guiding all Bahá'í activities are? Or, in other words, is it the result of the search for strict correspondences with an existing academic theory? Or is it the other way around, that analytical philosophy has been the theory used to apply an interpretative grid on the Bahá'í Writings and shape the potential elements of its conceptual framework, in turn influencing the types of correlations or correspondences that could be made with other theories?

Is the ontological foundationalism that Karlberg espouses derived from the Bahá'í Writings and the causal reason for a strict correspondence with analytical philosophy and a discarding of other theories such as discussed above? Or is it primarily caused by reading the Bahá'í Writings through the lens of analytical philosophy?

Whatever the case, what is of concern is that this alignment resulting in ontological foundationalism has produced, if judged by the example of this book, a narrow nucleus of knowledge. This nucleus has then been imposed, with quite some confidence, as a standard for evaluating Western thought in general. As already highlighted in different places throughout this paper, this unelaborated nucleus of knowledge seems to rely on few propositions.

First is the espousal of the notion of universal objective values or foundational normative truths – the non-adoption of which is then regarded as a full-on rejection of the realm of moral and spiritual values and the opening of a door to a huge number of problematic philosophical views on the topics of human nature, social identity, power, and politics; from this standpoint, cultural relativism becomes the main cause for all the major crises facing humankind. This constitutes the first principle, namely, the idea around which the other elements in this framework are organized, or by which their interpretation and application is being colored.

Then, there are several subsidiary elements:

1) Probably the most important subsidiary element is that, by accepting the belief in foundational normative truths, correct worldviews (meaning, in line with reality) would be engendered. These, in turn, would automatically (and unproblematically) lead to moral and social transformation and the elimination of the crises facing humankind. Karlberg employs this type of argument against Mouffe's presumption that all social identities are oppositional. His counterargument is that altruism is an anomaly to Mouffe's paradigm and that altruism is possible because of a shared worldview that all people are one. In other words, "altruistic individuals are inspired by a consciousness of the oneness of humanity [this is an interesting claim though not all forms of altruism might have such origins], to which they subordinate all secondary identities and interests." (pp.149-150) The assumption here is that if people would be inspired by a worldview based on the oneness of humanity, all conflict, power struggle, and violence would end because altruism would prevail. Such a perspective fails to consider that the principle of the oneness of humankind and its interpretation can be viewed differently by different groups, (depending on which statements from the Bahá'í Writings are given priority in relation to their concerns - including on issues of class, race, gender, etc.), which could then led to contests about its meaning and interpretation based on different frames of reference. In other words, there is no such thing as a monolithic worldview of the oneness of humankind, nor should we aspire towards one. Interpretations of the principle of the oneness of humankind depend on the type of hermeneutics applied to the Bahá'í Writings and its correlation with how the world is being understood in both a theoretical and a very practical way (and here, the mode of one's insertion into a particular socio-cultural space or formation is essential). That is why, if you were to ask two Bahá'ís how the Bahá'í community should

be built in their national community or their location, or how the principle of the oneness of humankind should be understood and applied, you are most likely going to get very different answers and ones that are fiercely defended (particularly if those two Bahá'ís are not of the same race, class, age, gender or nationality). From outside the Bahá'í Faith, some others would not doubt find that the concept can be seen to act as a pernicious ideology, maybe seeing it (justifiably or not) as a claim that one religion should dominate others, or as advocating for a world government, free immigration, the renunciation of national passports, or global taxation etc. Others still would find its application problematic for not being as inclusive of certain communities as they would like, such as the LGBTQ+ community.

As with the oneness of humankind above, the notion of a normative foundational truth is equivalent, if we ponder the implications, with the assertion of a worldview, a metanarrative, or an ideology. If posited as a normative foundational truth, the principle of the oneness of humankind would then face the same types of issues the notion of 'democracy,' or that of 'globalization' (which is a term very closely related to the notion of the oneness of humankind, if we deeply pondered their separate meanings), are being confronted with. Let us take the notion of democracy, for example. Some would be against it, claiming it constitutes a form of imperialism (many other critiques are possible), others would claim only their version of democracy is true democracy and not others (socialist democracies, for example). In the end, there would be intense conflict and fragmentation even over the meaning attributed to the notion of democracy within the same democratic nation-state, as has been the case with the United States and many European states most recently, where democracy and multiculturalism have become very problematic terms. Although most Bahá'ís generally support the notion of democracy, well-known Bahá'í scholars have been extremely critical of Western liberal democracy, even though we live in an era in which the notion of democracy (and particularly, that of liberal democracy) is directly under threat.[35]

[35] Although the West has traditionally combined liberalism with empire, thus camouflaging its imperialism, to suggest that "liberal democracies inevitably devolve toward oppressive social relations" (Karlberg, p.184), that "the Western liberal project of modernity … has clearly revealed its inability to construct a just and inclusive social order" (p.147) or to maintain that fundamentalism and liberalism (and not excessive liberalism) are opposite poles and perspectives equally incompatible with Bahá'í thought and action, like Paul Lample did in 2009 in *Revelation and Social Reality* (pp.166-189) seems to me exaggerations and irresponsible in this context (To be fair to Paul Lample, his argument is relatively balanced otherwise, in many ways useful as an optic for a critique of Bahá'í culture, and somewhat more acceptable as it had been made during the period of the Iraq War. But nuances are important.) As far as I am aware, more complex perspectives on liberalism have been advanced in a series of seminars organized by the Center on Modernity in Transition in 2020-2021 (*The Liberal Imaginary and Beyond | COMIT | Center on Modernity in Transition*. https://comitresearch.org/speaker-series/liberal-imaginary-beyond/. Accessed 27 Mar. 2022.) and in a short essay from 2021 by Behrooz Sabet (Sabet, Behrooz. 'An Essay on the State of Liberalism by Dr. Behrooz Sabet'. *Fsb*, 24 Mar. 2022, https://fsb2017.wordpress.com/2022/03/24/an-essay-on-the-state-of-liberalism-by-dr-behrooz-sabet/.)

When it comes to implementation how would such an important foundational normative truth as the oneness of humankind translate into political, economic, cultural, and religious notions, standards and models? Would liberal democracy be an adequate expression of it or not? Would those proponents of the oneness of humankind who believe in some form of liberal democracy embrace those in favor of some type of socialist democracy, or would some prefer a different political option? What about anarchism – would that fit with this notion of the oneness of humankind and how? Would an ecumenical solution be found an acceptable expression of the principle of the oneness of humankind in the religious realm? The list of questions can go on and on. Let us now return to the notion of democracy. Do we believe that, in the current context, one overall definition of democracy can resolve the world's problems? Haven't we already tried to use the notion of democracy as a global metanarrative or ideology? Furthermore, how would the Bahá'í Faith employ such metanarratives differently and in a way that is recognized by science and philosophy? Essentially, is this the methodology for social change that we find delineated in the Bahá'í Writings?

I think this gives a sense of the issues that need to be considered when implying that a change of worldview through acceptance of normative foundational truths can bring unity of vision, remove conflict, and resolve the crises of global society.

Moreover, the principle of the oneness of humankind, like the principle of unity, could be weaponized to gain power or to establish and maintain control. It is likely that the notion will be abused in this way even in the Bahá'í community by unscrupulous characters who understand its power in obtaining allegiance from others and in silencing unwanted critiques. After all, the notion of unity has been used to centralize control and to oppress large sections of humankind for millennia. The same can be said about metanarratives. It is for reasons such as these that classical 'conflict' theorists like Mouffe cannot be sidelined or ignored.

On the other hand, a grid of knowledge and practice could emerge based on the centrality of the principle of the oneness of humankind. Such a grid would by necessity impose a certain regime of normativity associated with advancing certain theoretical assumptions and forms of practice that key institutions would value over others. Such a discursive formation (a discourse plus its affiliated practices) around the notion of the oneness of humankind might then tend to neglect, deprioritize, and maybe even silence (at least for the time being)

theoretical and practical aspects of the principle of the oneness of humankind that stray outside its main lines of interpretation and action (the intensity of such a set of tendencies would depend on how well elaborated, complex, consultative, and open to change such a discursive formation is). This is where Foucault's analysis of discursive formations can be extremely useful. From a Foucaldian perspective, the principle of the oneness of humankind is not a truth or a normative foundational truth but rather a notion always embedded in a discursive formation/s developed around it or which background/s it. There is a discourse of the oneness of humankind and a practice. I will try to give an imperfect example of this.[36] Rather than being recognized for what it was, racism has truly caught the attention of the Bahá'í community as a fundamental aspect of the principle of the oneness of humankind only after George Floyd's murder and the global awareness campaigns triggered by *Black Lives Matter*. It took a global wave of awareness doubled by the efforts of Black and Native American Bahá'ís to bring the theme into focus, despite the clear provisions on the issues of racial justice and racial unity provided by the notion of the oneness of humankind. The espousal of a principle as a value, it would seem, does little for social action if its conceptual content is not connected to the understanding of our immediate social reality and of structural issues in society. While trying to make up for lost time, anti-racism work in the Bahá'í community now faces a strong inertia because of how the notion of the oneness of humankind has been defined in North America in the past twenty years. During this time, the notion has been framed not so much in relation to the issues of racism, gender and class inequality, imperialism, and neo-colonization, but rather, in contradistinction to individualism, materialism and, especially, adversarialism – seen as the key cultural features of a Western liberalism and liberal democracy that must now be discarded (a perspective largely associated with Michael Karlberg). Even today when anti-racism discourses have picked up, the North American Bahá'í official discourse on racism is circumscribed within the paradigm of non-adversarialism. I have already highlighted some of the resulting limitations of this paradigm while discussing Karlberg's critique on 'agonism.' I will now expand on them slightly in order to show how a quasi-Foucaldian reading could be applied to the current discourse of the oneness of humankind. On the one hand, a loose section of the North American Bahá'í community wants to bring anti-racism training, race theories,

[36] Let it also be noted here that to position the notion of the oneness of humankind as a normative foundational truth is to produce or, rather in this case, to re-produce a particular discourse: that of ontological foundationalism.

postcolonial theories, decolonial theories and decolonization approaches – so forms for the critical interrogation of racism in both theory and practice – into the community. On the other hand, mainstream portions of Bahá'í community view such forms with suspicion through the lens of non-adversarialism:

"By extension, true justice and emancipation entail the realization in thought, action, and social structure of the oneness of humanity. … Many attempts to overcome injustice fall short of this realization by framing their efforts as struggles against specific populations, groups, organizations, or institutions that are identified as being the causes of oppression. As a result, they end up reproducing the structural root of injustice, which is the tearing apart of the oneness of humanity." (Palmer, p. 59)[37]

From this angle, such forms of critical interrogation are deemed to bring disunity through an emphasis on racial identity which distinguishes between different groups of believers – in particular, White, Black, Persian and Native Americans. White and Persian believers, in particular, tend to perceive such approaches as going against notions of 'oneness', meaning, against the Bahá'í principle of the oneness of humankind. This comes with the tendency to read such movements, approaches, and theories as not operating based on foundational normative truths like the oneness of humankind or justice, but rather, as illegitimate expressions of a will to amass power for specific racial groups (at the expense of the majority). These theories, movements, and approaches are therefore deemed to operate on a notion of power that is incompatible with the Bahá'í conceptual framework (and its notion of 'power') and to be directly responsible for instituting or exacerbating a 'culture of contest' in society. The oppressed become the problem and the problem is disunity. From the side of the oppressed, the tendency is to read such responses as instances of 'White fragility.' Not surprisingly then, quite a number of Bahá'í individuals and institutions officially working on advancing discourses on racial unity are caught between these two contradictory perspectives – some unaware of these internal contradictions, others partially aware but believing the right course of action is a moderate position between the two. While the search for a moderate position might produce interesting results over time, there is also a strong possibility that, at least for now, such an orientation might reinforce patterns of turning a blind eye to forms of

[37] Palmer, David. 'Religion, Spiritual Principles, and Civil Society'. Cameron, Geoffrey, and Benjamin Schewel (Eds.). *Religion and Public Discourse in an Age of Transition Reflections on Bahá'í Practice and Thought*, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2017, pp. 37–69. *Open WorldCat*, https://muse.jhu.edu/book/57468/.

oppression by prioritizing non-adversarialism over truth and justice, silence, or even silencing, over interrogation and critique, and non-action over forms of social action. Whatever our opinion on these matters, the discourse of the oneness of humankind and its practices at least in North America, I hope I have made it clear, are currently shaped by the paradigm of non-adversarialism (see previous subsection on *Agonism*) and by the notion of power that derives from it. Since a very similar discursive orientation in general lines has been adopted by the conservative forces aiming to preserve the status quo in Anglo-Saxon countries, one wonders about the extent to which non-adversarialism will be able to act as a force for social change and social justice given such a backdrop.

The principle of the oneness of humankind could yet become problematic in other unintentional ways. The way in which the principle of the oneness of humankind is employed might act as a mechanism for the social reproduction of elites, for maintaining Western hegemony (or the hegemony of some smaller cultural grouping), for obscuring and maintaining the class, race and gender inequalities already present in society etc., or even for creating new ones. The very discourse developed around the notion of the oneness of humankind as a normative foundational truth might create its own power dynamics and effects, potentially even claiming to be universal and absolute while being very contingent and contextual, and possibly even Western centric or Eurocentric.

To conclude with, simply attempting to replace the key values of science and philosophy, or what the people in the world believe in, with religious or normative foundational truths is not quite the solution some envisage it to be. It follows then that we must be extremely careful, flexible, and self-reflective in how we frame spiritual truths and in how we frame notions such as the oneness of humankind.

2) Theories that are anti-foundational place undue emphasis on different perspectives on truth and on particular social identities or markers such as race, gender, disability, sexual orientation etc. which can only result in disunity and the engendering of conflict both as an ontological theoretical premise and in practice. Such theories are power-seeking and are employing a problematic concept of power not compatible with the Bahá'í conceptual framework.

3) This is really a continuation of the above statement. Anti-foundationalists operate with a very problematic concept of power that must be rejected or resisted. According to Karlberg, power can be defined in negative or positive ways as either 'adversarialism' or 'mutualism.'

The concepts of 'power over' and 'balance of power' constitute 'adversarialism' while the concepts of 'power to' and 'power with' constitute 'assisted empowerment' and 'mutual empowerment.' 'Power to' denotes power as a capacity in individuals that needs to be nourished or assisted from the outside. 'Power with' manifests itself when people act "in a cooperative or mutualistic manner in the pursuit of a common goal." (p.58) The key claim here is that 'adversarialism' leads to oppressive structures (this includes both social structures and knowledge structures) while 'mutualism' leads to "emancipatory structures" (again, this refers to both social structures and knowledge structures). (p.105) The Bahá'í Faith, Karlberg argues, participates in the establishment of emancipatory structures by fostering a culture of empowerment on mutualistic lines.

There are many ways in which such claims could be vulnerable to the critiques that anti-foundationalists bring. Let us consider one example. One distinguishing characteristic of anti-foundationalist discourses is precisely their take on the concept of power. One argument they advance is that it is inefficient to focus analysis on only macro levels of power (such as 'power over' or 'balance of power') if what we are seeking is to challenge existing forms of oppression. Rather, it is at the micro-level of power, in schools, orphanages, youth care homes, hospitals, psychiatric institutions, prisons, and workplaces (or study circles, devotionals, chidren and junior-youth classes, 19 day feasts, summer-schools and conferences etc. if we are thinking of the Bahá'í community), and in any other institutions that construct and apply notions of normativity (spiritual assemblies, area teaching committees, regional councils, auxiliary boards etc. in relation to the Bahá'í community), that the subjectivity of individuals based on particular forms of power/knowledge is being inscribed. There are two observations here. The first is that it is through the 'assisted empowerment' of institutions that our selves are largely constructed. This happens without us having much say over that process until later in life. The second is that such 'constructions' of our subjectivity reproduce existing inequalities and forms of oppression and even create new ones. These forms of oppression associated with 'mutualism' are a lot more insidious also because they operate at the interface between our consciousness and subconsciousness. For example, my notion of a White male might have been constructed through a history curriculum which omitted those histories and historical aspects that would have challenged Western hegemony and White supremacy (slavery, colonization, decolonization, neo-colonialism). Or, my Bahá'í children, junior youth, and adult classes might have introduced a notion of the principle of the oneness of humankind that largely reflects the perspective above and which does not consider

race or racism a topic worthy of consideration. Or, Bahá'í scholarship might have operated with a notion of the oneness of humankind that is trapped in a nationalistic mindset and hence unable to recognize Shoghi Effendi's injunction that the principle refers primarily to the relations between nations - this omission effectively reinforcing nationalistic perspectives on key issues such as immigration and even Western hegemony or other forms of imperialism. Or, it could simply be that the way in which Bahá'í communities and institutions have constructed Bahá'í identity in social settings might be subconsciously occulting and reproducing class, race and gender forms of inequality, while also engendering social status competition and positioning. This precisely via the definitions, understandings and applications given to the notions of the oneness of humankind, power ('mutualism' and 'non-adversarialism'), consultation and cooperation (as directly opposed to the principle and practice of competition). In other words, and this is reflective of Foucault's perspective on power, 'mutualism' or 'constitutive power' (that is, 'power to' and 'power with') must be constantly scrutinized and critically examined, if one wishes to promote an emancipatory program (Foucault's theories, and this is what made them well-known, describe how such examination could proceed). Otherwise, we might find that what we believe to be the solution constitutes in fact the central obstacle to emancipation. This micro-level is where power operates largely unimpeded and most effectively. That this notion is not understood in Bahá'í scholarship and community life is a hugely problematic thing for anti-foundationalists who see in this a complete lack of self-reflexivity and an unwarranted attitude of entitlement behind which hide unacknowledged forms of oppression. From their perspective, such a blind spot immediately disqualifies any possible attempts to ascribe to Karlberg's concept of power (and to its conceptual framework) either the status of normative foundational truth or that of normative nonfoundational truth. The concept, they would argue, must either be revised or withdrawn from the conceptual framework.

4) That anti-foundationalists reject any kind of normative principles, that anti-foundationalists do not have any kind of normative principles (it is often omitted or unacknowledged that anti-foundationalism can also generate normative prescriptive truths even if these are not 'foundational' in the sense of existing independent of the observer, being objective features of reality, eternal, and so on) or that, if they do, their normative principles have no standing in comparison with normative foundational principles (see Karlberg's critiques of pragmatism, proceduralism and agonism).

The problem with a nucleus of knowledge that draws so heavily on a set of narrow premises is that it becomes largely identified with the first principle from which such premises derive. If this first principle has not been epistemologically, philosophically, or scientifically elaborated and justified, if it constitutes more a statement of belief and an unassailable given truth, then the tendency to judge other existing theories and schools of thought simply based on that statement of belief can easily materialize. The result, of course, is that all such schools of thought are found to be deficient and in fundamental need of adopting this very statement of belief, though the truth of it has neither been scientifically proven nor rationally (philosophically or epistemologically) or practically justified or elaborated. This is how the pull of ontological foundationalism makes itself present. Consider, for example, this final assessment of the Frankfurt School of critical theory (pp.175-176):

"In addition, because of its own materialist underpinnings, which results in a rejection of moral realism, the project of critical theory tends to lead once again to extreme normative relativism. **Ironically, this ends up undermining the entire project of critical theory, because the pursuit of justice has no real basis without commitment to a transcendent principle of justice.** Indeed, it is partly due to this normative incoherence that many social scientists continue to adopt positivist approaches. If there are no transcendent normative truths, positivism can appear as the only rational approach to the generation of knowledge about reality." (p.17)

Why would the statement that 'the pursuit of justice has no real basis without commitment to a transcendent principle of justice' be an acceptable one for a non-Bahá'í or someone not already committed to ontological foundationalism (such as those analytic philosophers asserting a strong foundationalism)? Such a critique might only work here if based on a particular type of religious faith or on a prior belief in strong foundationalism.

All in all, it is because of these different forms of imposition of value that one can assert that Karlberg's model seeks to transpose Bahá'í 'eternal verities' (as these are understood via ontological foundationalism) as foundational normative truths in the frameworks of science and philosophy.

Let us also remark here that the issues I have raised are simply based on interrogating the logic of Karlberg's arguments. In other words, we have not evaluated his arguments in light

of the thought of Karl Marx, Otto Neurath, Hilary Putnam, Seyla Benhabib, Jürgen Habermas, Ernesto Laclau or Chantal Mouffe. How such authors would respond to Karlberg's critique is another question altogether, which thinkers familiar with those traditions of thought, or the reader himself/herself, might consider giving thought to.

Nevertheless, as we ponder on these matters, we must remain mindful of the fact that the current evolving Bahá'í conceptual framework and Karlberg's attempt to reinterpret it through the lens of ontological foundationalism are two very distinct theoretical enterprises.

I.7. Conclusion to the First Answer

Our previous analysis has highlighted a number of issues in the general theoretical argument of the book.

1. The idea that foundational or nonfoundational premises can only be verified through the results of large-scale social implementation has been questioned from several perspectives:

a) Two arguments, theories or even philosophical systems are much easier to compare as theoretical formulations than as two large-scale social projects or, as is the case here, two social systems allegedly derived from such theories/philosophies. Furthermore, it would be necessary and simply good practice for such theoretical comparison to occur (via philosophical, epistemological and/or scientific evaluation) before attempting a verification of such theories through their implementation at large scale.

b) Two contrasting philosophical arguments, theories or systems do not measure each-other out only in the field of large-scale social application; in fact, it would be difficult to argue that they can ever be evaluated in such a manner because of the sheer complexity of the factors involved. Such dynamic complexity escapes scientific monitoring, overwhelms scientific evaluation, cannot usually ensure a basic standard of 'objectivity', and significantly transcends the actual body of theory because of the interference of factors external to that theory once application is pursued.

c) The assumption that the verification of theoretical premises via the evaluation of large-scale projects does not occur from amidst a particular theoretical perspective (located in general terms within one of the three traditions: foundationalism, nonfoundationalism or anti-foundationalism), but rather somehow, from a neutral and objective standpoint, is highly suspect without further elucidation of the methodology at play. In the case of strong foundationalisms like ontological foundationalism such biases might derive from the general notion that reality is and can be immediately perceived as it is, from an objective standpoint.

2. The claim that in the absence of any kind of possible verification (at least until the final results of long-term and large-scale implementation are made available) foundationalist premises are as plausible or as justified as (or equal to) anti-foundationalist premises has also been questioned.

Foundationalist premises have universal implications in a very concrete way. The bigger the claim the larger the burden of proof required. In addition, it is the constant failure to prove that values of any kind are objective and fundamental features of reality that has resulted in the widespread view that values cannot be objectively determined, or namely, that we cannot prove that they have real existence (although they might). This negative type of verification, repetition after repetition, combined with the terrible history of the past centuries associating strong foundationalism with the worst forms of oppression is another reason why it cannot be assumed that, in the absence of verification, foundationalist premises are as plausible as (or equal premises with) anti-foundationalist premises.

3. The suggestion that normative foundationalism and normative anti-foundationalism are indeed the very premises that are being compared (but with the balance tilted in favor of foundationalism during the interim period) has also been contested.

Foundationalism and anti-foundationalism can be seen as different systems of knowledge (such as religion and science, or analytical philosophy and continental philosophy), philosophical orientations (such as realism and idealism), epistemological methodologies, or even as a sort of classificatory framing used to differentiate between many types of philosophical, scientific, and even religious traditions. Due to their complexity, such categories are impossible to evaluate, or measure against each other, with any degree of objectivity. These systems of knowledge cannot and should not annihilate each other; it is

their tension and interaction that advances the process of knowledge. The idea that one system or orientation could invalidate the other, that only one of them can be the truth, is deeply problematic. Such an assumption from religious corners could be taken to imply a sort of Manicheist battle between the ontological foundationalist forces of religion and the forces of materialism represented by materialist thinkers and the philosophies of anti-foundationalists. Such dualistic gnosticism would imply one side has to win because only one of these systems can be true, and, therefore, good: either objective or normative foundational truths (and in this case, spiritual truths) exist or they do not. Another associated assumption here would be that the conceptual framework of the Bahá'í Faith, and in particular ontological foundationalism, represents the testing ground, the standard, and once implemented at scale at the level of social reality, the definite proof against any type of anti-foundationalism. The idea that the balance can be tilted in favor of one side or another during an interim period at the end of which a final determination would eventually take place implies the notion of a direct and final judgment.

4. Because foundational premises "cannot be fully assessed until significant numbers of people commit to them and translate them into social practices on a large scale so that future generations can offer their verdict with the benefit of hindsight", Karlberg (p.6) maintains that in the meantime, other compelling factors exist for embracing normative foundational truths or foundationalist premises.

The first of these is 'normative intuition' or 'rational faith' (or our 'innate moral sense'): "When faced with a set of equally rational theses founded on equally plausible premises, supported by equally reasonable interpretations of provisional evidence, intuition becomes our interim guide." (pp.6-7)

The second is a pragmatic type of reason that discerns the clear positive effects of applying normative foundational truths to social reality: "At best, *normative foundationalism* (or normative realism) and *normative anti-foundationalism* (or normative anti-realism) are equivalent and equally plausible premises at this time, neither of which yet warrants an extremely high degree of confidence. But when we consider how predictable the effects of applying or violating various normative principles are, it seems reasonable to conclude that the weight of initial evidence tilts in favor of normative foundationalism." (p.127)

Normative intuition and pragmatic reason, in other words, 'tilt the balance in favour of normative foundationalism' during the initial stages and throughout the interim period.

A certain conclusion to this line of thinking thus begins to emerge:

We have in front of us a set of foundational premises that cannot be examined or challenged until we have started to believe in them through recourse to our 'normative intuition' (and have accepted their usefulness through pragmatic thinking), have committed to translating them into social practices on a large scale, and this has been achieved to a considerable degree. There are obvious problems with the supporting arguments advanced here and the overall conclusions.

While intuition clearly plays a role in the process of knowledge and in the formulation and testing of premises this role is either subconscious or subsidiary to other criteria of logic and procedures of reason. Never can a premise be consciously advanced in the fields of science or philosophy (or even in the field of social action or development) simply on the criterion of intuition. Moreover, what is the rationale that Karlberg offers for accepting this criterion of 'normative intuition' or 'rational faith' as a central one in the process of knowledge during this indeterminate and likely never-ending interim period? While we can all agree that intuition exists, 'normative intuition' is a very different type of concept (namely, an intuition that apprehends 'normative foundational truths') that has not been backed up by any argument. What enables this 'normative intuition' to confirm foundationalist premises over anti-foundationalist ones until that moment when a full evaluation of the two sets can finally occur? Why would an intuitive premise that (certain) foundational normative truths exist, so in favor of foundationalism, be more valid than an intuitive premise that (such proposed) 'foundational normative truths' do not exist, so supporting anti-foundationalism? The simplicity of the answer should worry us: because this 'normative intuition' is the very innate capacity of man to acknowledge 'normative foundational truths', but this 'innate moral sense' or 'rational faith' has been inhibited in materialist and skeptical (anti-foundational) thinkers by their 'egoism':

"If we accept the premise that foundational normative truths exist, a compelling case can be made that human intuition, **when it is not clouded by ego or perverted in other ways**, is capable of some initial, rudimentary recognition of, and attunement to, such truths." (p.42)

"**In relation to normative intuition, egoism can be understood as a form of ignorance, or irrationalism, characteristic of the untrained mind**. … Egoistic tendencies, it seems, can be transcended through the development of altruistic qualities. **It can thus be argued that efforts to quiet the ego through the development of altruistic qualities helps attune the faculty of intuition with foundational normative truths**. Let us refer to this outcome as the development of the capacity for *normative discernment*." (p.63)

What is potentially on display here is an extraordinary sense of moral entitlement. This stance implies that anti-foundational intellectuals are somehow morally deficient. It asserts that their failure to accept and adhere to foundational normative truths is a moral failure and that their mindset of relativism is, therefore, morally unhealthy. This stance is not dissimilar from the view of fellow collaborator Todd Smith[38] that "the habit of falling into relativism" (min.23) is one of the "habits of mind that are particularly detrimental and that actually serve to perpetuate certain crises that humanity is facing or certain conditions that are not conducive to our advancement". (min.4) What can be observed here is that the argument in favor of the key role of intuition in acknowledging normative foundational truths is not a philosophical, scientific, or epistemological one, but at best, a religious and mystical one. There is an assumption here that we can apprehend normative foundational truths through some kind of innate and divine capacity to directly perceive spiritual truths as they are, meaning, as eternal and independent features of reality. We have an innate moral sense that simply captures normative foundational truths, like the radio catches a radio station, unless some interference (egoism, in this case) occurs. Fundamentally, then, this innate capacity transcends reason.

The notion of a 'pragmatic reason' that Karlberg advances is equally problematic:

[38] "Cultivating Transformative Habits of Mind" is a presentation given by Dr. Todd Smith at the 2020 Grand Canyon Bahá'í Conference (held online). Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IYiGKSunwfc

"But when we consider how predictable the effects of applying or violating various normative principles [normative foundational principles] are, it seems reasonable to conclude that the weight of initial evidence tilts in favor of normative foundationalism." (p.127)

In constructing his argument this way, Karlberg seems indeed unable or unwilling to recognize that anti-foundationalism can also generate normative (prescriptive) truths even if these are not 'foundational' in the sense of existing independent of the observer, being objective features of reality, eternal, and so on. His truth-claim that the application of normative truths to social reality tilt the balance in favor of normative foundationalism rests entirely on this strange conception: that anti-foundationalists reject any kind of normative principles or that their normative principles have no standing in comparison with normative foundational principles. Anti-foundationalists, however, do not reject the importance of normative principles in social affairs (quite on the contrary); they simply argue these are socially constructed and contingent, rather than objective, universal and eternal truths. The one-sidedness of this argument in favor of pragmatic reason as the crucial element that can tilt the balance in favor of normative foundationalism is simply baffling. If you don't consider at all normative principles that are not 'foundational' then, of course, normative foundational truths win the day. The normative principles Karlberg mentions above could equally be normative nonfoundational principles, like a nonfoundational principle of justice. And Karlberg has not explained why such normative nonfoundational principles do not matter, or indeed, why the effects on reality of principles claimed to be normative foundational truths can only be positive and never negative. There is an assumption here than when we assess the effects of normative foundational truths, we possess some kind of divine or unerring rational knowledge about what such normative foundational truths are like and how they can be identified and, also, an objective and transcendental kind of reason that can neutrally distinguish between the validity of foundational and nonfoundational normative truths based on the assessment of their effects on social reality.

To sum it up, a set of subtle and possibly subconscious assertions are on display here to which we must give some thought:

1. that we possess some kind of innate moral sense and divine or transrational capacity of intuition to, in some measure, directly perceive spiritual truths as they are, meaning, as

eternal and independent features of reality (this capacity would also seemingly distinguish between normative foundational principles and nonfoundational ones).

2. that we also possess some kind of divine or unerring rational knowledge about what such normative foundational truths are (how to select them, what constitutes them) and how to objectively assess the validity of (foundational and nonfoundational) normative truths based on their effects on social reality.

3. at times what seems to emerge is a framework of dualistic gnosticism implying a sort of Manicheist battle between the ontological foundationalist forces of religion and the forces of materialism represented by materialist thinkers and the philosophies of anti-foundationalists. This dualistic gnosticism implies that one side has to win because only one of these systems (foundationalism and anti-foundationalism) can be true, and, therefore, good: either objective or normative foundational truths (and in this case, spiritual truths) exist, can be known objectively and can guide social reality in a foundational way, or they do not. Another associated assumption is that the conceptual framework of the Bahá'í Faith, and in particular its ontological foundationalism, represents the testing ground, the standard, and once implemented at scale at the level of social reality, the definite proof against any type of anti-foundationalism. Moreover, it is through the assertion of this religious type of ontological foundationalism that the Bahá'í Faith and scholarship will expose and revise the very defective intellectual foundations of Western civilization.

It is difficult to argue that the general argument Karlberg puts forward is distorted only by the strong pull (or bias) of ontological foundationalism. Has a reading of the Bahá'í Writings produced such a line of thinking solely because of the standpoint of ontological foundationalism? Or, has indeed, the standpoint of a strong foundationalism been chosen because it was deemed to correspond best to a particular and prior understanding of the Bahá'í Writings? If this was the case we would then have to ask what this type of understanding is and why it would appear to generate such narrow and reductionist arguments but still be able to assert itself as a main discourse. Or has this marriage of perspectives been caused, maybe, by a particular analysis of social-cultural change that draws heavily on perspectives from outside the Bahá'í Faith, such as strands of analytical philosophy and of Western conservative thought? Karlberg's assessment of Thomas Seung's perspective, which can be taken to mirror his own, seems to capture well this last possibility:

"*In Intuition and Construction: The Foundation of Normative Theory*, Seung argues that the modern world is in a state of crisis due to the widespread rejection of any ontological or transcendent basis for normative agreement, along with the consequent adoption of purely relativistic theories of social constructivism." (pp.154-155)

This perspective is clearly central to thinkers like Todd Smith, Karlberg, and others, and gaining more and more traction in the Bahá'í community. But is that really the chief reason for the current state of crisis in our modern world? Does this particular theory (and the methodology associated with it) adequately reflect the philosophy of socio-cultural change and the methodology for social change outlined in the Bahá'í Writings? I leave these questions with the reader.

Whatever the case, this marriage of Bahá'í thought with ontological foundationalism severely distorts the arguments which underpin Karlberg's conceptual model. Can such a theory be conceptualized as 'a middle point between foundationalism and antifoundationalism,' considering the bias present in the general argument of the book and in the critique of Western philosophical traditions?

The unfounded (lacking a coherent rational basis) arguments in favor of intuition and pragmatic reason as ways of confirming the validity of foundationalist premises over anti-foundationalist ones are central to Karlberg's overall model. It is because of these capacities of intuition and pragmatic reason that we are expected to accept certain foundational normative truths and make the huge commitment to collectively apply them at large-scale over one or several generations. The unfounded conviction in these key elements of his conceptual model, as well as the strong biases affiliated with his ontological foundationalism, undermine the legitimacy of his model, and throw into question the statement that "he [Karlberg] seems to be very clear about the lack of capacity for his model to offer conviction in foundational truths." This assessment stands despite his assertions that no final determinations can be made until the validity of competing premises has been verified through the social implementation of such premises at large scale.

In the end, what we are asked to do is to accept certain normative foundational truths based on faith, an argument which goes well outside the frameworks of science, philosophy and of

fields of practice such as those of social action, social transformation, or development. Furthermore, this faith is expected to reflect a particular religious perspective (that of the Bahá'í Faith), as this has been reinterpreted through the prism of ontological foundationalism. Through the notions of intuition and pragmatic reason and the claims advanced around them we notice an interesting fact. The commitment that Karlberg requires of his wide audience of individuals and institutions engaged in the many fields relevant to the theme of social transformation is very much the same type of commitment a religion would demand of its followers, if functioning on the basis of ontological foundationalism: to simply believe in and take for granted as objective and essential features of reality a set of given foundational premises that are religious in origin; and this, to the extent of committing to translate them into social reality at large-scale and across generations.

As it happens, this is exactly how Karlberg characterizes the work of the Bahá'í community in his chapter on "Bahá'í Discourse and Practice':

"By 2005, the House of Justice announced that the insights into community building that had accrued through these global learning processes had 'crystallized into a framework for action' that could be pursued throughout the Bahá'í world with confidence. … At the heart of this process is an effort to learn how to translate spiritual principles into social practice – **or how to increase the embodiment of normative truths in social reality** – by constructing new patterns of community life." (p.93)

In another place, a similar pronouncement is made with respect to religious communities in general: "When religious communities strive to apply 'spiritual principles' to the betterment of humanity, **they are contributing to the embodiment of normative truths in the construction of social reality**." (p.66)

Of course, by 'normative truths' Karlberg means 'normative foundational truths' which is indeed the concept which the notion of 'embodiment' presupposes (I will examine the notion of 'the embodiment of normative truths' in the second part of this paper). Both notions ('normative foundational truths' and their 'embodiment'), it must be noticed, help Karlberg redefine the conceptual framework and methodology for social change of the Bahá'í Faith (and of any religion) in the direction of ontological foundationalism. This is very subtle but still an essential shift.

Two other related problems surface here:

Problem 1:

Suppose we frame Karlberg's argument in reverse. What does Karlberg effectively say? He urges us to accept his foundational premises and to commit to implementing them in social action as large-scale projects across generations (if anyone has watched or read Isaac Asimov's 'Foundation' that, in a sense, might also be the sort of generational large-scale project being envisaged here).

It is not clear where these foundational premises have arrived from. In a sense, they are just a given, they have dropped down from the ether. Well, no, there is a justification for them, they are, or might be, divine or religious truths (although how that has been determined or what exactly these religious truths mean in philosophical/sociological terms it is not clear). The point is one must accept them as premises.

Why would anyone want to accept such premises based on this argumentation? Of course, this might work if someone is religious and accepts the type of Bahá'í spirituality Karlberg has to offer. But otherwise, people and, especially schools of thought or practice, tend to have their own systems of value and thought where specific premises are ascertained, generated, investigated independently, and based on quite complex forms of justification and reasoning. Imitation is not really a reason for accepting to operate based on someone's else premises, which is why this kind of imitation is so comprehensively shunned in the Bahá'í Writings. In fact, such imitation, as well as deriving premises (or truth-claims) for large-scale social projects primarily on the basis of intuition, can be considered to undermine the principle of the harmony of science and religion.

On the other hand, it is not like foundational premises and anti-foundational premises have not already been activated in the world. On the contrary, both have been active for a long time and are deeply embedded elements of the systems of value and thought in our societies. So why should I change or discard my values for yours? Is this request being advanced based on reason? Are we talking about philosophical or scientific reasoning here?

No, one should do so because such foundational premises or spiritual truths as proposed cannot generally fail to be recognized by our innate moral sense or intuition (if active) or by our reasoned evaluation of their likely positive effects on reality. As argued before, the first claim takes the form of a transrational or mystical argument while the second constitutes a flawed argument. Because of this bias surrounding the notions of 'innate moral sense'/'intuition' and pragmatic reason what this overall exercise results in is the subtle or not so subtle (depending on the observer) imposition of values. Not the imposition of any values but of the values advanced by a particular type of religious conceptual framework (that of the Bahá'í Faith), as it has been re-interpreted through the lens of ontological foundationalism.

Now let's that turn that argument in reverse. Why wouldn't Karlberg or the ABS or the Bahá'í Faith simply agree to intuitively operate on the particular anti-foundational premises of some other school of thought or movement and commit to constructing large-scale projects based on such premises as a matter of testing them?

Well, and here is the thing, one would only dare to advance such a grand proposal if they were really convinced (to the point of being certain) that their particular premises (foundational or relating to foundationalism, in this case) are significantly better than those of others (anti-foundational or relating to anti-foundationalism, in this case).

Problem 2:

The argument of the book is that Karlberg proposes a set of foundational premises and recommends these be simultaneously adopted at the level of schools of thought (see chapter 5), and also, in practice, through the implementation of large-scale social projects. These premises are arguably inspired from the Bahá'í Writings and the experience of the Bahá'í community, although they also appear as Karlberg understands them, meaning, framed by his ontological foundationalism.

The issue here is that neither large-scale social projects nor complex argumentation can develop from only a few foundational premises. Similarly, the foundational premises Karlberg talks about do not exist in separation, as if suspended in ether. They are part of the conceptual framework of the Bahá'í Faith, as this has been mirrored by Karlberg's own line of thinking. In that sense, they cannot be disconnected or dissociated from each other or from

the whole. This is particularly true if proper philosophical engagement is to proceed from them or if a large-scale social project is supposed to mirror them. The problem here is obvious. Although what is being proposed is a set of foundational premises what is being offered is the conceptual framework of either Karlberg or the Bahá'í Faith (or both). This is important because such conceptual frameworks reflect a religious system of belief and, at least in terms of Karlberg's understanding, they are also equivalent with ontological foundationalism. In that sense, what is being asked is that another party adopt a different system of belief (and not just a premise) for an indeterminate period and build on its foundations, both theoretically and in terms of large-scale social projects, in order to verify its truth and efficacy over time. This can also be deemed to constitute a somewhat subtle imposition of values.

These types of problems are the reason why it is hard to envisage the ontological foundationalism of Karlberg as 'a middle point between foundationalism and antifoundationalism.' A middle point methodology would not seek, consciously or subconsciously, to impose the values of foundationalism or any values in fact.

This imposition of values is not simply one between different persons or between one individual conscience and another. It concerns the many academic disciplines and fields of practice highlighted in the preamble as relating to the themes of social transformation, social action, and development. While the principle of the freedom and diversity of thought in the academia allows for a broad diversity of theories and intellectuals, from the superficial, quirky and the quixotic to the brilliant or the wise, this is not the case with the fields of practice that are our focus here. Strange theories or claims are allowed to exist in the academia because value is being attributed to diversity and weaker theories or claims simply do not attract much attention in such an environment, but might nevertheless stimulate it. On the other hand, the imposition of values is, without a doubt, one of the most sensitive, if not the most sensitive issue, in the fields of social action, social transformation, development and development education.

Finally, it is because of these forms of imposition of value that one can assert that Karlberg's model seeks to transpose Bahá'í 'eternal verities' as foundational normative truths in the frameworks of science and philosophy (and of different fields of practice).

Furthermore, it should be clear here that even when the audience is just the Bahá'í community the assertion of Bahá'í normative principles (foundational or not) must be accompanied by forms of rational justification. Abizadeh discusses this at length in his article *Because Baha'u'llah said so: Dealing with a non-starter in moral reasoning*. His conclusion is of relevance here:

"So to determine the basis for the Bahá'í position on some question in ethics, one must consider Bahá'í ethical theory as a whole, and justify the position in those terms, and not in terms of the divine say-so. What is more, given the Bahá'í principle of the harmony of science and religion, and that religion must be scientific in its method, the Bahá'í position must be interpreted in light of some background knowledge gleaned from the natural and social sciences."[39]

The following statement from 'Abdu'l-Bahá[40] confirms Abizadeh's take on moral reasoning:

"Consider what it is that singles man out from among created beings, and makes of him a creature apart. Is it not his reasoning power, his intelligence? Shall he not make use of these in his study of religion? I say unto you: weight carefully in the balance of reason and science everything that is presented to you as religion. If it passes this test, then accept it, for it is truth! If, however, it does not so conform, then reject it, for it is ignorance!"

In times such as these we must ask ourselves difficult questions. Why do we tend to subvert the principle of the harmony of science and religion precisely at the same time as we promote it as a fundamental element of the conceptual framework guiding the activities of the Bahá'í Faith? And is such an occurance caused by the strong pull of ontological foundationalism? Or to state this bluntly, doesn't this observed imposition of values occur precisely because of the belief in certain absolute or objective truths, or in 'normative foundational truths' as Karlberg calls them? Isn't at work here a particular conception that since we happen to know what the absolute or foundational truths of reality are, promoting such truths far and wide, including in the academic disciplines and fields of practice (like those of development and social transformation), constitutes the best methodology for changing or transforming the

[39] *Because Baha'u'llah Said So*. https://bahai-library.com/abizadeh_moral_reasoning. Accessed 14 Mar. 2022.
[40] *Bahá'í Reference Library - Paris Talks, Pages 141-146*. https://reference.bahai.org/en/t/ab/PT/pt-45.html. Accessed 14 Mar. 2022.

world? Surely, one could argue, if everyone accepted them, the world would be a much better place. Here might lie a most significant flaw and temptation in any version of foundationalism and one which would bear some likeness to the narrow tendencies of a more fundamentalist kind: to take for granted in literal manner certain principles or truths and centre on their promotion and adoption as absolute values rather than focus on their investigation and on how such principles can be, first and foremost, rationally identified, legitimized and justified within and outside one's religious community.

5. The implied claim that foundational and anti-foundational premises cannot be interrogated on the plane of philosophical or epistemological reasoning (because "equally rational arguments based on equally plausible premises yield different lines of logic that lead to divergent conclusions" etc.) has also been contested.

This dismissal of the role of reason constitutes in my view the most far-reaching element in Karlberg's overall argument. This is part of the reason why Karlberg's stance on how to assess foundational and non-foundational premises against each other adopts the specific transrational and mystical form given to it in his book. I would in fact argue that to a large extent, it is precisely on the territories of philosophy and epistemology (and of the other academic disciplines related to the theme of social transformation) that the initial arguments in support of such premises (foundational or anti-foundational) should be first evaluated. Premises do not live in the ether, neither they do fall from on high in the pure form of truth, like clear-cut or distinct objects. If these premises are derived from the Bahá'í Writings or from any Sacred Text, they exist not in the ether and in a pure and separated form, but as threads and patterns of a textual structure of great complexity. In other words, any such premises require hermeneutical exegesis both in terms of how they are selected from within a very holistic[41] text and in terms of how their significance as premises is justified through reason (these two processes are in fact inseparable). This aspect is missing in Karlberg's theoretical model. There is no work being done in relation to the specific premises or the general notion of premise being advanced. Because there is no elaboration, there can be no epistemological or philosophical verification: there is nothing to verify. Because there is no elaboration, no real interpretative grid or conceptual framework can be constituted. The

[41] Holistic = "characterized by the belief that the parts of something are intimately interconnected **and explicable only by reference to the whole**." Definition from "Oxford Languages" (Oxford English Dictionary).

theoretical grid or conceptual framework that emerges is largely identical with a single statement of belief: that absolute, normative foundational truths exist, that they are clearly transparent to us, and their assertion and acceptance is fundamental to our forms of knowing and social order. This unproven statement then becomes a first principle from which other subsidiary principles derive and which colours all other elements. Insofar as this inchoate conceptual framework has not yet been elaborated in the languages of philosophy, epistemology, ethics, and social sciences, it remains as it started: a statement of belief equivalent with the ontological foundationalism of Karlberg. Moreover, this lack of elaboration and theoretical development results in all major Western schools of thought being assessed through this narrow grid as deficient for the same reason, namely, for not accepting that normative foundational truths exist. Bias creeps in because of the strong pull of ontological foundationalism. Exemplary is this final assessment of the Frankfurt School of critical theory (pp.175-176):

"In addition, because of its own materialist underpinnings, which results in a rejection of moral realism, the project of critical theory tends to lead once again to extreme normative relativism. **Ironically, this ends up undermining the entire project of critical theory, because the pursuit of justice has no real basis without commitment to a transcendent principle of justice.** Indeed, it is partly due to this normative incoherence that many social scientists continue to adopt positivist approaches. If there are no transcendent normative truths, positivism can appear as the only rational approach to the generation of knowledge about reality." (p.176)

Until now, we have examined in depth both the general argument of the book (intuition, pragmatic reason, equal premises, no verification possible except after large-scale implementation) and how a critique of the main Western schools of philosophy has been advanced from the standpoint of ontological foundationalism.

Piece by piece I have shown that the general argument of the book can be called into question. Moreover, I have revealed it as supported at times by forms of bias. Similarly, I have shown that the critique of Western philosophy being advanced from the position of ontological foundationalism tends to undermine itself. In fact, it would be only fair to say that the traditions of pragmatism and, especially proceduralism, shine even brighter after such

evaluation, while some of the positive insights of agonism (or lessons to be learned from it) have not yet been explored.

All in all, it is because of these forms of imposition of value, present both at the level of the general argument (intuition, pragmatic reason, equal premises, no verification possible except after large-scale implementation) and in terms of the critique of Western thought being advanced, that one is justified in concluding that Karlberg's model seeks to transpose Bahá'í 'eternal verities' as foundational normative truths in the frameworks of science and philosophy. Since this imposition of values and the forms of bias that come with it are expressions of the strong pull of ontological foundationalism the resulting conceptual model cannot be considered to occupy 'a middle point between foundationalism and antifoundationalism.'

Bahá'í scholarship has oftentimes displayed this general tendency to impose or transpose spiritual truths into the frameworks of philosophy, science, and social action. This is not new. It stems from a lack of development in the field of scholarship. What is new from around the year 2016 onward is the addition of a feature which brings it acceleration and momentum, creating a new kind of general direction. This added feature has been the notion that spiritual truths should be accepted as "normative foundational truths" (namely, as absolute, and supreme ontological principles) by scientists, philosophers, and practitioners alike. This is to put the cart before the horse, in my opinion. If anything, scientists, philosophers, and practitioners alike should be allowed to explore reality in search of any kind of normative principles they might find, and not be asked to submit to any such ontological commitments in advance (be these theological or associated with some branch of analytical philosophy). The role of religion is to point to domains of inquiry or realms of existence or ways of thought and action that might have been neglected, and in general to provide an enlightening example of how unbiased research can be produced by integrating science and religion. Religion must also show how spirituality or morality should be expressed in action and remain a key consideration in all walks of life. It should offer dynamic forms of ethical living (which, it should be clear, presuppose unbiased and competent thought) that can inspire. The power of religion is not to set absolute truths for everyone (here postmodernist and postcolonial as well as race, gender and queer studies thinkers might be of assistance in helping us transcend ancient religious habits and reflexes), but to inspire through the power of example. If its values and meanings are going to spread into the global society this will be

by dispersion through the power of example and not through the imposition of values. In other words, others will make the independent choice to consider the importance of such values and meanings for themselves because they are attracted to the dynamic ethical forms of living and the new forms of knowledge that embody them. There are no shortcuts here. Dynamic ethical living must be cultivated and true rigorous thought of great creative power, and free of bias, must be developed. Both must be holistic as this approach is the sign of spirituality and the necessary kind of answer to the problems of our time. True ethical living and the creation of new knowledge require freedom, open spaces, constant experimentation with no fear of failure and most importantly, constant dialogue, critical thought, and forms of self-reflexivity at the level of the individual, of institutions, and of the community. In the absence of critical engagement, evaluation, and self-reflexivity glaring weaknesses will not be spotted and no ordering of value or refining of existing contributions will take place. The idea that we know what the essentials of the Bahá'í Revelation are and what they mean, or that we have the absolute truth, is the most dangerous obstacle at this juncture in the development of the Bahá'í community as far as I am concerned. And here, let us be clear, unbiased, rigorous, rational, free, creative, complex, and holistic thought is the trademark of spirituality. At the most basic level, thought largely free of bias and reductionism is the necessary and ideal expression of spirituality in our times, but this cannot be achieved in isolation, without collaboration and consultation in an environment in which critique, debate, a diversity of perspectives, and most importantly mistakes and failures, are actively encouraged.

In the end, no matter how much we appreciate (as I do) Karlberg's efforts to clarify aspects of Bahá'í thought and practice, we need to remain mindful of a simple fact: that the current evolving Bahá'í conceptual framework and Karlberg's attempt to reinterpret it through the lens of ontological foundationalism are two very distinct theoretical enterprises. Obviously, one should be mindful of such distinctions in relation to any author operating in the field of Bahá'í scholarship.

I am grateful here to Michael Karlberg for his broad overview, for his section on *The Normative Discourse on Religion* (which is my favourite), and for raising very important questions. How should we identify and understand the spiritual principles of the Bahá'í Faith? How should we relate to them in terms of our ethics and how should we translate them into forms of social action? What is the usefulness of viewing them as ontological truths? In

what manner should they be understood as ontological truths? How would this impact our ethics and efforts at social transformation? How do we develop normative discourses in all key areas of life, including within the domain of religion? Should we develop normative discourses only on the basis of normative foundational truths? What should be the Bahá'í methodology for social change? I have tried to provide some tentative answers to such questions in the second part of this paper, though these issues remain largely unresolved and open for discussion. Ultimately, Matthew Weinberg's (p.212) observations for the field of development are pertinent to any field of inquiry or practice:

"Determining how spiritual precepts and perspectives can be fully integrated into the theory, practice, and assessment of development is no easy task. Much research and learning lies ahead."[42]

Second Answer

The first answer has focused on the general argument of Karlberg's book. This section explores the method of "consultative epistemology" (p.15) that Karlberg sees as reconciling the tensions between "truth and relativity, knowledge and power, science and religion." (p.VIII) Such sequencing was necessary because the methodology put forward by Karlberg mirrors the general argument of the book.

[42] Weinberg, Matthew. 'Contributions to International Development Discourse: Exploring the Roles of Science and Religion'. Cameron, Geoffrey, and Benjamin Schewel (Eds.) *Religion and Public Discourse in an Age of Transition* Reflections on Bahá'í Practice *and Thought*, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2017, pp. 191–219. *Open WorldCat*, https://muse.jhu.edu/book/57468/.

Before proceeding, let us acknowledge that the methodology proposed by Karlberg is a revised version of the "consultative epistemology" outlined by Smith and Karlberg back in 2009.[43] The revisions are twofold. First the notion of 'attunement' to truths is redefined. Second, a new notion, that of "the relative embodiment of normative truths in the construction of social reality" is being added. (Karlberg p.31)

I. Attunement and the Scientific Method

I.1. Is Attunement without a Phenomenon still Attunement?

In their article from 2009, Smith and Karlberg (p.78) describe the notion of 'attunement' as follows:

"In all of the cases described above, we refer to this relationship between a paradigm and a phenomenal aspect as the relative attunement between the two. Attunement, as we define the term, refers to the goodness-of-fit between a specific paradigm (or specific paradigmatic insight) and a specific phenomenal aspect. For instance, the Ptolemaic paradigm of a geocentric solar system appears to have less attunement to orbital relationships within our solar system than the Copernican paradigm of a heliocentric solar system. As a result of the relative attunement between different paradigms and different phenomenal aspects, some paradigmatic truth claims appear to represent certain features of reality more accurately than do other paradigmatic truth claims."[44]

The notion of (relative) attunement, therefore, presupposes two things: a specific phenomenon and a paradigm lens that seeks to yield insights into it. The question that we must ask is what kind of phenomena are we talking about here? Smith and Karlberg (p.78) give two kinds of examples: a natural or physical phenomenon such as the orbital relationships within our solar system or a social phenomenon such as "the conditions that inhibit social and economic development among impoverished communities in a given region."

[43] Todd Smith and Michael Karlberg. *Articulating a Consultative Epistemology*. 2009, https://bahai-library.com/smith_karlberg_consultative_epistemology. Accessed 15 Mar. 2022.
[44] *Idem.*

The specific phenomenon the notion of attunement presupposes, therefore, is essentially one with material, even measurable features. This is obvious in the case of natural phenomena. As for the conditions inhibiting the social and economic advancement of a community, Smith and Karlberg (p.77) stress that different measurable aspects can be identified: "strong empirical evidence that the education and empowerment of females" is a key factor, but also "technical challenges that may be related to water purification needs in the region, or ecological constraints that may apply to specific agricultural practices in the region." Karlberg (p.19) revises this approach by moving attunement away from the notion of a specific observable phenomenon and connecting it with the notion of normative foundational truths.

He does so by claiming that principles of physics, like the notion of gravity, are just like normative foundational truths. Attunement, we remember, refers to "the goodness-of-fit between a specific paradigm (or specific paradigmatic insight) and a specific phenomenal aspect." However, Karlberg does not explain how the law of gravity is just like a normative foundational truth, beyond the fact that our knowledge of the law of gravity is progressive and not fixed. And this is where a strong objection can be made that normative foundational truths are not like the phenomenon which the laws of gravity proposed by different conceptual systems (of Newton, or of Einstein) seek to describe. To assume that normative foundational truths are phenomena of this kind, or to substitute the first for the second, is to assume a disruption or an expansion in the scientific method that is of significant proportions, and which has not been accounted for.

Gravity (or, rather, the phenomenon described by this scientific notion) might be alike to love in mystical literature (and even in reality, but at an ontological level which we cannot comprehend), but they are not the same type of referent in terms of our current scientific method (or philosophical method). The mathematical equations for gravity would be of little guidance in the matters of love, though poets have convincingly argued (poetically and not scientifically) that the structure of language is like the structure of matter. Of course, one could argue that there is a higher law that gets expressed as love in the human realm, attraction in the animal kingdom and as gravity in the physical realm – but this is to presuppose a transcendent reality beyond the observable phenomena. In such a case, a normative foundational truth's claim and validity would only be supported by it being posited as spiritual or transcendent truth. This is not what we currently understand by the

phenomenon of gravity in the field of science. That is so because the love between me and you functions in a different register than the gravitational pull between different celestial bodies. The first is at the level of consciousness and its very subjective states, while the second is at the level of material bodies and quite objectively measurable.

The phenomenon the law of gravity seeks to describe can be taken to constitute a feature of reality independent of the existence of men or of their knowledge of such a reality. This property is what would make the law of gravity a foundational truth for Karlberg.
Can we, through material means, prove that the same applies for normative foundational truths? What is truth, justice, equality, compassion, human dignity, or the oneness of humankind (these are referred to as examples of normative foundational truths by Karlberg on pages 25, 42, 62 and 203) without human beings?

My first objection here, therefore, is this: that normative foundational truths are not such phenomena as those which the methodology of 'consultative epistemology' has originally been set to explore. Therefore, the notion of 'attunement' cannot apply to them. For this reason, Karlberg redefines the notion of 'attunement' entirely. Attunement no longer refers 'to the goodness-of-fit between a specific paradigm (or specific paradigmatic insight) and a specific phenomenal aspect', but rather, to "a useful way to conceptualize the relationship between truth claims and foundational truths." (p.18) However, what is lost through this redefinition is exactly that type of referent that made the use of the scientific method possible. With this move, Karlberg moves 'attunement' outside the operations of the scientific method altogether. Karlberg is at least partly aware of this problem and attempts to address it on pages 26-30. However, this redefinition of attunement seems to also collapse the very concept itself. Attunement was to the phenomenon (as an increasing fitness between a specific paradigm and a specific phenomenon) not to the truth of reality or a foundational truth.

What do I mean by that? The law of gravity, or 'gravity' the term itself, is just an interpretation of a phenomenon based on a specific paradigm. Behind that phenomenon sits the truth of the reality of that phenomenon, but this essence remains hidden. The law of gravity or the term 'gravity' does not capture the foundational truth of that phenomenon, because with a different paradigm we might have a completely new law or term to describe that underlying phenomenon. Nevertheless, the phenomenon is still there, and we believe our

scientific paradigm captures features of that phenomenon that cannot be completely separated and independent from its essence. However, if there is no phenomenon how can you get any type of access to the essence? If this essence is completely hidden, how can you know you are attuning to it? If this essence is completely hidden, how can you posit, identify, and name a normative foundational truth there to start with? Indeed, all that happens is that there is a fit between an interpretation and a phenomenon under investigation, and when there is no such phenomenon not even such interpretation or interpretative fit (meaning attunement) can take place. Which begs the question, without such phenomena, how do normative foundational truths come into the picture?

I.2. Searching for a Way to Justify Attunement via the Scientific Method. Three Arguments in Favour of Normative Foundational Truths as the Basis for the Consultative Epistemology of Karlberg: Ontological Assumptions, Moral Qualities, and Intuition

Karlberg (pp.25-26) is at least partly aware of these problems:

"Therefore, let's proceed on the premise that the natural sciences can make relative progress toward attunement to truth in all these ways, in a cumulative manner, over time. It is not obvious, however, that this premise should be adopted in relation to the study of social phenomena that have normative dimensions. … But is this a rational, or valid, way to think about constructing social reality?"

The arguments Karlberg advances in support of his redefinition of 'attunement' are not about how this re-envisaging still meets the criteria of the scientific method but rather about how the scientific method itself is unknowingly suffused with assumptions about ontology (which act as underlying ontological premises for complex theories) and with moral imperatives or qualities necessary to regulate the behaviour of scientists (moral values such as curiosity, honesty and integrity are considered normative foundational truths by Karlberg). In addition, and this is one of the most important claims to Karlberg's overall argument, the scientific method is also heavily reliant on intuition. The argument then goes if the scientific method operates on ontological premises that have never been examined, why cannot we consciously introduce some new ontological premises in the same manner, leaving them unexamined for the time being? Equally, why cannot we accept some new ontological premises just on the basis of intuition?

Karlberg (p.28) then gives an example of such unexamined ontological premises: “Indeed, the entire enterprise of science ultimately rests on assumptions that the universe has an underlying material order, that this order is governed by laws or principles of some kind, and that human minds can gain insight into these laws or principles to some degree by applying the right methods over time.”

This argument is problematic firstly because it assumes that such assumptions are a matter of choice; namely, that they were selected over others that could have been chosen instead, when in fact such assumptions are fundamental to the process of knowing and might even be part and parcel of the innate categories of thought in man, at least at the level of assuming an order or structure in what can be known. If the world we see has no order, has no laws or principles of some kind, and these cannot be understood by the human mind, how could one hold any picture of reality at all? Furthermore, these need not have been ontological assumptions to start with, as order in the material universe is empirically verifiable: day succeeds night, seasons succeed seasons, etc. On the other hand, if they are to be considered assumptions, these are assumptions without which no knowledge would be possible: they are assumptions of the most general kind without which no form of science can develop. Karlberg makes the mistake of conflating such general assumptions that background science with specific premises one could hold or could hold not, based on choice.

Let us suppose for a second, though, that these assumptions would not be general assumptions backgrounding science, but presuppositions embedded in the culture of a particular time (possibly even with a religious origin). In other words, that such presuppositions would subconsciously inform the fundamentals of the scientific method because of being unknowingly embedded in the larger cultural context. Even if science might function within a set of wider metaphysical considerations without much awareness of it, it would still not be scientific to consciously attempt to substitute that set (or parts of it) for an explicit metaphysical principle (foundational or not) or supreme value. One does not simply change the metaphysical underpinnings of a scientific model by inserting different clauses (for that would demand the reworking of the entire model into a new one for purely ideological reasons, or either way, likely break the existing one). Altering the metaphysical underpinnings can only occur organically when the existing scientific model is gradually

making way for a new scientific model. This kind of paradigm shift is not a process determined by the substitution of metaphysical assumptions in science by individuals who think they have discovered normative foundational truths in provinces outside science, but by the building of alternative theories which, if validated, can in time result in the development of a new scientific model. This is a cultural process, maybe a civilizational one, of scientific accretion and discovery within the global scientific community.

As for the moral imperatives or qualities that should guide science, these can be identified over time through the processes of success and failure and can also be derived from the first set of general assumptions. There are pragmatic reasons associated with their appearance and it is not likely that their inclusion in the scientific method is due to their status as normative foundational truths, but rather, as nonfoundational normative truths at best.

This leaves us with only one argument in support of the new definition of 'attunement': intuition. As remarked previously, while intuition clearly plays a role in the process of knowledge and in the formulation and testing of premises, this role is either subconscious or subsidiary to other criteria of logic and procedures of reason. Never can a premise be consciously advanced in the fields of science or philosophy (or even in the field of social action or development) simply on the criterion of intuition.

I.3. The Implications of the Redefinition of Attunement for the Scientific Method

Now, let us return to the questions that Karlberg has asked and which he answers in the affirmative as a way of supporting his redefinition of attunement:

If the scientific method operates on ontological premises (presuppositions) that have never been examined, why cannot we consciously introduce some new ontological premises (normative foundational truths) in the same manner, leaving them unexamined for the time being? Equally, why cannot we accept some new ontological premises just based on intuition?

This mode of thinking is equivalent with the imposition of normative foundational truths (which might also be taken to constitute Bahá'í 'eternal verities') on the frameworks of

science and philosophy, from outside their domains. In fact, such forms of logic could even be perceived as expressions of anti-intellectualism, because of the way they operate from outside the province of the scientific method.

In the absence of scientific or philosophical elaboration, the mode of thinking comprised of the two questions highlighted above ('why not introduce unexamined ontological premises into the scientific method?' and 'why not adopt such ontological premises based on intuition?') becomes the fundament of Karlberg's 'consultative epistemology.' In this sense, Karlberg's methodology faithfully mirrors his general argument (equal premises, no verification possible except after large-scale implementation, intuition as the interim guide[45]):

"But where is the starting point for such processes? How do we initially come to recognize the existence of normative truths? If we accept the premise that foundational normative truths exist, a compelling case can be made that human intuition, when it is not clouded by ego or perverted in other ways, is capable of some initial, rudimentary recognition of, and attunement to, such truths. Many religious systems are based on this premise, broadly construed; otherwise, people could never recognize and respond to 'revealed' truths. Many moral philosophers, both past and present, have also posited secular variations on this theme. And a body of empirical evidence seems to point toward the existence, in our species, of some kind of normative intuition or an innate moral sense." (p.49)

I.4. Investigating Other Possibilities for Extending Attunement to the Notion of Normative Foundational Truths. Sources for Normative Foundational Truths: Natural Law, Common Law, or Religion?

The issue of the redefinition of the notion of attunement does not end here because another question can be asked. What if we thought of normative foundational truths not as 'phenomena', such as the law of gravity etc., that can be studied in the same manner, but as features of reality in some other way, which could still be studied scientifically or philosophically?

[45] See my first answer (the first part of this response).

There are many problems to unpack here that perhaps have not imposed themselves on the processes of inquiry Karlberg sets out in his book.

Normative principles seem contingent to human existence (this indeed is why they cannot be seen to constitute 'phenomena' such as those described by the law of gravity). They appear not as phenomena in nature but as notions of value in the sphere of human consciousness highly dependent on thought, human will, and other human qualities, and evinced in either discursive practices or social practices (between humans, at least for now). As far as I can see, this allows for three possibilities:

1) Normative principles are laws immanent in nature. They can be 'found' or 'discovered' but not be constructed, such as a social contract or a bill of rights would be. These laws operate as intrinsic to nature which, because we observe such values only in the realm of human existence, implies that they are inherent to human nature. This stance reflects the notion and tradition of thought known as 'natural law.' This stance would likely be the one Karlberg would have to adopt to philosophically and scientifically substantiate his claim that foundational normative truths are essential aspects of reality. However, there are two extremely difficult obstacles to overcome here. The first is that Bahá'í legal scholars such as Udo Schaefer assert, based on rational arguments (pp.151-155), that 'the Bahá'í Faith does not support the idea of an innate, natural, moral law inscribed by God in human nature." (p.151) This is not to claim that Schaefer is right but simply that his position must be considered and the issues raised addressed.

Connected to such a notion of 'natural law' would be the idea that human reason can 'find', 'discover', or 'recognize' how such natural laws are inscribed in human nature. 'Human dignity', one of the normative foundational truths of Karlberg, would thus be recognizable by reason as a natural law inscribed in human nature. This is something Karlberg would have to demonstrate based on rational arguments. However, as Schaefer (p.111) points out, such a position requires a clear concept of human nature, and this has proven extremely problematic: "However, all attempts conclusively to deduce moral rules from an abstract concept of man, on the basis of the dignity of man, have failed. Reason is not able to make 'thou shalt' statements that are clear and unanimously acceptable. The question as to man's 'dignity' cannot be answered without reference to a clear concept of man; and the nature of man is

unfortunately a question whose answer lies beyond rational, empirical or scientific knowledge."

Still, Karlberg can be seen to formulate a view or incipient argument that falls under this category by claiming that a) the laws of physics can be considered themselves, not as approximations of given phenomena, but as abstract realities – implying it is the existence of abstract realities that determines the existence of physical phenomena and b) that normative foundational truths are abstract realities in the same way the laws of physics (at least in terms of having this intellectual existence that is more real than physical existence). However, even if point a) would be accepted in science (and that is still a contested view) it is hard to see what type of argument or proof (except a religious one) could be developed to support point b) for now.

2) A second perspective could be that we can consider certain normative principles as natural laws if these have emerged from the natural process of resolving conflicts over time. An example here would be the tradition of common law. In other words, tradition is what makes normative principles foundational. This perspective would not be of any help to Karlberg's argument who is seeking to root such normative principles in a transcendental dimension, meaning as objective and fundamental aspects of reality. There is a lesson in here, however. If we try to identify normative principles, the area of investigation is limited to the human condition: either we derive them through forms of collective deliberation based on reason or via the crystallization of tradition (in which case they are 'socially constructed'), or through abstract reason – again, either philosophically, or through a study of human psychology (or consciousness) and human behaviour (again, this would imply the construction of conceptual models which can only guarantee objectivity within their own remit – so these would be again, 'socially constructed').

3) Another perspective would state that normative foundational truths can only be derived from the domain or religion as Revelation that transcends both human reason and human nature. This is Schaefer's position. However, even if we took Schaefer's position, and argued that "it is religion, to sum up, which produces all human virtues, and it is these virtues which are the bright candles of civilization" ('Abdu'l-Bahá cited in Schaefer, p.154), such mapping and understanding of religious truths would still depend very heavily on a philosophical or ethical theory, or on such conceptual models, and on the prior notion of an interpretative

hermeneutics that has given rise to them. In other words, even the assertion of foundational normative truths as spiritual truths implies the use of the very fallible and limited procedures of human reason, and, therefore, of socially constructed notions, arguments and theories derived from prior interpretative perspectives.

My second objection, therefore, is this: that normative principles are contingent to human reality and human consciousness and no matter how we posit their origin (including as the spiritual truths of Scriptures) their selection, ordering and overall interpretation is based on socially constructed knowledge. In other words, while it is possible to talk of normative nonfoundational principles in this manner, it is extremely difficult to identify criteria by which to ascribe a foundational character to them in the manner that Karlberg wishes to do (as objective, essential features of reality, independent of human existence or understanding). Karlberg or others who wish to argue in this manner must produce supporting arguments. Principally, they must argue how such normative principles transcend the sphere of human reality and human consciousness to constitute normative foundational truths and how they can be identified as such if they transcend human consciousness.
What would Karlberg's options be here?

If he chose to argue that normative foundational truths are instances of natural law, then rational proof of that would be required as well as the endorsement of such a notion in the Bahá'í Writings. However, Karlberg doesn't mention or choose this path.
If he chose to argue they are 'spiritual truths,' which he does in a 'weak' way but not in the 'strong' manner of Schaefer for whom religion is the only possible grounding for normative foundational truths, then that again would arguably confirm an imposition of spiritual truths on the frameworks of science and philosophy.

II. The Relative Embodiment of Normative Foundational Truths and the Methodology of Consultative Epistemology

The simple fact that we are talking about 'embodiment' means that the normative foundational truths Karlberg introduces differ entirely from the type of phenomena the notion of 'attunement' was originally devised for. To make up for this transgression Karlberg

(pp.34-35) introduces the notion of "latency" (derived from the Greek notions of potentiality and actuality), which presupposes that normative foundational truths operate in a somewhat similar manner to the 'Ideas' or 'Forms' of Plato. However, Karlberg does not try to ground this concept and his normative foundational truths in any philosophical, ethical, or scientific theory, which would admittedly constitute a difficult – but, in my view, necessary – undertaking. This occurs even though the Bahá'í Faith has its own theological terms from which a philosophy on the lines of the 'Forms' of Plato could be derived: 'the Names and Attributes of God.' Indeed, it is hard to see how one could convincingly talk about the possibility of normative foundational truths in the Bahá'í Faith without directly engaging the subject of the 'Names and Attributes of God.' The point I am making is that there is a side-stepping here from considering what the Bahá'í Writings have to say about normative foundational truths. In fact, the issue of philosophical or epistemological grounding of such concepts in the Bahá'í Writings is simply avoided altogether. There is also no serious elaboration in the languages of philosophy, epistemology, ethics, and social sciences (see for example, the discussion above regarding the sources of normative foundational truths: natural law, common law or tradition, and religion). Rather, the main line of argument (based on Nagel and Seung) is that normative foundational truths are as unjustified as normative nonfoundational truths when it comes to the scientific method or philosophical reasoning, but more justified when normative intuition and pragmatic reasoning (assessing large-scale implementation) are considered as part of the scientific method.[46]

Nevertheless, the embodiment of normative foundational truths presupposes some type of elaboration, some type of description and definition. Otherwise, how could one start to embody any such truth?

It is at this point that the need to understand how the 'consultative epistemology' of Karlberg is meant to operate ascertains itself. The one thing we know for sure is that normative foundational truths are a given. The question is: in what form are they a given?

Do we, for example, envisage a consultative process where everyone is supposed to accept from the start a particular normative foundational truth such as justice, but where the concept has no content prior to that consultation? If the concept has no prior content, why is it

[46] I have challenged these claims extensively in the first part of the paper.

important for it to be considered a foundational normative truth rather than a nonfoundational normative truth? Is this what Karlberg is arguing for? It seems not.

Rather, Karlberg seems to envisage the consultative part as primarily concerned with how particular given concepts (the notion of 'concept' implies elaborated conceptual content), understood as normative foundational truths, are best applied to social reality.

Let us then examine this 'consultative epistemology' more closely.

Step 1: Normative Foundational Truths and their Conceptual Content

Normative foundational truths are elaborated as 'abstract laws, ideals or principles.' We know this because Karlberg (p.34) tells us that "the term embodiment … refers to the expression of abstract laws, ideals, or principles in manifest material or social forms" [by 'material means' he means technological applications, for example]. These normative foundational truths have conceptual content, meaning, they have received conceptual elaboration of some kind. However, these truths are not "conceptualized as comprehensive and detailed prescriptions for right living" or "as something akin to a comprehensive prescription for constructing a proper airplane." (p.31) Rather, they are defined at a more abstract and general level "as something akin to a set of physics principles that diverse people could apply in their efforts to construct increasingly safer and more efficient airplanes suited to specific purposes, reflecting various cultural priorities." (p.31) This is quite surprising. First, because it suggests that the concept of 'the generation and application of knowledge' does not apply to the most important part of the process of knowledge: the identification, selection, and definition of key concepts (or truths). This implies very limited forms of 'participation' in the process of knowledge, and a process of consultation that is welcome only after key values have been established and defined from above. Second, on what basis would such elaboration from the above proceed and how would it look in concrete terms? After all, no such specific conceptualization of a normative foundational truth as 'a set of physics principles' has been outlined in Karlberg's book.

There are clearly a few significant issues here:

1) This approach clearly results in the imposition of values associated with a particular type of religious conceptual framework (that of the Bahá'í Faith), but which has been re-interpreted through the lens of ontological foundationalism by Karlberg (this also implies reliance on certain strands of analytical philosophy). Now let us that turn that argument in reverse. Why wouldn't Karlberg or the ABS or the Bahá'í Faith simply agree to intuitively operate on the normative principles (or even nonfoundational normative principles) of some other school of thought or movement, and commit to translating that set of normative principles into social action? Suppose another religion made this request of Karlberg? What would he say if he was invited to a consultative epistemology session by some other group to find he can only consult about the application of the key principles espoused by that group (and defined solely by that group), all on the assumption, accompanied by no rational argumentation, that such principles constitute normative foundational truths all should recognize intuitively? Would he find that type of consultation an authentic and just one?[47]

2) Another issue here is that meaningful social action or social transformation require more than only a few foundational premises or principles. At the same time, the foundational premises Karlberg talks about do not exist in separation, as if suspended in ether. They are part of the conceptual framework of the Bahá'í Faith, as this has been mirrored in Karlberg's theory and methodology. In that sense, they cannot be disconnected or dissociated from each other or from the whole. The problem here is obvious. Although what is being proposed is a set of foundational premises, what is being offered is the conceptual framework of either Karlberg or the Bahá'í Faith, or both. This is important because such conceptual frameworks reflect a religious system of belief and, at least in terms of Karlberg's understanding, they also imply the values of ontological foundationalism. In that sense, what is being asked is that another party adopt a different system of belief (and not just a premise) for an indeterminate period, and agree to build on its foundations, both theoretically and in terms of large-scale social projects, so as to verify its truth and efficacy over time. This constitutes an imposition of values, particularly when this argument is made in relation to the academic disciplines or fields of practice such as the field of development or those of social transformation, social justice, and social change.

[47] Of course, if this offer is made in a transparent manner and someone wishes to join it under these limited conditions then there is no imposition of values. Indeed, perhaps these are experiments we should get involved in so that we can learn how other religions, social movements and research groups envisage their methodology of social change.

These types of problems are the reason why it is hard to envisage the ontological foundationalism of Karlberg as 'a middle point between foundationalism and antifoundationalism.' A middle point methodology would not seek, consciously or subconsciously, to impose the values of foundationalism, or of religion, or any values in fact. Furthermore, it should be clear here that even when the audience is just the Bahá'í community the assertion of Bahá'í normative principles (foundational or not) must be accompanied by forms of rational justification. Abizadeh discusses this at length in his article "Because Bahá'u'lláh said so: Dealing with a non-starter in moral reasoning." His conclusion[48] deserves our utmost consideration:

"So to determine the basis for the Bahá'í position on some question in ethics, one must consider Bahá'í ethical theory as a whole, and justify the position in those terms, and not in terms of the divine say-so. What is more, given the Bahá'í principle of the harmony of science and religion, and that religion must be scientific in its method, the Bahá'í position must be interpreted in light of some background knowledge gleaned from the natural and social sciences."[49]

The next point can be seen as an extension of Abizadeh's position.

3) In the absence of philosophical elaboration, it is not unreasonable to expect the content of the normative foundational truths of Karlberg would consist either of particular statements from the Bahá'í Writings (selected through the prism of ontological foundationalism), or from such quotes and their paraphrasing alongside minimal interpretation by Karlberg or others (via the lens of ontological foundationalism). Would particular statements from the Bahá'í Writings be deemed to constitute normative foundational truths simply because they appear in the Bahá'í Writings? That is very likely to be the case. This constitutes one of the most significant issues that typically affects Bahá'í authors in favour of strong foundationalism. Can such propositions be taken directly from the Bahá'í Writings (or in a paraphrased form) and transferred into the domains of science and religion? In my view, the

[48] I have touched on the issues throughout my first answer, and particularly in Section I.5. "Foundationalist and Anti-Foundationalist Premises Cannot Be Interrogated on The Plane of Philosophical or Epistemological Reasoning. Part 2."
[49] Abizadeh, Arash. *Because Bahá'u'lláh Said So*. 1995, https://bahai-library.com/abizadeh_moral_reasoning. Accessed 14 Mar. 2022.

answer is no. One cannot just take instances of the Divine Word, meaning propositions or quotations from the Bahá'í Writings, and simply drop them within the discourses of science or philosophy, much less so as foundational, objective, or even eternal truth. To establish linkages between statements or principles from the Bahá'í writings and the discipline of philosophy (or any other academic discipline or practice), one must at least identify the philosophical (or scientific) terms that correlate one with the other. The language of religion must be first translated into the language of philosophy (or science) and then correlations identified. Moreover, a strong argument can be made that, rather than attempting to correlate terms, one should really try to correlate philosophical systems or theoretical models. What makes certain terms philosophical is precisely the fact that they are part of a philosophical system or of a philosophical discourse, be this classic or modern in format. To accurately compare such terms means to compare these terms as they sit within their own philosophical systems or discourses, not in isolation from their theoretical frameworks of origin.

What is needed, therefore, is a philosophy that orders and connects the many important teachings and principles that can be found in the Bahá'í Writings. Only after such elaboration can the concepts from the Bahá'í Writings be compared with those of a particular philosophy (or academic discipline). As Karlberg's work is concerned with social change and social transformation, what is needed is a Bahá'í philosophy of social change. As his claims involve the notion of normative foundational truths, a Bahá'í epistemology and a "Bahá'í ethical theory as a whole" are also needed. Only then, this line of thinking would suggest, could he, or others, proceed to attempt to correlate the Bahá'í teachings with the academic disciplines and with the fields of practice in the areas of development, social transformation, and social change.

Even selecting the shortest of statements from the Bahá'í Writings as a normative foundational truth will always imply a prior act of interpretation that would have to be made publicly available. Moreover, the truth of such a statement would still need to be justified both within the domain of religion (in light of its own principles of hermeneutics and in relationship with the whole of the Revelation), and within the domains of science and philosophy (according to their logics and procedures). It is not as if truth comes in small pieces (divine words or propositions) and as a material object that can be transferred in its exact form from one location to another (from the domain of religion straight to that of philosophy or science, or to fields of practice). For example, the language of the Revelation, although it is the Word of God, is not an 'ideal language' of the kind espoused by the early

proponents of analytic philosophy. The notion of Bertrand Russell that reality could be analysed objectively by starting from the smallest units of language (propositions) and of reality (facts), identifying exact correspondences between them, and then building larger sets in which propositions (the standard-bearers of truth) could be connected to each other has not been successful within the discipline of analytical philosophy, and could never be applied here as a main hermeneutical methodology (although experimentations of this kind are welcome). Why? For at least two reasons (though many more could be found): 1) because the truth of the Writings resides in them as a whole, in their holistic nature (and it would be extremely dangerous to rely on a fragmentary method – which would be the very opposite approach to take in relation to the hermeneutical principles[50] outlined in the Bahá'í Writings) and 2) because the meanings of the language of Revelation are symbolic and spiritual; they require a complex and holistic type of hermeneutics (the terms of this language are generally neither immediately accessible at the level of meanings nor corresponding to aspects of physical or social reality in a direct and transparent way).

As 'Abdu'l-Bahá suggests below, the Bahá'í Writings seem to disfavour literal interpretation, or the idea that religious language is clear and transparent, and therefore, an objective mirror of reality in the same manner with the 'ideal language' of analytical philosophy:

"Therefore, holding to literal interpretation and visible fulfilment of the text of the Holy Books is simply imitation of ancestral forms and beliefs; for when we perceive the reality of Christ, these texts and statements become clear and perfectly reconcilable with each other. Unless we perceive reality, we cannot understand the meanings of the Holy Books, for these meanings are symbolical and spiritual—such as, for instance, the raising of Lazarus, which has spiritual interpretation. … **The Holy Books have their special terminologies which must be known and understood**. Physicians have their own peculiar terms; architects,

[50] "We must take the teachings as a great, balanced whole, not seek out and oppose to each other two strong statements that have different meanings; somewhere in between there are links uniting the two. That is what makes our Faith so flexible and well balanced." (19 March 1945 to an individual believer)
"Likewise he is constantly urging them [the Bahá'ís] to really study the Bahá'í teachings more deeply. One may liken Bahá'u'lláh's teachings to a sphere; there are points poles apart, and in between the thoughts and doctrines that unite them. We believe in balance in all things; we believe in moderation in all things . . ." (5 July 1949 to an individual believer) Letters written on behalf of the Guardian, cited in Fananapazir, Khazeh, et al. *Some Interpretive Principles in the Bahá'í Writings*. 1992, https://bahai-library.com/fananapazir_fazel_interpretive_principles. Accessed 18 Mar. 2022.

philosophers have their characteristic expressions; poets have their phrases; and scientists, their nomenclature."[51]

The Bahá'í Writings have their own 'special terminology' that must be studied and understood (and which relates closely to the 'special terminology' of other Holy Books). One must first study the terminology of this specialized language before assigning to any of its words, sentences, or to any of its content, the status of normative foundational truths. This is not just a scholarly argument to make. The decline of religions begins when incorrect hermeneutics are being applied, particularly when the positions of strong foundationalism and biblical literalism are aligned:

"As to religious people their criterion has ever been the sacred text which must be accepted as final. One is not allowed the slightest reflection. 'The word of God,' they say, 'is truth.' For them everything outside direct revelation is viewed with doubt." ('Abdu'l-Bahá)[52]

"Inasmuch as the Christian divines have failed to apprehend the meaning of these words, and did not recognize their object and purpose, and have clung to the literal interpretation of the words of Jesus, they therefore became deprived of the streaming grace of the Muḥammadan Revelation and its showering bounties." (Bahá'u'lláh)[53]

The theme of the nature of the language of the Revelation and its possible types is too weighty a theme to attempt to engage with here. Nevertheless, a small example can be given to highlight why such discussion can be of interest. In the "Gate of the Heart", Nader Saiedi[54] (p.53) analyzes the Bab's five modes of revelation and summarizes his universal hermeneutics as follows:

"According to the Bab, not only the realm of language but all other aspects of phenomenal reality, including natural and cultural objects, are symbolic signs that point toward spiritual meanings. Everything is a divine text, and the entirety of being is a mirror of divine reality:

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[51] 'Abdu'l-Bahá. *Bahá'í Reference Library - The Promulgation of Universal Peace, Pages 245-247*. https://reference.bahai.org/en/t/ab/PUP/pup-87.html. Accessed 18 Mar. 2022.
[52] 'Abdu'l-Bahá. *'Abdu'l-Bahá on Divine Philosophy* (pp.93-94). https://bahai-library.com/abdul-baha_divine_philosophy&chapter=2. Accessed 18 Mar. 2022.
[53] Bahá'u'lláh. *Bahá'í Reference Library - The Kitáb-i-Íqán, Pages 3-41, para. 25*. https://reference.bahai.org/en/t/b/KI/ki-1.html. Accessed 18 Mar. 2022.
[54] Saiedi, Nader. *Gate of the Heart: Understanding the Writings of the Bab*. Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2016.

whatever exists in the world is a sign, a verse, and a miracle that proclaims the unity and sovereignty of God."

Notice how this turns notions of language in analytical philosophy on their head. Not only that language is symbolic but the reality it seeks to correspond to as objectively as possible is also symbolic, reflective of a higher reality that is otherwise not accessible. The reality we take for granted is only a reflection of something else still to be determined; it is as messy or, rather, as symbolic (if not more) as language.

Step 2: Intuition as the Mode of Recognition for Normative Foundational Truths

Once we have been presented with certain normative foundational truths and their conceptual content by Karlberg the next step is their acceptance based on the faculty of 'intuition.'[55] Notice here also the redefinition of attunement as based on intuition (and more specifically, on 'normative intuition') and not on 'the goodness-of-fit between a specific paradigm (or specific paradigmatic insight) and a specific phenomenal aspect':

"But where is the starting point for such processes? How do we initially come to recognize the existence of normative truths? If we accept the premise that foundational normative truths exist, a compelling case can be made that human intuition, when it is not clouded by ego or perverted in other ways, is capable of some initial, rudimentary recognition of, and attunement to, such truths. Many religious systems are based on this premise, broadly construed; otherwise, people could never recognize and respond to 'revealed' truths. Many moral philosophers, past and present, have also posited secular variations on this theme. And a body of empirical evidence seems to point toward the existence, in our species, of some kind of normative intuition or an innate moral sense." (p.49)

Step 3: Intuition as the Basis of Applied Knowledge through Intersubjective Agreement

[55] The notion of 'intuition' has been discussed at length in the section concerned with the general argument of Karlberg's book.

Normative intuition is not only used for 'recognizing' the normative foundational truths on offer, but also, for deriving "initial intuitions' about how such truths could be applied to social reality. These 'initial intuitions' would result, via consultative processes, in collective plans for constructive action which would then need to be constantly reassessed (while being implemented) until they lead to stable forms of intersubjective agreement.

This is discussed by Karlberg (pp.42-43) in the following paragraph:

"However, even if we accept the existence of some rudimentary form of normative intuition, initial intuitions would still need to be repeatedly tested against reality – not merely individually, but collectively – in an iterative manner over time, to increase our intersubjective attunement to normative truths. This speaks of the need for deliberative processes, or consultative processes, that involve planning for the kinds of constructive action alluded to above and that also involve reflecting on such action. These processes would need to be characterized by conscious attention to the application of normative principles and conscious reflection on what is learned through such efforts."

Besides the fact that it provides normative foundational truths and their conceptual content as a given, what is strange about the 'consultative epistemology' of Karlberg (p.43) is that it sees the processes of knowledge and social transformation as centered on "the intuitive faculties of discernment." This occurs despite mention of the need for 'conscious reflection on what is learned through such efforts.' The reason given by Karlberg (p.43) for this is that in "the domain of social change" "subjective interpretations and intuition" take on "elevated importance." (p.43) Such subjective interpretations and intuitions can lead to high levels of confidence in the conclusions reached because these are sanctioned by intersubjective forms of agreement. In other words, both the application of normative foundational truths to social reality and the evaluation of such applications are based on "a subjective – or intersubjective – mode of assessment." (p.43) "Subjective interpretation and intuition are not infallible faculties of discernment" but objectivity is assured through achieving "higher degrees of intersubjective agreement" that are "stable over time."

This is explained in the following key paragraph:

"The application of normative principles in a consultative mode, is, of course, no simple matter. **Although efforts to apply the principles of physics to the construction of an airplane can be assessed in an objective manner**, **the application of normative principles to the construction of a social practice or institution requires a subjective – or intersubjective – mode of assessment**, as alluded to above. This further underscores the need for a consultative approach, because **consulting about the application of normative principles involves subjective interpretations supported by the faculty of intuition**. If we are concerned about the role of subjective interpretation and intuition in this process, we should recall from the previous discussion of science that subjective interpretations and intuition already play an invaluable role in the advancement of the natural sciences. **Therefore, we should not be inherently skeptical of these human faculties. At the same time, we must recognize that in the domain of social change, they take on elevated importance.**

The challenge, in this regard, is that subjective interpretation and intuition are not infallible faculties of discernment. But neither are the faculties of logic and reason, as the histories of science and philosophy amply demonstrate. Furthermore, most forms of logical reasoning rely on a degree of underlying interpretation and intuition. **In science and philosophy, the limitations of subjective and intuitive understanding are addressed by striving for intersubjective agreement – that is, consensus among the subjective understanding of many people. Higher degrees of intersubjective agreement, when they are consistent with all the available evidence and become stable over time, increase our confidence in conclusions. The same might be said for intersubjective agreement regarding the application of normative principles in the social domain. Under the right conditions, public deliberation can lead to relatively high levels of confidence in intersubjective conclusions based, in part, on the exercise of intuitive faculties of discernment." (p.43)**

Karlberg's 'consultative epistemology', we can thus conclude, is similar with the deliberative or consultative procedures of Habermas (and with proceduralism), except that reason and logic, and, therefore, the scientific method, have been superseded and displaced by intuition and normative foundational truths. Even when based on forms of reason and logic, collective consultation is generally good at generating consensus or agreement on existent themes, but not of great use in research or for producing new knowledge, meaning it is also not great at producing an evaluation. This would constitute a huge limitation and a glaring issue for

Karlberg's methodology. However, in Karlberg's 'consultative epistemology,' the procedures of reason and logic are in fact replaced by intuition and subordinated to it, which means the scientific method as we know it is not being applied.

At this point, we must ask ourselves, are these views of Karlberg derived from the Bahá'í Writings? Clearly, such a methodology would not seem to fit well with the principles of the independent investigation of truth and of the harmony of science and religion for which reason is the primary mechanism and method. The answer seems to be that Karlberg (pp.154-155) has derived his methodological approach not from the Bahá'í Writings, but from his reading of the philosophy of Thomas K. Seung:

"In *Intuition and Construction: The Foundation of Normative Theory*, Seung argues that the modern world is in a state of crisis due to the widespread rejection of any ontological or transcendent basis for normative agreement, along with the consequent adoption of purely relativistic theories of social constructivism. He argues that this crisis will be overcome only when we recognize that rational processes of social construction inevitably depend on the exercise of intuition regarding foundational normative truths. … Seung draws a contrast between *proceduralism* and *intuitionism*. He defines *intuitionism* as the view that normative truths exist and can be discovered by rational intuition."

Nevertheless, this line of reasoning is susceptible to interrogation. Karlberg's use of Seung's arguments is problematic in that, even if we accept that some kind of normative intuition exists and is active in how thinkers consciously or subconsciously construct their theoretical models, one still has to prove that what this normative intuition apprehends are not nonfoundational normative assumptions, but rather, normative foundational truths. But one cannot do so, in Seung's theory (as Karlberg presents it), except through the very capacity of 'normative intuition.' Without this type of 'normative intuition' the whole argumentation collapses, as also do key claims in favour of the existence and the identification of normative foundational truths. There are other problems with Seung's argument. What Seung considers the results of 'normative intuition' might simply be the results of inspiration from other discourses and themes in society rather than direct insights into 'normative foundational truths.' Seung would have to prove the sources of such intuition are transcendental and accessible in a truthful manner and not simply the man-made ordinary discourses and themes circulating around. The heavy reliance of Karlberg's theory and methodology on the notion

of ‘normative intuition’ creates, therefore, insurmountable problems (while also extending them from theory to practice) and it is hard not to attribute this blind spot (or type of bias) to the strong pull of ontological foundationalism.

But let us turn back to Karlberg’s ‘consultative epistemology.’ Whatever their merits might be, public forms of intersubjective agreement derived solely from subjective understandings and intuitions without scientific verification and procedures of reason cannot be confused with the application of the scientific method in any of the phases of the consultative epistemology of Karlberg. And this is a huge problem, because we find that the scientific method and philosophical and scientific reason are missing from all its key phases: 1) in the identification of the normative foundational principles and their content; 2) in the evaluation and recognition of such normative foundational principles and their content; 3) in the elaboration of designs for how normative foundational truths would be implemented in social reality; 4) in the iterative assessment of their implementation.

In other words, just because a community of people come together and reach agreement based on their intuition and subjective understandings when these are repeatedly tested against reality (or through ‘the exercise of intuitive faculties of discernment’ as Karlberg also puts it), that does not mean that the scientific method has been in the slightest applied at any point in the process or that the results are in any way scientific. Reliance on a normative ontology or a single ideology, for example, could easily skew the entire consultative process and the results thereof. At the same time, there is no guarantee that the process of intersubjective consultation would not produce very subjective and partial conclusions. For the process of consultation to be scientific it has to function from the beginning and throughout on the procedures of reason and the scientific method. This implies both the use of hermeneutics, philosophy, and science to develop theories and various conceptual frameworks and the adoption of internal research methods such as the collection and reporting of data and the use of participatory research approaches. In addition, the process of consultation must also be researched independently by experts from both within and outside of the Bahá’í Faith through, ideally, a combination of quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods research methodologies.

Finally, although one can understand and relate to Karlberg’s dislike for social engineering (particularly if we think of companies like Google, Facebook, and Amazon), his consultative

methodology indicates that his comments might have more to them, in the sense of seemingly disclosing a general feeling of suspicion towards forms of scientific and research expertise (while reason implies the need for scientific or philosophical expertise, normative intuition does not call for expertise in the same way, although claims to moral excellence or spiritual expertise are not infrequent in the religious domain):

"Moreover, as cautioned in the introduction to this book, such approaches cannot be understood in terms of social engineering. Social engineering implies a reliance on privileged forms of alleged expertise applied to the design of social policies and processes intended to achieve instrumental objectives determined by elite social groups. Such approaches have been ineffective at their best, oppressive at their worst.
In contrast to social engineering, efforts to increase the embodiment of normative truths through processes of social construction require reflective modes of collective learning through action." (pp.41-42)

Because of how his consultative epistemology does not allow for participation in the identification of normative foundational truths and their content while requiring their recognition and application in social reality, and because it removes the procedures of logic and reason, and therefore, the scientific method and expertise, from its processes, Karlberg faces precisely the type of charge he would not want to face: that of designing an approach that is very close to social engineering. Paradoxically, he is also speaking from institutional positions that imply 'privileged forms of alleged expertise' and assisting with the design of social policies and processes intended to achieve objectives determined by the leadership bodies of the Bahá'í Faith.

III. Karlberg's Notion of Consultation and Bahá'í Consultation (Ontological Truths, Knowledge, Ethics, and Community-Building)

Many of these problems occur because, from the very start, Karlberg interprets the notion of Bahá'í consultation through the prism of ontological foundationalism. The notion of consultation he proposes is more clearly outlined in a 2017 book chapter on normative foundations in media and public discourse:

"The normative principles outlined in this chapter suggest that religion can make significant contributions to the advancement of knowledge about the construction of social realities – if religious voices meet certain conditions. To understand this potential, it is important to return to the issue of relativism. Within consultation, diverse perspectives are viewed as a means of arriving at a more comprehensive understanding of multifaceted realities in the pursuit of unity and justice. In the absence of these foundational normative commitments, diversity results in extreme relativism. And extreme relativism leads to a normative impasse that makes social progress impossible, as mentioned at the outset of this chapter. This impasse cannot be avoided unless one assumes the existence of foundational normative truths, or what Bahá'ís refer to as spiritual principles, which underlie and inform the construction of social realities."[56]

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

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

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

"The second proclivity, to totalize, refers to the penchant to systematically explain the world, or as many perceivable aspects of it as possible, within an increasingly regimented worldview – to grapple with and explain more and more of what is perceived in terms of a single overarching logic. This tendency also has value: conceptually mapping reality in order to make sense of it is both natural and helpful. In practice, however, whatever does not fit neatly within the parameters of the resulting paradigm is typically explained away, dismissed as absurd or senseless, or even repudiated as deviant or antagonistic. The extreme manifestation of this tendency is totalitarianism, but it also takes on other forms such as scientism, reductionist materialism, and religious dogmatism." (Smith and Ghaemmaghami)[57]

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

"Let us also remember that at the very root of the Cause lies the principle of the undoubted right of the individual to self-expression, his freedom to declare his conscience and set forth his views. …Let us also bear in mind that the keynote of the Cause of God is not dictatorial authority but humble fellowship, not arbitrary power, but the spirit of frank and loving consultation." (Shoghi Effendi)[58]

[57] Smith, Todd and Ghaemmaghami, Omid. 'Consultation'. Stockman, Robert H., editor. *The World of the Bahá'í Faith*, Routledge, 2022, p.451.
[58] Effendi, Shoghi. *Bahá'í Reference Library - Bahá'í Administration, Pages 63-64*. https://reference.bahai.org/en/t/se/BA/ba-55.html. Accessed 24 Mar. 2022.

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

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

If more people accept these normative foundational truths through intuition, we could say that agreement on key principles widens. Therefore, in the short-term, great gains seem to be made. However, does this not tend to happen at the loss of substance? And does it not tend to lead to the creation of a frozen, inert, and maybe even dogmatic culture over the long-term? It seems important here to highlight certain tendencies which might emerge from this conceptual approach that could inhibit rather than stimulate, the pursuit of knowledge, moral and ethical formation, and processes of community-building.

III.1. The Pursuit of Knowledge

III.1.a. Potential Tendencies: The Crystallization of Dogma

It is interesting to note here that the 'consultative epistemology' and ontological foundationalism of Karlberg mirror similar and prior tendencies in Catholic conservative thought. One can observe, for example, the arguments of Catholic theologian R. R. Reno. Reno is the editor of the popular Conservative Christian journal "First Things." During Reno's stewardship, "First Things" has transitioned from a position combining ecumenical dialogue with neoconservatism towards more extreme versions of neoconservatism, laden sometimes with accents of Trumpism. Clearly a very important thinker on the Christian right, Reno believes the world is passing through "an ontological crisis, about whether there is really anything true, anything stable" and that we might be living "in a kind of Dark Ages where the churches actually carry the cultural memory of the west to the next generation."[59] There is a sense here that the Academia and our forms of public knowledge are dragging us into unreality and that "a crazy society where men can be women" is "a sign of our profound alienation from the real as a society."[60] In a 2006 review[61] of Thomas Guarino's *Foundations of Systematic Theology* (with the perspective of which it largely identifies), Reno associates the crisis of our age with "the weakening of the idea of truth" of Vattimo and with the "nonfoundationalism" of figures such as "Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard, Baudrillard and Rorty." From Heidegger to Hegel and Vico, this tradition of nonfoundationalism is then extended by Reno to continental philosophy as a whole. Not only do such figures "contribute to the dehumanizing nihilism of contemporary culture," Reno argues, but "**they also provide little other than resistance to the work of any theology committed to the truth of doctrine**."[62] What is of interest to us here are three of the suggestions Reno makes for how a Catholic theology should respond to this ontological crisis of our age.

1) First, Reno argues that one should follow the example of W. V. Quine. Quine is presented as "nonfoundationalist in epistemology" but "an unrepentant foundationalist" when it comes to ontology. From this standpoint, even though we might not be able to philosophically verify or prove what we know we can still have confidence and certainty in our knowledge of the

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

mind, the world, and truth. David Opderbeck[63] correctly interprets this viewpoint as suggesting that Catholic theology should orient itself towards combining a foundationalist ontology with a non-foundationalist epistemology. This, I would argue, is also the standpoint of Karlberg and of Karlberg and Smith.[64] The question, however, is how this union, or combination, is to be achieved; or more essentially, if such different ways of thinking can be reconciled. The next two points relate to this dilemma.

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

"The Church supplied the crucial doctrines about ultimate truth, as well as disciplines to cure the soul. In this context, philosophy took on a more modest role. It provided logical training and a conceptually precise vocabulary for Christian thought, expressed the perennial longing of the human heart for the infinite, and served as a clearinghouse for natural knowledge. This subordinate role is the essence of scholasticism."[65]

Here, Reno heavily advocates that Catholic theology turn away from continental philosophy and embrace analytical philosophy, inasmuch as the latter constitutes "the main form of contemporary philosophical scholasticism." This type of realignment, I would argue, is also present in the work of Karlberg and other advocates of strong foundationalism in the Bahá'í community. This is how Reno explains the reasons for such a choice:

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

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

Guarino and John Paul II, postmodern philosophy is more than nonfoundational: **It is antifoundational and antidogmatic at its core**. …

I do not doubt that there are many long, complex, and obscure arguments that must be made in order to shape analytic philosophy into a truly Christian project. **But the crucial point is not that analytic philosophy provides a useful array of doctrines and a handy set of principles for theology. What matters most is the underlying loyalty to truth that it encourages**. No analytic philosopher, however antagonistic toward Christianity, wrote anything that provided support for the way of thinking that informs my local UCC pastor and his call for '**religion without dogma'** indeed, for life without truth."[66]

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

3) The question that we must ask is how we would know for certain things about the world, the mind, and truth when philosophical or scientific reasoning cannot verify or prove such knowledge. And the answer that Guarino and Reno provide is the universe of Catholic dogma at the center of which stands the Nicene–Constantinopolitan Creed: "At minimum, affirming the Nicene Creed entails at least tacit commitments to truths both universal ('for us and for our salvation') and particular ('crucified under Pontius Pilate')."[67] I will remind here the reader of the Nicene–Constantinopolitan Creed:

"I believe in One God,
the Father Almighty,
Maker of Heaven and Earth,
and of all things visible and invisible.

[66] Idem.
[67] Idem.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ,
the Son of God,
the Only-Begotten, begotten of the Father before all ages;
Light of Light;
True God of True God;
begotten, not made;
of one essence with the Father,
by Whom all things were made;
Who for us men and for our salvation
came down from Heaven,
and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary,
and became man.
And He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate,
and suffered, and was buried.
And the third day He arose again,
according to the Scriptures,
and ascended into Heaven,
and sits at the right hand of the Father;
and He shall come again with glory to judge the living and the dead;
Whose Kingdom shall have no end.

And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life,
Who proceeds from the Father;
Who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified;
Who spoke by the prophets.

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

I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins.
I look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come."[68]

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

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

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

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

Let it be mentioned here that Steven Phelps has recently argued[69] that the solution of the Bahá'í Writings to the diversity of human thought and opinion is not "the reduction to a

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

single dogma."[70] (min.39) In his view "harmony is established not by Fiat and not by a universal acceptance of a single dogma," but rather, through kindness, tolerance, and dialogue from which a certain level of "consistency" emerges as "a basis for consensus and for collective action."[71] (mins.39-41)

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

In a study from 1958, Thomas O'Dea[72] analyzes the reasons for the extremely unproductive record of the American Catholic institutions in almost all fields of study until that point. His analysis of the history of the Catholic Church points to the existence of "a certain permanent tension – a perennial strain – between the Christian faith and its demands, on the one hand, and the requirements of the intellectual life, on the other – or, to use more conventional terms, between faith and reason." (p.58) At the extremes, this tension might result in moments of true synthesis and harmony or in the exacerbation of conflict between science and religion, with each age responsible for which outcome ensues:

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

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

"We must ask ourselves why some Catholics are afraid of the differences of opinion demanded by a genuine pluralism. Why is the unusual by that very token sometimes suspect?

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in *"*The Call of the Divine Beloved: Selected Mystical Works of Bahá'u'lláh." Bahá'í World Center, 2018, pp.60-61)

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

[71] Idem.

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

Is it not that there is a tendency to fear the very ambiguities which we have analyzed in the previous section? Is it not that conformity and uniformity are sought as a kind of insurance to create and maintain an illusion of universality which hides uncertainty? Is it that we are at times too eager for a comfortable, customary Catholicism? Is it that in fact our faith does not overcome the world? That we need sociological props – conformity and uniformity – to assure us on the natural level that God is in His heaven, and that in spite of the nasty modern situation all is really right with the world?

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

"What does Christian formation in the intellectual virtues mean?" O'Dea asks. "Certainly," he answers, "it involves an appreciation of the point made by A. N. Whitehead, 'The worship of God is not a rule of safety – it is an adventure of the spirit.'" (p.62) He then cites Father Walter Ong: "Maturity is not achieved until a person has the ability to face with some equanimity into the unknown." (p.44) This, however, is not the type of education that Catholic educational institutions have provided: "the attitude cultivated in the seminarian appears at times to be characterised to a high degree by a kind of passive receptivity; the impression is given that Christian learning is something 'finished,' and that education is a formation to be accepted from established authority with a minimum of individual initiative and critical activity on the part of the student." (p.65) "Many Catholics," O'Dea adds, "tend to identify critical analysis of Catholic affairs with disloyalty." (p.25)

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

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

O'Dea's analysis of the failures of American Catholic intellectual life deserves a lot of attention. What is important to us here, however, is his emphasis on the notion of maturity as involving acknowledgment of the unknown, of the ambivalence between faith and reason,

and of living with the anxiety that ensues from that and from critical thought. This observation is of significance to us because it mirrors the words of Bahá'u'lláh:

"Consider the rational faculty with which God hath endowed the essence of man. … Having recognized thy powerlessness to attain to an adequate understanding of that Reality which abideth within thee, thou wilt readily admit the futility of such efforts as may be attempted by thee, or by any of the created things, to fathom the mystery of the Living God, the Day Star of unfading glory, the Ancient of everlasting days. This confession of helplessness which mature contemplation must eventually impel every mind to make is in itself the acme of human understanding, and marketh the culmination of man's development."[73]

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

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

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

Processes of knowledge formation where key values have been specified in advance tend to exhibit bias in relation to those values. What is worse, this tends to happen in ways that block even the understanding of those initial values. This is so because static forms of knowledge demand and elicit passive acceptance or obedience and not careful analysis, investigation, and experimentation. The assertion of ontological truths usually comes with the implied

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

prescription that they are not to be challenged, altered, questioned, or interfered with in any way. But questioning is a key part of the process of knowledge. Indoctrination, itself a complex process to define or identify, is a process of knowledge acquisition in which values are specified in advance, thus bypassing critical deliberation: "Indoctrination means infiltrating (drilling, inculcating etc.) concepts, attitudes, beliefs and theories into a student's mind by passing her free and critical deliberation." (Huttunen, p.1)[74] This problematic is most obvious in curriculum building, which is why it is considered good practice to design curricula in such a way as to allow for values to emerge as independent outcomes of the process of knowledge. It would seem to me of potential benefit to apply the same perspective to consultation.

Sometimes, religious scholarship involuntarily adopts a scheme of thought as if it had been assigned the status of ontological truth. Such is the case with the definition of the human psyche or soul as consisting of three qualities: love, will, and knowledge. From at least the early 1990s to the present day, Bahá'í scholarship on psychology, human nature and pedagogy has not advanced beyond this standpoint. Some of the greatest minds in the Bahá'í Faith have ardently debated with each other about which one comes first: love, will, or knowledge? Today, we are in deep need of more complex conceptual models of the human psyche, human nature, and moral development. Such models are essential if a Bahá'í inspired epistemology and pedagogy are to be derived from notions of human nature. Because of taking this tripartite definition of human nature as somehow foundational, other alternative formulations in the Bahá'í Writings have not been explored. One example here is the notion that each human soul is a particular combination of the Names and Attributes of God, in which one Name shines the brightest:

"Know thou, O lover of the All-Glorious Beauty, that differences between the statements of the saints is on account of differences in the effulgences of the Names of the Absolute and variations in Their places of manifestation. For in the being of every one of the mirrors of the Attributes of the Absolute and in the reality of each locus of the manifestation of Absolute Self-Sufficiency, one of the Names of the Absolute is King over the rest of the Names. … But humanity is the dawning of light, which is to say that it is the beginning of the Day of

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

Oneness and Guidance and the end of the night of plurality and loss. It is the mirror with the disposition to reflect all of the conflicting and opposing Names and is the source of the revelation of all of the Attributes of Divinity and Lordship. For the world of humanity is the world of the perfection of the words. Thus it is that it has been said: 'God created Adam in His image' [48a]; that is to say in the form of His Names and Attributes. However although he is the dawning-place of the manifestation of all the Names and Attributes, one of the Divine Names is manifested most strongly and appears most intensely [in each person]. Thus his being originates from this Name and returns to it."[75]

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

"and various of Bahá'u'lláh's statements and those of 'Abdu'l-Bahá as well I think suggest that even these kinds of, what we might take to be the rock bottom fundamentals that we should all agree on, you know, 'oneness of God,' even that is conditioned by culture, is conditioned by time and space. 'Abdu'l-Bahá himself in Some Answered Questions[76] says the reality of God is sanctified beyond singleness, then how much more beyond plurality. And it's statements like that that which I think can be highlighted as signaling a kind of theological posture which takes it outside of the orbit of, certainly of Shia Islam and outside of the orbit of Western theological thinking. And through this idea of the relativity of religious truth and the relative validity of radically different perspectives on the Divine it offers I think a kind of sandbox[77], a kind of theological sandbox within which all the traditions on the planet can come together."[78] (mins.57-59)

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

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[75] 'Abdu'l-Bahá. *Commentary on the Islamic Tradition 'I Was a Hidden Treasure...'* https://bahai-library.com/abdul-baha_kuntu_kanzan_makhfiyyan. Accessed 1 Apr. 2022.
[76] The statement in question is "The reality of the Divinity is sanctified above singleness, then how much more above plurality." 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and Laura Clifford Barney. Some Answered Questions. Newly revised, Bahá'í World Centre, 2014, 'The Trinity,' p.127.
[77] The terms sandbox also refers to "a testing environment in a computer system in which new or untested software or coding can be run securely." Oxford Languages Dictionary.
[78] *Baha'is of Austin. Steven Phelps Fireside – 'What Is Real?' 2021. YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ltTiMQiTzHY.*

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

"While the consequences of the rich metaphors of 'mind', 'emanation', and related ideas for the conception of the essential unity of science and religion, as cast through the lens of the Bahá'í teachings, are far-reaching, the Bahá'í Writings nowhere propose that differing conceptions of the divine and its relationship with the world can somehow be reduced to a single correct dogmatic formulation. They rather acknowledge that diversity of viewpoint, even in matters of ultimate theological import, is a feature of the human condition, for religious truth is relative— in time, between one era of human civilization and the next, but also between different people at the same point in time:

'[S]ince all do not possess the same degree of spiritual understanding, certain statements will inevitably be made, and there shall arise, as a consequence, as many differing opinions as there are human minds and as many divergent beliefs as there are created things. This is certain and settled, and can in no wise be averted. … Our aim is that thou shouldst urge all the believers to show forth kindness and mercy and to overlook certain shortcomings among them, that differences may be dispelled; true harmony be established; and the censure and reproach, the hatred and dissension, seen among the peoples of former times may not arise anew.' (Bahá'u'lláh, Call 3.6–7)

Therefore, a diversity of views about science and religion can be expected to persist into the future, from those who, informed by metaphysical dualism, present science and religion as essentially separate domains of knowledge to those who pursue more non-dualistic themes that stress the unity that lies behind the world of ever-changing appearances. These views are able to coexist within the community through a shared conviction that a greater harmony

underlies its differences, through mutual love and respect, and through a consultative framework that ensures that action is taken in unity even when differences persist."[79]

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

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

III.2. Moral and Ethical Formation

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

The Bahá'í principle of the independent investigation of truth suggests that "we are each individually responsible for seeking out the Real."[80] (Phelps, min.37) This would imply that the nature of truth and the identification of ontological truths are issues open to examination for each and all. Phelps interprets this principle as follows:

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

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

"The essence of all that We have revealed for thee is Justice, is for man to free himself from idle fancy and imitation, discern with the eye of oneness His glorious handiwork, and look into all things with a searching eye."[81]

Thus, justice manifests itself not only at the individual level, when an individual thinks for himself, but also, at the collective level, when each and every individual forming that collective is allowed to see reality through their own eyes. Such an interpretation has significant implications for how consultative and educational processes should be set up. To suggest that consultation should start with the acceptance of certain normative foundational truths or ontological truths seems therefore incompatible with both the principle of the independent investigation of truth and the notion of justice. A just consultation is one in which each and every individual is free to think for himself, in which each can individually seek out the Real and deliberate independently on ontological matters. Disobeying this principle erodes the very development of moral thought and moral character which, above all else, implies the independent development of normative discernment, meaning, of the capacity to identify normative principles and decide how to relate to them. However, this is not the only problem.

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

[81] Bahá'u'lláh. *Bahá'í Reference Library – Words of Wisdom. Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed After the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, Pages 155-157*. https://reference.bahai.org/en/t/b/TB/tb-11.html. Accessed 1 Apr. 2022.

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

This is extremely unhelpful in many ways. First, it leads to the false assessment that we as individuals are ethical enough. We also take it for granted that our communities are deeply ethical which blocks potential scrutiny and self-reflexivity at individual, institutional, and community levels. Our confidence is in our principles and their divine status, rather than in the horizon of their meaning and the sphere of their application, meaning, our ethics. In effect, we pay scant attention to the deeper meanings of the principles we invoke (particularly when ambiguity, unknowns, questioning, or a diversity of perspectives enter the picture) and stop being concerned with doing ethical work on ourselves. We fail to develop the capacity for normative discernment, and we also fail to develop dynamic forms of ethical living. Consequently, when moral issues permeate the Bahá'í community we assume they have come from the outside world. The problem, however, is internal. It concerns our mode of relation to ethical principles, our moral education. One that has been framed through the internalization and retention of 'given' ontological truths and of their abstract but simplified definitions akin to a list of instructions in a training manual (similar with the banking model of education, a notion partly rehabilitated by Sona Farid-Arbab[82]). This approach leads to imposition and aims at imitation; namely, for such 'truths' and their provisions to be taken for granted and copied at the level of consciousness because of their ontological status.

[82] Farid-Arbab, Sona. *Moral Empowerment: In Quest of a Pedagogy*. Bahá'í Publishing, 2016, pp.277-287.

There is an assumption here that acceptance of normative foundational truths at the level of consciousness will translate effectively into patterns of ethical behaviour. Some examples of ideal behaviour are provided but concrete and deep analyses of how such morality would look in action, particularly when facing complexity, ambiguity, diversity of perspectives and the unknown, are largely missing. All in all, such an approach fails "to communicate religious knowledge in such a way that it becomes part of the student's very being."[83] (p.64) It constitutes a static rather than dynamic approach to knowledge which fails to trigger those essential processes of personal transformation necessary for the formation of moral character. In addition, engaging other moral traditions does not happen because we believe all that is needed, at least in this initial phase, is the universal recognition of our ontological truths as we currently understand them. With the introduction of normative foundational truths in the manner of ontological foundationalism what is being lost, therefore, is the dynamic mode of relation to virtues.

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

The other issue is that the cultural strategy of promoting one's normative foundational truths at global scale and in all areas of life could be read as a Gramscian strategy: the strategy of extending 'counter-hegemony' to challenge capitalist or autocratic power and the ruling-elites. Gramsci viewed the extension of 'counter-hegemony' in very conflictual terms, as a 'war of position' to be later followed by a 'war of manouevre' (the revolutionary capture of political power and of the state). Clearly the Bahá'í methodology of social change has nothing in common with 'the war of manouevre,' and seems largely incompatible with the Gramscian notion of 'counter-hegemony.' The imposition of values, cultural perspectives, ideologies, or worldviews is to my mind completely incompatible with the Bahá'í

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

methodology for social change. Bahá'í approaches to social change must be based on a politics of friendship to all, not on one of distinction between friends and enemies.[84] They must be based on the principle of the independent investigation of truth and not on the spread of ideology or dogma. This seems to me incompatible with the Gramscian notion of 'counter-hegemony', which is a form of war by cultural means. Nonetheless, Gramsci is one of the key sources of FUNDAEC from the 1970s to the early 2000s, an aspect that has been widely neglected in Bahá'í scholarship. Whether or not Gramsci's thought connects, and how, with current approaches to social change that emphasize the promotion of normative foundational truths, such as ontological foundationalism, is a topic that deserves examination. To state this is not to undermine the importance of Gramsci and his theories.

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

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

III.3. Processes of Community Building

In a recent article, Jean Marc-Lepain[85] (p.179) reminisces on a particular reductionist tendency observed in Bahá'í culture several decades ago:

"In the 1970s and the 1980s, Bahá'ís had only simple and often naive answers to contemporary problems. One of these simple answers was that establishing the unity of humanity would solve all the problems of the world; however, there was no clear idea offered to us on the ways to bring about that unity. I heard once Douglas Martin calling this naive approach to addressing contemporary issues 'the Disneyland version of the Faith.'"

One can certainly trace a tendency reinforced by ontological foundationalism to extend the situation from decades ago to present days by way of an addition: that the unity of humankind is to be established through the very propagation of the concept itself as an ontological truth. The past solution to the world's problems is thus recast anew: as the far and wide proclamation of the normative foundational truth of the oneness of humankind until it has become generally accepted.

The promotion of the principle of the oneness of humankind as an ontological truth subconsciously implies that the concept itself is relatively well delineated and understood or at least elaborated well enough for the focus to be on its promulgation. This sort of (temporary) epistemological finality and specific focus have arguably contributed to the conceptual underdevelopment of the term.

The principle of the oneness of humankind is still primarily perceived as an issue of how individuals should generally treat each other – with kindness and consideration – and not as a concept illuminating the structural inequalities existing in society. From such a perspective, the moral imperatives associated with the concept are almost exclusively directed towards the individual and his/her attitudes, rather than towards institutions and the community. The use of the principle to highlight structural inequalities is not actively encouraged. In some settings such use might even be considered too challenging to the current unity and

[85] Marc-Lepain, J. 'Tractatus: A Logical Introduction to Bahá'í Philosophy'. In Sergeev, Mikhail, editor. *Studies in Bahá'í Epistemology: Essays and Commentaries*. M-Graphics Publishing, 2021.

consensus, too uncomfortable, contested, and divisive, and therefore, too adversarial. Notions of 'unity' might even be invoked to silence talk of structural inequalities in the society at large or criticism of social realities and processes within the Bahá'í community. It could thus be said that the principle of the oneness of humankind has suffered from a lack of conceptual development in relation to its social dimensions. At the same time, it is much easier to promote a smooth and relatively accessible concept of the oneness of humankind projecting an image of unity than one laden with ambivalence and complexity and projecting an image of the structural issues in society that must be addressed.

Even more surprising is the failure to develop the most important aspect of the principle of the oneness of humankind. This principle, Shoghi Effendi[86] makes it very clear, "is applicable not only to the individual, but concerns itself primarily with the nature of those essential relationships that must bind all the states and nations as members of one human family." The principle of the oneness of humankind is therefore primarily concerned with the relationships between states and nations. This implies a need for political education[87] that relates from the local and the national to the global. Such education is currently missing in the Bahá'í community. More than that, however, the definition of Shoghi Effendi positions the principle of the oneness of humankind as a global notion, namely, as one that applies primarily at global scale:

"Bahá'u'lláh is designating and establishing a new unit of analysis – the global level – at which to reconceptualize human, spiritual, economic, and political culture and institutions. His perspective intentionally transcends the limited nationalistically oriented discourse of political theory because solutions based on the category of the nation-state are inadequate to meet the needs and moral challenges of a global human society." (Saiedi, p.324)[88]

[86] Effendi, Shoghi. *Bahá'í Reference Library - The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, Pages 42-45*. https://reference.bahai.org/en/t/se/WOB/wob-22.html. Accessed 2 Apr. 2022.
[87] A good introductory resource here is Knight, W. Andy, and Thomas F. Keating. *Global Politics: Emerging Networks, Trends and Challenges*. Oxford University Press Canada, 2010. Andy W. Knight has been one of the most prominent Bahá'í intellectuals in the field of political science for the last couple of decades. A comprehensive introduction is provided by the following course of Ian Shapiro - a non-Bahá'í political thinker: Shapiro, Ian. *(35) Power and Politics in Today's World - YouTube*. University of Yale Course https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLh9mgdi4rNeyViG2ar68jkgEi4y6doNZy
[88] Saiedi, Nader. *Logos and Civilization: Spirit, History, and Order in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*. Univ. Press of Maryland, 2000.

This dimension of the concept, which happens to be essential to our understanding of the present and the future, remains largely unacknowledged (as with the sociological and political dimensions of the concept). One might well ask: What are we promoting when we are promoting the concept of the oneness of humankind as an ontological truth?

Essentially, these perspectives, sociological – concerning structural inequalities, political – concerning the relations between nations and states, and global – concerning a new unit of analysis for all dimensions (spiritual, economic, political, environmental, etc.) require new forms of morality or ethics. Such forms of ethics would have to engage structural inequalities, the asymmetric relations between nations and regions, and forms of global inequality and the global concerns, crises, and trends of the present age. This cannot happen without in-depth knowledge of the global and of one's society in all its aspects. Such re-orientation in knowledge in light of this key teaching of Shoghi Effendi has not yet occurred. Therefore, a corresponding ethical alignment derived from such knowledge has not occurred either. Overcoming such issues requires an acceleration in open and democratic processes of knowledge and intense experimentation with dynamic forms of ethical living in light of the sociological, political, and global dimensions of the principle of the oneness of humankind. The last few decades show that fixating the notion as an ontological truth suspends these important dimensions and processes of inquiry. At the same time, what has been taken as an ontological truth might in fact constitute an interpretative paradigm yet to be constituted and an extremely complex program for social change – a vision of world order given by Bahá'u'lláh that is yet to be analyzed and understood. The focus on the aspect of ontological truth tends to, in this case, occult the vision of world order associated with that principle of the oneness of humankind.

Only with such analyses of the global and asymmetrical relations between nations, states, and regions, and of the structural issues in every society can the principle of the oneness of humankind begin to be comprehended, and forms of normative discernment and of dynamic ethical living reflective of it begin to be identified. You cannot be a lover of humankind if you do not understand the global (for what will you love?) and you cannot develop authentic forms of unity if injustice remains unexamined in local, national, and global settings. Considering that these aspects are essential to the attaining of spirituality, the hesitance in pursuing such deeper connections with the principle of the oneness of humankind is of concern. We cannot hide our participation in forms of oppression and the need to develop

forms of ethical responsibility by hiding behind a faith-based identification with the perfect and divine status of ontological truths. And we cannot safely rely on the promotion of an unelaborated notion of the principle of the oneness of humankind as ontological truth to result in meaningful social change and personal transformation. Asserting the principle of the oneness of humankind as an ontological truth in the manner of strong foundationalism hinders both the understanding of the concept and the formation of those dynamic forms of ethical living that such a principle calls for. The focus on the ontological status of the religious principles of the Bahá'í Faith and their acceptance as such by others also undermines a key Bahá'í teaching regarding moral development, teaching, and the appropriate methodology for pursuing social change. This teaching holds that arguments, words, and, therefore, the assertion of spiritual principles as ontological truths should not be prioritized over or imagined as somehow identical with the pursuance of goodly deeds, the edification of moral character, and the development of a spirit and way of life that mirrors the divine teachings. Of these, only the latter constitute the Bahá'í methodology for teaching and social change and should, therefore, be given priority (this point is also relevant in relation to Gramscian approaches to social change):

"The wish of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, that which attracts His good pleasure and, indeed, His binding command, is that Bahá'ís, in all matters, even in small daily transactions and dealings with others, should act in accordance with the divine Teachings. He has commanded us not to be content with lowliness, humility and meekness, but rather to become manifestations of selflessness and utter nothingness. Of old, all have been exhorted to loyalty and fidelity, compassion and love; in this supreme Dispensation, the people of Bahá are called upon to sacrifice their very lives. Notice the extent to which the friends have been required in the Sacred Epistles and Tablets, as well as in our Beloved's Testament, to be righteous, well-wishing, forbearing, sanctified, pure, detached from all else save God, severed from the trappings of this world and adorned with the mantle of a goodly character and godly attributes. … **It is primarily through the potency of noble deeds and character, rather than by the power of exposition and proofs, that the friends of God should demonstrate to the world that what has been promised by God is bound to happen, that it is already taking place and that the divine glad-tidings are clear, evident and complete.** For unless some illustrious souls step forth into the arena of service and shine out resplendent in the assemblage of men, the task of vindicating the truth of this Cause before the eyes of enlightened people would be formidable indeed. **However, if the friends become**

embodiments of virtue and good character, words and arguments will be superfluous. Their very deeds will well serve as eloquent testimony, and their noble conduct will ensure the preservation, integrity and glory of the Cause of God."[89] (Shoghi Effendi)

"The great thing is to 'live the life'--to have our lives so saturated with the Divine teachings and the Bahá'í Spirit that people cannot fail to see a joy, a power, a love, a purity, a radiance, an efficiency in our character and work that will distinguish us from worldly-minded people and make people wonder what is the secret of this new life in us. … If we do this sincerely then we shall have perfect unity and harmony with each other. Where there is want of harmony, there is lack of the true Bahá'í Spirit. Unless we can show this transformation in our lives, this new power, this mutual love and harmony, then the Bahá'í teachings are but a name to us."[90] (Shoghi Effendi)

IV. Conclusion to the Second Answer

My second answer was framed in relation to this excellent comment or question:

"But I am wondering, considering that Karlberg is upfront about the lack of capacity for his system to actually supply 'faith' in a mediated relationship between social knowledge and foundational truths; and given the idea of 'attunement' rather than say direct human access to direct truth; why would it be disingenuous to call this a middle point between foundationalism and antifoundationalism?"

The essential role of intuition in accepting normative foundational principles and their content as stipulated in advance, as well as its key role in all the phases of Karlberg's

[89] Effendi, Shoghi. *Living the Life*. https://bahai-library.com/compilation_living_the_life#1267. Accessed 2 Apr. 2022.
[90] Effendi, Shoghi. *Living the Life*. https://bahai-library.com/compilation_living_the_life#1271. Accessed 2 Apr. 2022.

'consultative epistemology', which occurs at the expense of the procedures of reason and of the scientific method, indicate that 'faith' features quite prominently 'in the mediated relationship between social knowledge and foundational truths.' I have also shown that normative foundational truths are not such 'phenomena' as those which the methodology of 'consultative epistemology' has originally been set out to explore. Therefore, the notion of 'attunement' cannot apply to them. For this reason, Karlberg redefines the notion of 'attunement' entirely. Attunement no longer refers 'to the goodness-of-fit between a specific paradigm (or specific paradigmatic insight) and a specific phenomenal aspect', but rather, to "a useful way to conceptualize the relationship between truth claims and foundational truths." (p.18) However, what is lost through this redefinition is exactly that type of referent that made the use of the scientific method possible. With this move, Karlberg moves 'attunement' outside the operations of the scientific method altogether, towards intuition, faith and/or mysticism. This redefinition of attunement collapses the very concept itself. The concept of attunement was originally defined as a fit between an interpretation and a phenomenon being observed. When there is no such phenomenon, no such interpretation is possible. Moreover, without a referent of this kind, how can any scientific avenue towards normative foundational truths be found? The attunement was to phenomena, not to the truth beyond them. Without a phenomenon, the truth is completely hidden and unknown and cannot be brought into the investigative process. It is, therefore, impossible to even point a possible direction for a normative foundational truth. Normative foundational truths cannot be located.

To escape this conundrum, Karlberg brings in an innate capacity that can apprehend normative foundational truths, called 'normative intuition.' In this, he claims to rely on the arguments of Seung. However, Seung's arguments, at least as Karlberg presents them, are problematic. Even if we accept that some kind of normative intuition exists and is active in how thinkers consciously or subconsciously construct their theoretical models, one will still have to prove that what this normative intuition apprehends are not nonfoundational normative assumptions but normative foundational truths. But one cannot do so, in Seung's theory, except through the very capacity of 'normative intuition.' Without this type of 'normative intuition' the whole argumentation collapses, as also do key claims in favour of the existence and the identification of normative foundational truths. There are also other problems with Seung's argument. What Seung considers the results of 'normative intuition' might be borrowed themes from other discourses in society or reflexes of social conditioning and not direct insights into 'normative foundational truths.' Seung would have to prove the

sources of such intuition are transcendental and accessible in accurate manner and not simply the ordinary discourses and themes circulating around.

Indeed, this is a significant issue also for the 'consultative epistemology' of Karlberg. Karlberg cannot guarantee or demonstrate that the intuition on which such a methodology relies is actually one that captures normative foundational truths, or which is connected to a transcendental source of knowledge in some sort of direct way. So, what happens when intersubjective agreement is sought based on intuition, but such intuition is nothing but ordinary imagination and inspiration, and not regulated by the procedures of reason or by the scientific method? In the end, it is only through religion that normative foundational truths can be located, hypothesized, or asserted, and only through faith that these can receive recognition, acceptance, and the long-term commitment to apply them at large-scale. Normative foundational truths simply become 'articles of faith.' As for 'embodiment', the simple fact that we are talking about such a notion means that the normative foundational truths Karlberg introduces differ entirely from the type of phenomena the notion of 'attunement' was originally devised for. To make up for this transgression, Karlberg (pp.34-35) introduces the notion of "latency" (reminiscent of the Greek notions of potentiality and actuality), which presupposes that normative foundational truths operate in a somewhat similar manner to the 'Ideas' or 'Forms' of Plato. However, Karlberg does not try to ground this concept and his normative foundational truths in any philosophical, ethical, or scientific theory. There is also no consideration given to what the Bahá'í Writings might or might not have to say about normative foundational truths. In the penultimate chapter of the book there is a discussion about teleology but even the author admits teleological thinking has fallen into disfavour as much as modern science is concerned. Consequently, 'latency' gets justified as an ontological premise because it constitutes 'an article of faith':

"The latent reality of the human spirit can thus be understood as a transcendent reality that became manifest in the material world only when the tree of biological evolution reached its fruition and produced the human form, thus laying the basis for higher-order evolutionary processes with moral and social dimensions. **This understanding is an article of faith – or an ontological premise.** It has not been empirically proven." (p.169)

Curiously, it has also been noted that in Karlberg's consultative methodology the principle of 'the generation and application of knowledge' does not apply to the most significant part of

the process of knowledge: the identification, selection, and definition of key concepts (or truths). Other problems appear through the notions of 'intuition', 'normative foundational truths', and 'embodiment.' What would Karlberg say if he was invited to a consultative epistemology session by some other group to find he can only consult about the application of the key principles espoused by that group (and as solely defined by that group), all on the assumption, accompanied by no rational argumentation, that such principles (as articles of faith) constitute normative foundational truths all should recognize intuitively? I have also argued here that extracting 'articles of faith' or 'normative foundational truths' from the Bahá'í Writings is a very complex exercise that Karlberg seems to take for granted, with 'intuition', or 'faith', or notions from analytical philosophy such as that of an 'ideal language',[91] trumping hermeneutics and the procedures of reason. In addition, I have also indicated that what is being proposed by the consultative epistemology of Karlberg is a set of foundational premises forming a conceptual framework that, in fact, reflects a religious system of belief (and the values of ontological foundationalism). In that sense, what is being asked by such consultative procedures is that another party adopt a different system of belief and not just a premise, for an indeterminate period, and accept to build on its foundations, both theoretically and in terms of large-scale social projects, so as to verify its truth and efficacy over time. This implied system of belief would, of course, be affirmed as one of strong foundationalism.

For such reasons as delineated above, Karlberg's notion of normative foundational truths can be taken to constitute not only an imposition on the frameworks of philosophy, science, and of fields of practice, but also an imposition on the original and more rigorous 'consultative epistemology' of Smith and Karlberg.

[91] The process of selecting even the shortest statement from the Bahá'í Writings as a normative foundational truth will always imply a prior act of interpretation that must be expounded upon, while the truth of the statement in question would still need to be justified both within the domain of religion (in light of its own principles of hermeneutics and in relationship with the whole of the Revelation), and within the domains of science and philosophy (according to their logic and procedures), as the principle of the harmony of science and religion demands. It is not as if truth comes in small pieces (divine words or propositions) and as a material object that can be transferred in its exact form from one location to another (from the domain of religion straight to that of philosophy or science or to fields of practice). The language of the Revelation, although it is the Word of God, is not an 'ideal language' of the kind espoused by the early proponents of analytic philosophy. As Karlberg's work is concerned with social change/transformation and the notion of normative foundational truths, his claims, even if just to the Bahá'í community, must be grounded in a Bahá'í philosophy of social change, a Bahá'í theory of ethics, and a Bahá'í epistemology. This has not occurred.

While such impositions of value are the result of general bias either from the strong pull of ontological foundationalism or from the strong and direct assertion of faith (or both), bias creeps in also in specific arguments. Karlberg makes the mistake of conflating general assumptions that background science with specific ontological premises one could or could not activate, based on deliberate choice. At the same time, a premise can never be consciously advanced in the fields of science or philosophy (or even in the field of social action or development) simply on the criterion of intuition. While intuition clearly plays a role in the process of knowledge and in the formulation and testing of premises, this role is either subconscious and/or subsidiary to other criteria of logic and procedures of reason. His use of Seung's argument in favour of 'normative intuition' also has flaws – in fact the very notion has no conceptual grounding (it is as taken for granted as the notion of normative foundational truths is), but it becomes the fundament of 'consultative epistemology.' He also fails to consider that cultures are dynamic and open to exchange; that the cultural norms of any social formation can experience significant change towards universal forms through the use of reason and language and through cultural exchange etc.

In his book, Karlberg (pp.189-190) claims that his 'consultative epistemology' "reconciles truth and relativity, knowledge and power, and science and religion in rational and constructive ways":

"Relative embodiment is a much richer concept that enables us to recognize the constitutive, as well as the context-dependent, expression of normative truths in the phenomena we construct through human agency. **With this recognition [namely, the recognition of normative foundational truths provided through 'relative attunement' and 'relative embodiment'], we can reconcile truth and relativity on yet another level. We can see that 'truth versus relativity' is a false dichotomy even in the domain of social reality and normative truths**." (p.45)

Thus, the main thesis of Karlberg's book is that his 'consultative epistemology' "reconciles ontological foundationalism and epistemological relativism within a moderate social constructionist framework." (p.190) Nevertheless, the analysis provided here reveals this claim as unsubstantiated. In terms of constituting 'a middle point between foundationalism and antifoundationalism', the difficulties with Karlberg's methodology can be broadly summarized as follows:

1) His redefinition of 'attunement' and the notion of 'embodiment' seem incompatible with the 'consultative epistemology' of Smith and Karlberg.[92] Are there not essential problems here with the fundamentals of what Karlberg refers to as his "moderate social constructionist framework" (p.190)?

2) Both at the conceptual level and as consultative practice the notion of normative foundational truths (as concepts derived from religion but viewed through the prism of ontological foundationalism) is imposed in many ways on the frameworks of philosophy and science, as well as on fields of practice such as those of development, social change, and social transformation (while also not being legitimized or justified hermeneutically and philosophically for a Bahá'í audience). Is the 'consultative epistemology' of Karlberg truly democratic, dialogic in character, and consistent with bottom-up approaches? Does it abide by the principle of the harmony of science and religion? In one of the most important parts of his book Karlberg makes the important observation that for social justice movements or initiatives 'the means should prefigure the ends.' He then wonderfully explains: "Similarly, if people aspired to live in a society that was not characterized by oppressive hierarchies, they should organize their movement in ways that did not reproduce oppressive hierarchies." (p.185) This principle should be given serious consideration in how we envision consultative processes.

3) Does the new 'consultative epistemology' of Karlberg constitute an authentic form of open consultation? Is it generally free of bias? Does it respect the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and belief? Does it cultivate 'power with' or 'power over'? One concern here is that 'the generation and application of knowledge' does not apply to the most significant part of the process of knowledge: the identification, selection, and definition of key concepts (or truths). Furthermore, such concepts imply the adoption of a system of belief. The operation of this methodology can be called into question even further: Who decides what counts as accurate 'normative intuition' at individual and collective levels? Who decides what constitutes 'relative embodiment' in real life applications and what fails to meet that criterion? Who decides what are 'normative foundational truths' and what are not? More

[92] Todd Smith and Michael Karlberg. *Articulating a Consultative Epistemology*. https://bahai-library.com/smith_karlberg_consultative_epistemology. Accessed 15 Mar. 2022.

importantly, do the Bahá'í Writings anywhere mention that consultative consensus cannot be reached without prior acceptance of normative foundational truths that should 'underlie and inform the construction of social realities'? Do they state anywhere that consultation should only proceed after certain key ontological principles regarding the aspects of social reality under consideration have been accepted as such? There are no indications that one should begin with a particular ontology or metaphysics before proceeding to consultation. Karlberg is right to indicate that a certain aspiration for justice and unity (and, I would add, for truth first and foremost) is necessary for the process of Bahá'í consultation. But this does not mean 1) that the acceptance of the foundational normative principles of the Bahá'í Faith is a must or 2) that such foundational normative principles should be employed from the above as objective truths arbitrating between knowledge claims. We read in his attempt to impose normative foundational principles as objective values or truths specified in advance "a proclivity to totalize." (Smith and Ghaemmaghami, p.451)

These problems occur because, from the very start, Karlberg interprets the notion of Bahá'í consultation through the prism of ontological foundationalism. The promotion of normative foundational truths constitutes an intrinsic aspect of ontological foundationalism and of any type of strong foundationalism. This is so because in such a perspective the direct assertion of ontological truths is the solution to any given problem. We must, therefore, be acutely concerned with how strong foundationalism impacts our regimes of ethics and our ethical conduct. As I have argued above at length, it seems the more we assign priority to the promotion of religious principles as normative foundational truths (or ontological truths) the more the intellectual investigation of such truths and the formation of dynamic forms of ethical living (or regimes of ethics) in relation to them are being impaired.

4) Is this new version of 'consultative epistemology' scientific enough? The scientific method and philosophical and scientific reason do not seem central to its key phases in a) the identification of the normative foundational principles and their content; b) the evaluation and recognition of such normative foundational principles and their content at a conceptual level; c) the elaboration of designs for how normative foundational truths would be implemented in social reality; and d) the iterative assessment of their implementation. Does this 'consultative epistemology' operate primarily on procedures of reason and on the scientific method?

When taken together, points 2), 3), and 4) indicate the need for asking quite a number of questions: is the 'consultative epistemology' of Karlberg truly consultative? Is it fair? Is it unbiased? Is it just? Does it respect the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and belief? Does it cultivate 'power with' or 'power over'? Is this 'consultative epistemology' scientific enough? Does it operate primarily on procedures of reason and on the scientific method?

5) Even when based on forms of reason and logic, collective consultation is generally good at generating consensus or agreement on existent themes, but not of great use in research (that is, in proposing, investigating, and validating major hypotheses such as the existence of particular normative foundational truths), or for producing new knowledge. For such reasons, it is also not great at producing rigorous evaluations. Even the capacity to generate consensus on existent themes, however, is significantly weakened if the methodology in use does not operate primarily on reason, logic, or the scientific method.

For all these five sets of reasons, the essential claim that this 'consultative epistemology' "reconciles ontological foundationalism and epistemological relativism" (p.190) seems unfounded. This 'consultative methodology' and its associated conceptual framework, no matter how much one can appreciate the effort put into formulating them and the strong desire to accelerate meaningful social transformation, cannot be taken to constitute 'a middle point between foundationalism and antifoundationalism.'
Furthermore, because of the manner in which they identify, define, and assert ontological truths, the 'consultative epistemology' and ontological foundationalism of Karlberg display certain tendencies that inhibit rather than encourage the pursuit of knowledge, moral and ethical formation, and processes of community-building. The possible crystallization of dogma; the failure to acknowledge the positive role of the anxiety of facing the unknown (and of the perennial tension between faith and reason) in attaining intellectual maturity; the reluctance to open channels of communications with philosophy, science, the academic disciplines, and other religions; the limitation of knowledge generated by processes of knowledge formation where key values have been specified in advance; the failure to appreciate that even the central principles of the Bahá'í Faith are defined in relative terms and can be legitimately expressed through diverse and even contradictory viewpoints; the undermining of the principle of the independent investigation of truth and of the notion of justice demanding that in a consultation every individual should be free to think for himself,

to seek out the Real, and to deliberate independently on ontological matters; the failure to develop normative discernment and dynamic forms of ethical living because the mode of relation to spiritual principles is one primarily concerned with their assertion as ontological truths; the assumption that if certain normative foundational truths are accepted as a 'given' processes of moral transformation and social change will automatically ensue; the unfounded belief that the direct assertion of ontological truths can provide the solution to any related problem; the manner in which the assertion of a spiritual principle as an ontological truth can undermine its conceptual development and the ethical forms of living that should be derived from such conceptualization; the fact that, in terms of constituting a Bahá'í methodology for social change, the assertion of spiritual principles as ontological truths tends to be prioritized over, or be imagined as identical a process with the pursuance of goodly deeds, the edification of moral character, and the development of a spirit and way of life that mirrors the divine teachings – all of these have been highlighted as problematic tendencies associated with ontological foundationalism and with strong foundationalism.

However, to admit of this is not the end of the world, nor should we allow such matters to obscure the merits of Karlberg's work. First, without this well-written book from Karlberg our scholarship and practice would not be able to advance from where they are.

Second, the posing of such questions is necessary. How are we to relate to and apply the ethical teachings of the different religions in the world for the betterment of humankind? How do we reach agreement on normative principles at a societal level? How do we make ethics the foundation of our individual and collective lives? These are key questions that Karlberg expressly brings to our attention.
Third, not all is lost. This experiment maps a territory on which much can be built.

What is noticeable is that if we remove the notion of normative foundational truths and of normative intuition (as a capacity that apprehends normative foundational truths and is central to the process of constructing large-scale projects) and add the procedures of reason and the scientific method from the very beginning of the process, the 'consultative epistemology' of Karlberg becomes largely functional. Unmistakably, such a revised 'consultative epistemology' begins to look very much like the consultative processes outlined by Habermas. Indeed, maybe a worthy conclusion of the book could be that Karlberg's

(p.138) own description of the deliberative procedures of Habermas should act as a blueprint for the future:

"Normative claims, according to Habermas, do not refer to independent or external phenomena. But they still can be the object of reasoning, criticism, and justification leading to normative consensus – or intersubjective validity – under the right conditions.
For Habermas, such conditions include the following: All relevant voices must be included and must have an equal voice. **All participants must be free to initiate discussion**, share their views, and question others in honest and open ways. And all participants must be free from coercion when they speak. Under such conditions, Habermas asserts that it is possible to arrive at some context-transcending normative principles. Such principles do not exist outside of human reasoning and discourse. Rather, the linguistic structure of human reasoning and discourse can, under the right conditions, yield them. **In this sense, context-transcending normative truths are not ontologically foundational. They are derivative. Yet Habermas submits that they can be universal because the underlying structure of human language and reasoning is a universal species characteristic.** Thus, when language and reason are collectively exercised through the right deliberative procedures under the right deliberative conditions, **the process can allegedly yield context-transcending normative truths**."

From this perspective, Bahá'í intellectuals interested in the themes of collective consultation, development, social change, and social transformation might wish to concern themselves more closely with proceduralist approaches. In this, the central task would be how to transcend the failures of Habermas's theory (and of Bahá'í consultation) to address the hegemonic and power relations that severely disrupt, undermine, or make deliberative practices (and the establishment of social forms based on normative principles) impossible in the real world. Here we should be wary of Karlberg's contention that "although participatory action research has an obvious normative dimension" it should be made to rest on "a coherent normative ontology," an argument Karlberg seems willing to extend to other research methodologies too. (p.179) Such suggestions should be read in my view as 'a proclivity to totalize.' All research methodologies come with their implied ontological assumptions, and one ontological aspect cannot be simply removed from the set and replaced with another. What can be done, however, is the construction of an alternative research methodology.

Equally important to such a proceduralist focus would be the development of a Bahá'í philosophy of social change. This would have to derive at least in part from a Bahá'í epistemology – another area of investigation in need of development.

Finally, the merits of Karlberg's book lie in advancing the need for the Bahá'í community to advance a normative discourse on religion, on technology, and in all areas of social life (from the food industry to financial services). This would obviously go hand in hand with supporting norm-based approaches to the resolution of social problems, and particularly in terms of global governance. Through Karlberg's efforts, the need to research, practice, and develop the practice of Bahá'í consultation emerges as one of the most fundamental themes in any form of Bahá'í ethics or methodology for social change. This establishes consultation, I would hope, as a key research topic for decades to come.

However, in addition to advancing normative discourses, consultative practices, and norm-based approaches to social problems, religion must also show how spirituality or morality should be expressed in action as a lived reality. It should offer dynamic forms of ethical living that can inspire. This form of relationship with the realm of values is probably the most significant feature a religion could focus on and one infinitely more important than the promotion of normative foundational truths in my opinion. Here it should also be clear that the expression of virtue presupposes unbiased, nuanced, refined, and empathetic thought imbued with love. Narrow thought and forms of bias, even when religious, are simply not compatible with spirituality. [93] The power of religion is not to set absolute truths for everyone but to inspire through the power of example. If its values and meanings are going to spread into the global society this will be by dispersion through the power of example and not through the imposition of values (as the universal promotion of 'articles of faith' via Gramscian approaches or of normative foundational truths via ontological foundationalism, for example). In other words, others will make the independent choice to consider the importance of such values and meanings for themselves because they are attracted to the dynamic ethical forms of living and the new forms of knowledge that embody them. There are no shortcuts here. Dynamic ethical living must be cultivated and truly rigorous thought of great creative power and free of bias must be developed. If these are integrated with the

[93] In this sense, postmodernist, postcolonial, race, gender, and queer studies might all be of assistance in helping us transcend ancient religious habits and reflexes.

advancement of normative discourses in various fields of knowledge and practice (particularly in the field of religion) and with norms-based approaches (such as those present in Habermas or other forms of proceduralism) to the resolution of social problems, all under the constant imperative of individual and collective self-reflexivity ("constant scrutiny, continual self-examination and heart-searching"[94]), then the focus on foundational normative truths as fundamental to social transformation might prove not as crucial or relevant as some deem it to be today.

And, indeed, why not focus on the normative dimensions of religion, of technological applications and of other related areas of life, on norm-based regimes and the methodologies and discourses that could underpin them, and on how to live a life based on ethics in this world of modernity, instead of chasing the dream of identifying absolute foundational truths in which to ground the essentials of Western thought and civilization, all from a position of underdeveloped and inchoate scholarship? Why not focus on developing a more complex understanding of the Bahá'í Writings and on expanding our search for its deeper concepts (via developing a Bahá'í hermeneutics, ethics, epistemology, and philosophy of social change, for example) rather than on promoting as of yet unelaborated conceptions (that lack rigor and depth) as universal normative foundational truths? Why cultivate strong foundationalism when our phase of opening up to the world and our religious belief system would seem to require consultative approaches that are wider, more open, more authentic, more grounded in reason and the scientific method, and much freer of bias, than the world has ever seen? Why cultivate strong foundationalism when we haven't yet started examining the Bahá'í Writings in a serious scholarly manner, meaning, by the development of Bahá'í inspired fields of study that could hold their own within the academia?

Other ways to engage the normative dimensions of religious teachings, from foundational ones (modest and weak foundationalism are general options but many more specific options can be imagined) to nonfoundational or even anti-foundational ones, can and should be explored.

Ultimately, we must move beyond educational models inspired by ontological foundationalism that frame moral education as the acceptance of and submission to 'given'

[94] Shoghi Effendi. *The Advent of Divine Justice*. New pocket-size Ed, Bahá'í Pub. Trust, 2006, p.32.

ontological truths and the imitation of prescriptive models of social behaviour towards models of education that transcend banking education by encouraging active thought, creativity, experimentation, problem-solving, and self-agency in establishing a search for, and a mode of relation to, ethical principles. Here, the analysis of the unique moral dilemmas of our time[95] (for which new moral codes are required) and our mode of relation to (the resulting) ethical principles should be given considerable priority over the identification of absolute moral principles or normative foundational truths:

"In most religions, metaphysics--the structure of the spiritual world--is considered of primary importance. Even in Buddhism, where the Buddha himself played down the importance of metaphysics--and even went so far as to refuse to answer metaphysical questions--a vast amount of effort by Buddhist scholars through the ages has gone into defining and refining their metaphysics. However, if it is considered that the truth of all metaphysical systems is only a provisional, partial, relative truth, the importance of metaphysics lessens considerably. Interest is no longer primarily in the structures of metaphysics, but rather in relationships. **That is to say that the focus of interest is no longer so much in what the Absolute is, but in what the individual's relationship with the Absolute should be, and what the consequences of that relationship are**. The emphasis has shifted from structures to processes and relationships. And therefore ethics comes to the forefront of consideration." (Momen)[96]

As mentioned at the very beginning, this account should not be read as a review of Michael Karlberg's book *Constructing Social Reality*. My concern here is simply with 'ontological

[95] See, for example the ethical dilemmas emphasized by Paul Hanley in his book "11" and which are unique to our time because 1) of the crises faced, 2) of how they link our everyday actions to global issues, 3) of how the different crises connect to each-other – which makes addressing them through ethical or moral thought and action extremely complex. From the food industry, to healthcare, to education, to law, to politics, to travel, to consumerism, to paying taxes, to entertainment, to sports, to using gas and electricity and so on, there is no aspect of our everyday lives that does not link us to chains of oppression that either endanger the planet or hurt populations if not around us then in some other parts of the world. These are not the ethical dilemmas of previous generations, though many aspects of them are not new either. Because we are in a search for identifying how these different forms of oppression link together from the local to the global, and in a search for what kind of normative and ethical responses would be needed to address them, banking education and the promotion of normative foundational truths have little use here. At the same time, while identifying a global ethics in this context is different from other times and a comprehensive model of this kind has rarely, if ever, been truly activated at a global stage, older models are of use and should be considered, but in dynamic and not in static ways (not as codes to be internalized, for example). Participating in the formulation of a global ethics is an essential part of normative discernment for each of us, but unattainable if such discernment is not dynamically and freely allowed to flourish.

[96] Momen, Moojan. *Relativism: A Basis For Bahá'í Metaphysics*. 1988, https://bahai-library.com/momen_relativism_bahai_metaphysics. Accessed 27 Mar. 2022.

foundationalism' and the claims relating to it as well as with the recent wave of Bahá'í scholarship originating from a position of strong foundationalism. Although authors such as David Palmer[97] and Sona Farid-Arbab[98] prefer an even more direct insertion of spiritual principles or values (and, therefore, of religion) as ontological foundations in the spheres of civil society[99] and education their models and arguments are in many ways similar to those of Karlberg and, therefore, susceptible to the same critique.

It is because of the need for the Bahá'í community and scholarship to show the rest of the world that it can engage in critical self-reflection and engage with different perspectives (a prerequisite for displaying a culture of ideas that is alive and not inert) that I have committed to making such an unusual contribution. At the same time, I am very grateful to Michael Karlberg for writing this book and raising so many issues for discussion.

I would never have embarked on this analysis of ontological foundationalism without the exceptional and detailed questions of Ney Grant. By the rules of academic exchange his questions necessitated that I provide an in-depth response. These have also provided me with an angle for analysis that frames the structure of the paper.

I have not yet had time to ponder on what approach based on the notion of normative foundational truths could be acceptable to me. The only exception is a model that would treat them as spiritual realities but hidden and unknown truths (principles or paradigms) to be approximated through different conceptual models that cannot guarantee objectivity or certainty. This model differs from the nonfoundationalism of Richard J. Bernstein proposed by Paul Lample[100] but is very compatible with it and in need of such reinforcement. The key issue, however, remains the development of interpretative conceptual models or theories which can order the truths in the Bahá'í Writings into a coherent whole. Without such approaches, an identification of the principal concepts or principles of the Bahá'í Faith remains elusive, illusory, fragmentary, biased, and shallow. Otherwise, my understanding of

[97] Palmer, David. 'Religion, Spiritual Principles, and Civil Society'. Cameron, Geoffrey, and Benjamin Schewel (Eds.). *Religion and Public Discourse in an Age of Transition Reflections on Bahá'í Practice and Thought*, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2017, pp. 37–69. *Open WorldCat*, https://muse.jhu.edu/book/57468/.
[98] Farid-Arbab, Sona. *Moral Empowerment: In Quest of a Pedagogy*. Bahá'í Publishing, 2016.
[99] David Palmer's essay offers an interesting and powerful critique of civil society in its four main dimensions.
[100] Lample, Paul. *Revelation & Social Reality: Learning to Translate What Is Written into Reality*. Palabra Publications, 2009, Chapter 5: A Problem of Knowledge.

an appropriate mode of relation to Bahá'í spiritual principles has been outlined in my discussion of the principle of the oneness of humankind and in the subsection entitled "Processes of Community Building" (although the entire section III. "Karlberg's Notion of Consultation and Bahá'í Consultation" has been devoted to this topic).
Many of the weighty questions raised by Karlberg, including how to reconcile truth and relativity, knowledge and power, and science and religion have not yet been successfully answered. These are all very dynamic and open themes for exploration, as I have endeavoured to show through this analysis.

"Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp, Or what's a heaven for?" (Robert Browning)