

INTERVIEW — SESSION 2: A DEVELOPMENTAL MODEL FOR RELIGION; A BAHÁ'Í PHILOSOPHY AND SOCIAL THEORY

This is a lightly edited transcript of an informal interview between Dr. Filip Boicu and Dr. Behrooz Sabet, originally published on YouTube on October 10, 2025.

Section I

A Developmental Model of Religion and the Three Stages of Educational and Scholarly Development

Dr. Filip Boicu: *Dear Dr. Sabet, thank you for joining me again. This is the second session we are having together. The first one was on the topic of the social sciences. Today I want to continue with a related theme. Could you please explain to us the developmental model of religion you have outlined in your work? I really would like you to take your time in describing the model. I also have a diagram of it here, which I will share with everyone. Here it is. Please feel free to take it over.*

Dr. Sabet: Sure. Thank you again for inviting me for this second interview. I hope I can say something valuable about these important topics. The first item is about the evolutionary or developmental processes that, according to the Bahá'í Faith and Bahá'í theology, are the backbone or organizing principle of Bahá'í teachings, and that is the idea of unfolding truth—truth that God sends messengers to this world with messages suited to human capacity, historical necessity, and geographical conditions. All of these situations or environments are aspects of these progressive divine revelations.

So I think the foundation of this idea, philosophically speaking, is that the Bahá'í Faith acknowledges change. Nothing is static in this world. Everything is in the process of becoming, changing, and evolving, or reaching a degree of *kamāl* (perfection). In that sense, religion also is part of this evolving process. Alfred North Whitehead, the Anglo-American philosopher and mathematician, once said that religion commits suicide if it does not change and evolve like science, and this is very relevant to Bahá'í thinking as well. Therefore, there are two aspects that I have to mention here: one is the universal aspect of religion, which is everlasting and renewed in every religious dispensation; and then there are particular aspects depending on culture and on the progress of humanity in terms of social development, technological development, and so on. Those are the social principles that change and evolve.

There is an interesting relationship between the spiritual, universal, everlasting principles of religion—which constitute the concept of the unity of all religions because they all come from the same source with the same divine purpose—and the particular social principles, which aim to elevate the human condition, create a new consciousness of spirituality, and foster moral

rectitude, and so on. In other words, the transcendental element reminds humanity that we do not ultimately belong to this earth. Our true essence is spiritual—it seeks to achieve perfection, to progress, to separate itself from the mundane aspects of life, and to seek higher aspects of knowledge, experience, and development. These two dimensions really work together.

Another important point we should mention about this idea of evolving religious traditions is that it rejects two things that are often emphasized in traditional religions: one is the finality of dispensation or revelation, and the other is the exclusivity of a religious dispensation. Many religions—almost most of them—particularly when they become part of the sociocultural institutions of religion, and when they are somehow separated from the original spiritual impulse and revelation and become part of history, basically become like another ideology. One is the idea of finality: the claim that revelation has ended, that they are the final religion, the final answer, and therefore there is no need for any new divine revelation. Perhaps reform of some sort is acceptable, but only within the parameters of the initial revelation, not as a completely new revelation. The other is the concept of exclusivity: the belief that their revelation is unique and separate from other religious traditions, and perhaps better, in the sense that they provide a wider aspect of truth to humanity.

These two concepts are rejected in Bahá'í thought when we talk about religions and the role of religion. We believe that religious dispensations come and grow through a process of evolution, and then there is the idea of cyclical renewal: when the initial spiritual sentiment of religion plays out, the need for a new revelation arises. So that is basically the idea that there is no final religion; there is no final prophet or messenger of God. This is a continuous process. It is an evolving process because, if religions come to save humanity spiritually, humanity is in a state of dynamic evolution. Therefore, the dynamism we assume for human civilization must also be assumed for religious dispensations and revelations. The other point, as I said, is the concept of exclusivity—the claim that they have the truth and have the answer.

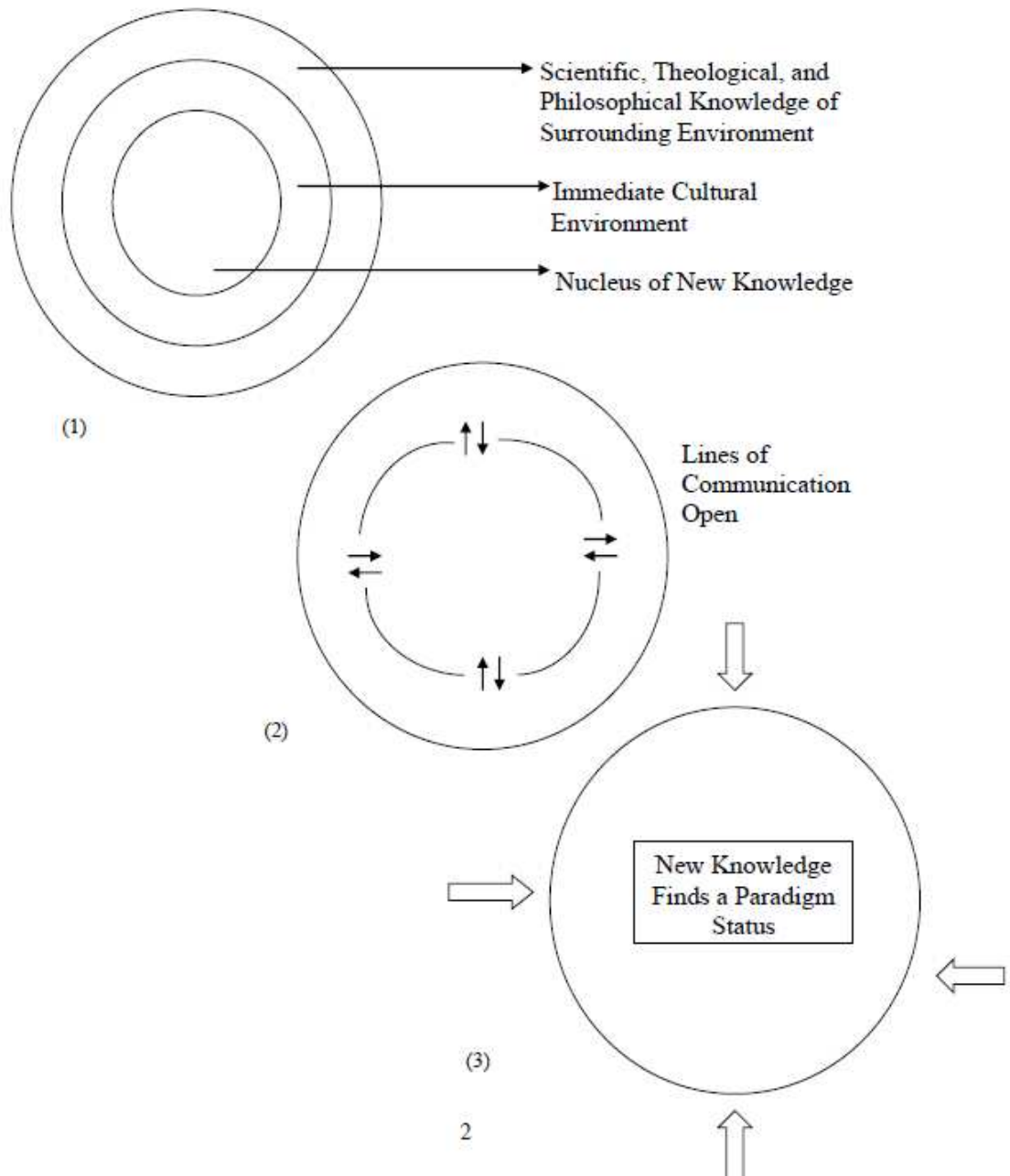
I can give an example. The finality of religion is particularly emphasized in Islamic tradition: the doctrine that the Prophet was the end of all prophets and that after him there is no other; he basically brought everything that humanity needed forever. In my view, that is a rejection of change, science, progress—everything. Of course, the spiritual side, as we said, is universal; but there is a dynamic relationship between spiritual principles and social principles and historical necessities, and if they do not work with each other, it creates tension and chaos. An example of exclusivity can be related to certain Christian beliefs: that Jesus Christ was the essence of history, the only person who offered humanity, through his blood and his sacrifice, a chance for redemption. It goes back to the idea of original sin—that human beings were cursed from the beginning, thrown out of heaven, and carry this original sin from generation to generation. That includes followers of all religions and even prophets of God such as Moses and the other Abrahamic prophets. The only perfect, infallible human being was Jesus Christ. That then takes us to the concept of the Trinity—Jesus Christ as, at the same time, the Holy Ghost and God—

which is really beyond our discussion. But the basic idea is that Jesus Christ brought the only answer, and salvation depends exclusively on believing in Jesus Christ and acknowledging that he came and shed his blood for our sin, and that we must repent, go to him, and ask for salvation. This is not part of the Bahá'í picture—the concepts of finality and exclusivity.

Another feature of Bahá'í thinking—Bahá'í theology—is that, ultimately, the purpose of religion or of any new revelation is to create a new civilization. There is a very dynamic, progressive, and unique relationship between the concept of revelation and the establishment of civilization: religions come to accompany human progress and inject a dose of spirituality into social progress, technological progress, and scientific progress, and to create a cohesive spiritual, social, technological, and scientific environment for an emerging civilization. This, of course, is another topic for scientists, historians, and social scientists—sociologists—to examine: how there is an element of spirituality, moral rectitude, and moral codes behind every major civilization of the world. This is strongly emphasized in the Bahá'í teachings; in fact, the claim is that the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh will eventually lead to a global civilization.

So that is basically one part of this discussion. The other one is about the diagram that you brought up, which I can explain a little bit more.

Stages of the Historical Development of Education and Scholarship



Dr. Sabet: As you see, there are three stages in this model. The first stage is represented by concentric circles within each other but separated from each other. In this first level of religious formation, a religion comes into being: the smallest circle is the nucleus of a new revelation. This nucleus is within a broader cultural and social environment, which itself is within a much broader social, cultural, scientific, or philosophical environment—but they are not communicating with each other. The outermost, bigger circle represents the dominant mode of thinking, behavior, and values. The circle in between represents neighboring dominant ideas. In the middle is the nucleus of the new religion.

Now, for instance, in the Bahá'í Faith we can say that the nucleus began when the Báb declared his mission to Mullá Husayn in 1844, and that was the beginning of this nucleus. Of course, there were historical and theological backgrounds to it; I do not want to discuss those now. A new religion was formed, and this revelation became part of history on that particular night when the revelation was conveyed from the source of revelation to another human being—into the consciousness of another human being. Then he went out and brought together the Letters of the Living, and gradually the whole country became aware of this new revelation. This is how religion starts: with an initial impulse at a particular moment in history, and then it grows and expands and becomes part of social interactions and social progress, and so on.

During that particular period—the infancy of religion, when it is just a nucleus—there are certain conditions that apply. This model can be applied, roughly speaking, to most religious traditions. It is almost common sense; of course, there are differences in terms of a specific religion, a specific cultural environment, a specific historical period, and so on. But a general pattern—a historical trajectory—can be constructed based on this model. During that period of infancy, religion has its own characteristics. It is limited. The number of believers is limited. Historically there have been periods of severe persecution and sacrifice among the early believers. The main point of this era—this period or stage—is to consolidate the faith, consolidate the teachings, and expand them so the religion can grow and gain strength to advance itself and expand its boundaries during this period.

As I said, the knowledge available to the believers is very basic. It is primarily the words of the prophet. For instance, in Christianity, what Jesus Christ preached to his followers while he was living—before his crucifixion—was then recounted among the believers, and that became the foundation of the New Testament, the Christian Bible. As I said, the knowledge is very limited, and I would add that people's understanding of the ultimate vision of the religion is also limited. They know they have found the truth, but it is difficult to perceive where this new revelation is going, how it can expand, and what the end result will be. This is natural: it is a limited intellectual environment that must grow through history and the exchange of ideas.

So these are the characteristics of this embryonic inception of a new religion and its gradual evolution. When you look at different religions—for instance, in Islam in the early days, the

main sources of knowledge were the Qur'an and then what the Prophet said (the *sunnah* or *hadith*). It took almost two centuries before we saw an expansion of this knowledge and a better understanding of it—when Islam expanded, became almost an empire, and established social and political foundations. Gradually, cultural exchanges took place. The early study, if it was in a *madrasa*—a school that was part of the mosque—centered on the Qur'an and the sayings, but gradually other subject matters came into the picture, like astronomy, philosophy, mathematics, and so on. This was also because of exchanges with other cultures: works of Greek philosophy were translated into Arabic; Iranian and Persian culture strongly influenced the formation and operation of the Islamic empire under the Abbasids, and so on.

Because of these interactions, the religion became more sophisticated. Gradually we see that the concept of a school was separated from the place of worship; they became their own institutions. A similar pattern appears in Christianity. Christianity, for perhaps 400 years, was in this period of embryonic inception, growth, persecution, and sacrifice, but gradually—through Constantine—it became a major religion in Rome, and then it started to grow. We see how the books of the Old Testament and the New Testament came together and became the foundation of major philosophical and scientific progress. St. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and many others incorporated Greek philosophy into Christian theology and established very sophisticated forms of theological doctrine. The point is that they gradually moved toward establishing civilization. By that I do not mean there were no negative aspects in this process—in terms of wars or the tyranny of some leaders who claimed religious authority, and so on—but overall a general pattern can be observed: the sphere of influence of these religions became stronger; they established universities, schools, hospitals; they became sources of philanthropic deeds that still continue to this day.

So that is the first diagram. The second one shows the initial religion—the nucleus, that embryonic infancy—growing and coming closer and closer to the dominant mode of thinking, to the paradigm of the time in thinking, feeling, and acting, and so on. The third one shows when the internal development of this nucleus grows to the point that it becomes the dominant paradigm—or incorporates the dominant paradigm into itself and becomes the ultimate paradigm. This is the stage at which, we can say, a religion moves from infancy to the stage of establishing a civilization.

So I think this is one way of understanding this process of development—how, in the beginning, a small, persecuted but spiritually motivated community starts to advance and moves from the state of infancy to, later on, centuries later, establishing a civilization. Of course, in the process there have been all sorts of ups and downs—progress and regress, persecution and sacrifice, and so on.

This is essentially one aspect we can briefly discuss regarding religion and its development. Of course, it has other features, which I have tried to describe in greater detail in some of my

articles. But this is one way of presenting it in summary form. As I mentioned, many more ideas can be developed in this context. For example, the types of scholarship that emerge during the first, second, and third stages, as well as the kinds of philosophical frameworks that take shape.

In the first stage, what we often see is a basic attempt to understand the words of God at the most fundamental level, followed perhaps by the compilation of those words and their dissemination. Gradually—because, as I noted, this is also a recurring pattern in religion—older religions tend to persecute newer ones, rejecting the new ideas and revelations that have appeared. Two clear examples are found in the histories of Christianity and the Bahá'í Faith.

Another early form of scholarship at this stage is the defense of the faith against accusations and attacks—through writing, articles that explain the true vision of the religion, and efforts to refute charges and counter persecution through scholarly means. Over time, however, the nature of this scholarship evolves and matures. When religion becomes more established, we begin to see works produced that go beyond apologetics or defense of the faith, and instead attempt to address social issues and cultural changes, engaging with dominant theories and philosophies of the time—sometimes critiquing them, sometimes adopting them. This pattern of intellectual development continues to grow until eventually the worldview of the religion itself becomes the dominant worldview of the emerging civilization.¹

¹ To complement the content of this interview, I have added this footnote, which was part of another presentation of mine related to this topic.

Religion and the Three Stages of the Historical Development of Education and Scholarship

Focusing on the stages of education and scholarship within a religious context may serve to elucidate this point further, as education and scholarship are inherent potential forces in the teachings of religion. Integrative concepts of knowledge and learning have always addressed the relationships between philosophy and theology, or between science and religion. As long as tensions between these branches have existed, the need for integrative knowledge has also existed.

In broad terms, three stages can be identified in the historical development of education and scholarship within a religious context:

1. Stage One (Emerging / Internal)

The first stage represents the period in which a new model of education and scholarship is embedded as a latent force in the teachings of religion. During this time, dialogue between the new religion and the sciences, arts, and philosophies is minimal. The essential subject matter of education at this stage centers on the teachings of the religion, the scriptures, and key writings, with little or no explicit connection to the existing disciplines of the arts and sciences.

The internal dimension implies a learning process based on the progressive acquisition of new concepts and principles and their interrelationships. Believers, in the process, continually alter their cognitive structures in order to grasp a more refined and unified perception of the mission and vision of the new revelation. The aim is to enable the believer to comprehend the totality of the new teachings and to see a reflection of the whole in every part of the message.

The content of study and the subjects of research during this period are focused primarily on the internal history of the religion, commentaries on its relationship with its cultural and historical environment, classifications of laws, compilations of writings, and defense of the religion against internal and external opposition. The scholarly and educational activities of this internal stage are therefore mostly religiously oriented.

Over time, however, the internal phase tends to move toward integration with the broader spectrum of human knowledge in art, philosophy, and science. Historically, this process has occurred in most dispensations and eventually results in the emergence of a more widely integrative model for the synthesis of knowledge.

2. Stage Two (Transitional)

Gradually, this relationship evolves, and the new revelation enters into dialogue with the outside world and other branches of knowledge and philosophy. The content of education at this stage introduces new subjects and broader content areas. These are enriched by intercultural exchanges, early dialogues with diverse intellectual traditions, translated works from other languages and cultural perspectives, and an internal tendency to expand in order to respond to external questions and inquiries.

3. Stage Three (Externalization / Gaining Paradigm Status)

In the third stage, the emerging religion becomes conceptually and numerically significant, capable of engaging with the outside world, reinterpreting it, and becoming the foundation for a new system of knowledge. Once the new religion and its ideas have been conceptually solidified, there is a gradual influx of new modes of thought into the educational system.

In Islam, for example, the first stage of education was primarily focused on the study of the Qur'án. The second stage involved integrating traditional modes of thought with those of the new dispensation, and a separation gradually emerged between the place of worship (*masjid*) and the school (*madrasa*). The third stage witnessed the integration of the Islamic worldview with philosophical and scientific schools of thought, resulting in the creation of a progressive society that, by many standards, surpassed Western culture in its civilizational achievements.

In Christian history, similar processes occurred. The efforts of philosophers such as St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas to incorporate the message of Christianity with Greek philosophy opened new eras of integration and synthesis in the evolution of Western culture. In brief, the external dimension is characterized by the articulation of a systematic relationship between the teachings of religion and a multidisciplinary core of knowledge and practice in both philosophical and scientific domains.

Internal and External Interplay

The external and internal approaches are not mechanically separated. Even during the internal stage, elements of the external may be present. In early configurations of the internal stage, conflict between the

SECTION II

Baha'i Philosophy

Dr. Filip Boicu: *That was a brilliant introduction—thank you so much. I feel like I could take this in two different directions. One question could be: what are the dangers, opportunities, and advantages of each of these phases? The other question could be about the role of philosophy—specifically, how the nucleus of new knowledge interacts with the broader environment of knowledge, and what role philosophy plays in that process. Perhaps we can begin with the second question and then circle back to the stages later, since I also have more questions about them toward the end.*

So in terms of philosophy, it's really an extraordinary topic—in other words, the philosophy of religion. Today I thought I might focus on what I understand to be some of the key provisions of a Bahá'í philosophy. The first thing that comes to my mind goes back to something I learned when I was first studying this subject. I heard it from a Bahá'í scholar in Iran, Dr. Dawoodi, who said that at this point we don't yet have a fully developed Bahá'í philosophy. I think it's

internal and external often arises, since the internal values of the emerging religion are based on a prescriptive (or declarative) mode of thinking, while the dominant forms of scholarship in the wider academic community may consider those presuppositions untenable.

It is therefore important to recognize that the evolution of an integrative model is closely tied to the growth and development of ideas from both inside and outside the emerging religion. As ideas interpenetrate, a comprehensive integrative model—based on a consensus among conflicting poles of knowledge—may come to fruition.

The three components of integrative study—internal, transitional, and external—correspond to the broader stages of incubation, expansion, and consolidation that can be historically identified in the growth and development of all major religions of the world. Integrative studies evolve along these historical stages. As these stages unfold and the body of spiritual and scientific knowledge expands, integrative studies become more coherent and empirically verifiable in their assumptions. In the early days of a religion, however, integrative studies retain an embryonic quality and tend to rely more heavily on intuition and speculative reasoning.

important to mention that at the outset. If we look at the three stages I explained earlier, perhaps at that time in Iran the trajectory of Bahá'í thought was still in its early phase. Maybe now things have changed; only history will tell us how this trajectory has unfolded. But what Dr. Dawoodi said was that in religion there are times when people stand up to defend the Faith, often under persecution, and that takes courage and sacrifice. And then, later, comes a time when people can sit down, reflect, and think philosophically. At that time, the Bahá'í community in Iran was still in the stage of defending and consolidating the Faith.

So, based on that, my understanding is that the Bahá'í Faith does not yet possess an explicit, systematic philosophy because of its youthful and evolving nature. And by “systematic philosophy” I mean the kind of comprehensive, structured theology that other religious traditions developed over centuries. For example, Christian systematic theology fills volumes and thousands of pages, but that is after 2,000 years of work. So we need to give time for the evolution of Bahá'í philosophy. Typically, philosophy emerges in religions after those developmental stages. But this does not mean we should refrain from thinking philosophically about the Faith now. Of course we should, while acknowledging the limitations of this early stage. We don't have to wait for the golden age of the Faith, when it becomes a global civilization, to begin reflective philosophical inquiry.

One aspect of Bahá'í philosophy, as I see it, is the recognition that the outward expression of divine reality is dynamic, vital, and progressive. This is really the skeleton of Bahá'í thought, and it means religion must remain alive and relevant to society and to social progress. Otherwise, religion risks stagnation. Another part of Bahá'í philosophy is that it provides a divine philosophy centered on oneness, love, and unity. These principles must expand and grow alongside history and the development of civilization.

Another important feature is that Bahá'í philosophical thinking must focus on the integration of knowledge. It should bring together different domains—religion, philosophy, and science—into a coherent framework. These topics will need to be developed in the future; each could be the subject of many books, articles, and discourses. But the foundation is there: Bahá'í philosophy emphasizes the convergence of religion, philosophy, and science. It also builds on one of the key principles of the Faith, the independent investigation of truth. That means exploring all realms of knowledge, including philosophy, and creating links between religious insight and scientific discovery. In this process, philosophy provides the connecting factor between abstract thought, the universalization of human ideas, and empirical knowledge.

This is why philosophy, religion, and science must come together. The harmony of science and religion is one of the central teachings of the Bahá'í Faith, but philosophy has a crucial role in making that harmony possible. Science cannot simply be on one side and religion on the other, with nothing in between. Without philosophy, there is no framework to connect them. Historically, science grew out of philosophy, and even today, philosophy provides universal

feedback when scientific theories reach their limits. Philosophy can point scientists toward new directions, new experiments, and new knowledge. We can see this in modern science as well; figures like Einstein and many quantum physicists had a clear philosophical disposition in their thinking.

Another aspect of Bahá'í philosophy is that religion must be treated as a living organism—a living phenomenon, not a mechanical or linear one. It is something that grows, evolves, and remains in contact with human civilization. Bahá'í teachings also emphasize that all ideas, including religions, have a historical context and philosophical origins. For instance, 'Abdu'l-Bahá in *Some Answered Questions* makes use of older philosophical concepts. But the point of Bahá'í philosophy is not to discard or entirely rewrite these frameworks; rather, it is to reinterpret them. The task is not to fixate on the past but to synthesize ideas, renew them, and integrate them into a forward-looking framework of thought.

Dr. Filip Boicu: *Thank you. A few more items I'd like to mention. Another idea that I find very interesting in Bahá'í thought—and one that could have profound philosophical implications—is the view that religion itself can be understood as a comprehensive philosophy. Like philosophy, religion addresses the nature of reality, epistemology, political philosophy, ethics, and so on. Based on this, in our time, as both religion and philosophy continue to evolve, they can come together, seek coherence, work toward synthesis, and complement one another—while also working together to complement science.*

There are some references in the Bahá'í writings to both Western and Eastern philosophers—for example, Western figures like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle—acknowledging that they had an enduring impact on the development of ideas. I would suggest, and I know I'm not the first to say this, that Bahá'í philosophy has the potential, in future generations, to develop a very broad framework that could bring together the two great branches of Western thought: the idealism of Plato and the realism of Aristotle. Such a synthesis could become part of a Bahá'í approach to philosophy. This isn't without precedent; some modern Western scientists and philosophers, like Alfred North Whitehead, tried to do something similar. And in Eastern philosophy, Mulla Sadra was a genius Muslim philosopher who also sought that kind of integration. So, I think we too must seriously consider how to create a synthesis between the ideal and the real.

Another theme I've mentioned is the reconciliation of science and religion. This is an extremely important subject, though we don't have time to explore it fully here. My understanding is that what we call the “scientific method” is actually quite recent—only about 400 years old, dating back to the cultural revolution in the West, with figures like Galileo, Bruno, and others, who insisted that we must test, observe, and use technology to interpret nature. That was the birth of modern science, grounded in empiricism. But science itself was part of philosophy until the Middle Ages. With that in mind, I would argue that the empirical method, valuable as it is, must

expand beyond narrow empiricism to include other concepts, such as consciousness and related phenomena. Perhaps we touched on this earlier when we discussed the social sciences.

Another point concerns the role of Bahá'í philosophy in relation to modern philosophy's fragmentation into specialized fields. This specialization has often undermined philosophy's holistic and universal scope. That, to me, is dangerous. Philosophy must remain universal. Of course, for the sake of knowledge and communication, we can specialize in certain areas—analytic philosophy, linguistics, and so on—but we must never lose sight of the broader, integrative picture. If reductionism and over-specialization go too far, they risk obscuring meaning, purpose, and the progress of philosophy itself. Bahá'í philosophy should preserve the holistic, global perspective.

Another item to mention is the integration of facts and values in a Bahá'í philosophical framework. Scientific facts are not neutral; they are value-laden. True objectivity, in an absolute sense, is unattainable. The Bahá'í view, however, stresses scholarship with purpose. Knowledge must contribute to material, intellectual, and spiritual development. Both science and philosophy carry a double-edged potential: they can benefit humanity, or they can harm it, depending on the values guiding their practice.

Two more aspects are central to a Bahá'í philosophical framework. One is the concept of universality. Rational discourse alone is not sufficient. Revelation—the first impulse of every religious dispensation—provides transformative power. That, I believe, is a claim of Bahá'í philosophy. Revealed knowledge must be incorporated into ontology, epistemology, ethics, governance, and political philosophy—the core domains of traditional philosophy. We cannot say this belongs only to metaphysics. Bahá'u'lláh's vision, as I understand it, is to remove such divisions and create unity of knowledge, for the explicit purpose of building a material and spiritual civilization.

Finally, Bahá'í philosophy must overcome reductionism, dogmatism, and materialism, while envisioning a dynamic, evolving understanding of truth. In the writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, both religious dogmatism and extreme materialism are strongly criticized. Yet 'Abdu'l-Bahá also acknowledges the value of broad-minded philosophers—even those with materialist outlooks—if they are willing to engage in dialogue. This is important, because modern materialist philosophies, in some ways, actually helped religion. They exposed the shortcomings of traditions when those traditions became stagnant, fanatical, or reduced to sociopolitical ideologies instead of maintaining their transcendental, spiritual role. In that sense, strong criticisms from materialist philosophers contributed to a clearer understanding of religion and spirituality.

Bahá'í philosophy, therefore, must also include the study of consciousness. That is a key part of it. And ultimately, this integrative philosophy could provide a guiding framework for Bahá'í

education and scholarship. But it cannot remain abstract or confined to the realm of ideas. While meditation and reflection are valuable, philosophy must also have a practical purpose: to help humanity develop a sense of wholeness, unity, justice, and ultimately, to contribute to the building of civilization. Civilization itself needs a philosophical framework. So Bahá'í philosophy, while it certainly has its theoretical side, must also have a practical outcome—and that outcome is the establishment of a civilization.

Section III

Bahá'í Social Theory: Potential Domains of Scholarship and Inquiry

Dr. Filip Boicu: *Could you continue and explain where Bahá'í studies might fit into all of this—or, if you prefer, perhaps focus specifically on the area of education instead?*

Actually, I was thinking of mentioning some areas, themes, issues, and problems that could be discussed within social discourse—or within what we might call Bahá'í social theory, or Bahá'í-oriented or Bahá'í-inspired social theory. What I had in mind was to try to put together a kind of comprehensive, but still short, definition of social theory in a very general sense from a Bahá'í perspective. Here is an organized definition of a Bahá'í social theory that I have prepared, and I'm going to read it here.²

A Social Theory of Progressive Transformation

This social theory begins with the premise that reality is not static but dynamic, unfolding in stages of growth and refinement. Just as individuals move through stages of physical, intellectual, and spiritual development, societies and civilizations evolve through historical processes shaped by both material progress and moral-spiritual transformation. At the heart of this theory is the conviction that truth unfolds progressively and that human collective life is continuously advancing toward greater integration, justice, and unity.

Religion and Civilizational Growth

Religion is not a closed or static system of doctrines but a living force that interacts with the evolution of society. Each revelation appears in response to the conditions of its age, offering a moral and spiritual framework that enables societies to reorganize themselves on higher levels of integration. Over time, these teachings shape institutions, cultural norms, and systems of

² What I presented in the interview was a shorter version of this. For this text, I have expanded the definition and made it more organized and comprehensive.

knowledge that define the trajectory of civilization. When vitality declines, renewal becomes necessary to ensure that spiritual principles continue to guide humanity's expanding capacities.

This view runs counter to materialist interpretations that reduce religion to a mere reflection of economic structures or social contradictions. Such reductionism neglects the creative and transformative power of spiritual ideals, which have historically inspired movements of justice, visions of human dignity, and civilizational renewal. Material necessity may shape the conditions of history, but it does not exhaust the sources of meaning, purpose, and social transformation.

Knowledge and Scholarship as Social Forces

Education and scholarship are integral to this process. In early stages, they preserve revelation, transmit its truths, and defend it against opposition. Over time, religious thought engages external philosophies and sciences, generating dialogue, critique, and synthesis. Eventually, it contributes to civilizational paradigms in which spiritual principles inform governance, law, and cultural creativity. Knowledge is therefore not merely technical or utilitarian; it is a mediating force that integrates material and spiritual dimensions of life.

This stands in contrast to views that portray knowledge as nothing more than an ideological expression of material production. History shows that ethical, philosophical, and spiritual ideas have not only mirrored material conditions but also reoriented them—reshaping economies, institutions, and cultures in ways that material necessity alone cannot explain.

The Dynamics of Social Transformation

This theory rejects the notion that progress is driven solely by conflict, contradiction, or the collision of material forces. Transformation is better understood as a process of refinement, intensification, and integration. Lower impulses—whether individual desires or collective ambitions—are not inherently destructive; they are stages in the unfolding of human potential. When undisciplined, they produce imbalance and injustice. But when elevated by spiritual principles, they become the foundation of higher forms of civilization.

This perspective critiques materialist theories that glorify negation or conflict as the sole engines of historical progress. It argues instead that growth occurs through existential intensification—through deepening understanding, cultivation of virtue, and integration of diverse human capacities into unified patterns of life. Evil and injustice are not creative forces but deficiencies of being, overcome not by perpetuating struggle but by fostering knowledge, virtue, and solidarity.

Progressive Revelation as Social Renewal

The principle of progressive revelation serves as the corrective mechanism that links ontology with ethics. As humanity evolves, it requires renewed spiritual guidance to articulate justice, clarify moral responsibility, and reshape institutions. Without this renewal, moral frameworks risk becoming either rigid and outdated or relativistic and unstable. Revelation ensures that civilizations advance not merely in technological or economic terms but also in moral and spiritual terms, creating the conditions for sustainable progress and global integration.

This vision challenges materialist claims that freedom and justice can be secured through material emancipation alone. History demonstrates that material abundance without moral renewal often breeds new forms of alienation and domination. True liberation requires the integration of spiritual principles with social structures, so that progress enhances not only material well-being but also human dignity, responsibility, and unity.

Toward a Unified Civilization

In this view, history is not random but teleological, directed toward the perfection of human capacities and the emergence of a global civilization. The social journey from fragmentation to unity parallels the individual's ascent from lower to higher states of being. The culmination of this process is not uniformity but the integration of diversity into a higher synthesis—a civilization that harmonizes science and religion, material and spiritual progress, individuality and collective responsibility. This theory thus frames human history as an ongoing civilizational project in which religion, knowledge, and morality serve as generative forces guiding humanity toward unity, justice, and spiritual realization.

So, I thought that with this concise definition of social theory, we can begin to identify subjects that relate to this perspective—areas that are needed and essential for further study, further scholarship, further research, further discourse, and further writing. In short, based on what I've read and reflected on in relation to this statement, Bahá'í studies—if we want to summarize—can draw from all aspects of knowledge. Whether one approaches it from a sociological perspective, an educational perspective, or even from fields like physics or biology, anyone who wishes to contribute to Bahá'í studies can do so. There is room for many disciplines to contribute. But the ultimate goal or outlook must be framed within the context of civilization. We have to see Bahá'í studies in relation to civilization itself, recognizing how vast the needs of civilization are: from natural sciences to the natural order, from social order to ethical order, to discourse and beyond. If we think in this way—that we are contributing to the establishment of a civilization—then social studies become integral aspects of this growing and emerging civilization. And this perspective, in turn, helps us develop a better understanding of what we are actually doing. Now, after this, I would like to mention some of the areas I have identified as traditional, present, or future topics for Bahá'í studies.

Compilation and classification of the writings: The first one—and it still is important—is the compilation and classification of the writings of the Central Figures of the Faith and the Universal House of Justice. This has always been essential. I remember from my experience in Iran that most of the early published works were based on this approach, which was extremely helpful. It provided authoritative guidance, ensured accessibility for ordinary believers, and supported study and application. By organizing these writings by subject and theme—at a more advanced level—both the believers and the institutions of the Faith were able to draw upon this vast body of knowledge, using it to address questions and challenges. In this way, a coherent framework was created that supported the spiritual, intellectual, and social development of the community at that time. I believe the need for this kind of work is still there, and it remains an ongoing process. So that is the first point we have to acknowledge: the importance and continuing significance of this effort.³

Concepts and theories emerging from academic disciplines: Another area of scholarship, in my understanding, is that in modern science and social developments there are many theories and ideas coming from different academic disciplines. From a Bahá'í scholarly perspective, this requires careful identification of scientific and intellectual orientations that are relevant to Bahá'í discourse. Examples include the theory of evolution—which is a very important and emerging concept—political economy, ideas about human nature, and, as I've mentioned repeatedly, the concept of consciousness: what consciousness is, what spiritual psychology means, and so on. Because the Bahá'í Faith offers a unifying framework, I think it also has a great deal to contribute to discussions about philosophical ideas that are now prevailing in modern science—such as attempts at a grand synthesizing theory. That, too, is a very interesting subject for Bahá'í scholars. If I remember correctly, even Habermas, from his philosophical and sociological perspectives, referred at one point to this idea of a grand synthesizing theory. I may not recall the details exactly, but perhaps that was the case. In any event, I think it is very important that we identify the areas currently being discussed in scientific, philosophical, and social discourse, and then reflect on them in order to develop a Bahá'í response.

Apologetics: Another area that has always been very rich in Bahá'í literature—and I think must continue—is apologetic writing, basically aimed at defending the Faith. The Faith was born in Iran, and of course it was vehemently attacked and persecuted. As I mentioned earlier, in the infancy stage of the Faith—the nucleus of the Faith in Iran—the first scholarly effort of Bahá'ís was to compile the writings, and the second was to produce apologetic works: to defend the Faith, to refute attacks and accusations, and to protect the community against misrepresentation and defamation. I think this kind of work remains vital even today, especially in places like Iran.

³ In the interview, I forgot to mention the importance and significance of narrating Bahá'í history, and of linking the processes of an emerging revelation with our ability to use modern research tools to explain the unfolding of a new religion.

Since the Islamic Revolution, believers there have faced not only physical persecution, imprisonment, and martyrdom, but also a constant stream of media and public attacks without ever being granted the right to defend themselves. This continues even now. And even in the future, should Iran's situation improve, there will still be groups—those with clear anti-Bahá'í agendas in the past—who will likely continue their opposition.

In addition, similar challenges have already arisen, and may increase, in other parts of the world. There have been some examples in Europe and the United States, though they have been limited—perhaps because the Bahá'í Faith is still not widely known to the broader public. But it is not only religious fanatics who may attack the Faith. Certain secular movements, too, may come to see Bahá'í teachings as incompatible with their agendas, and that could also generate the need for apologetic writings to respond to such challenges.

Let me give one example from the political side. The Bahá'í Faith has a global character. My speculation—this may or may not happen—is that this global orientation could be misinterpreted in light of controversial assumptions about globalization. Globalization today evokes both hope and apprehension among different groups. But if we set aside the term itself, which is often misunderstood, what remains beyond doubt is that humanity can no longer address many of its problems without collective collaboration. From local conflicts to global crises, from war to peace, these issues require nations working together. This is where Bahá'í scholarship becomes important—particularly in political philosophy, social theory, law, and governance. It must clarify that the Bahá'í vision is not in conflict with patriotism or national sovereignty. On the contrary, meaningful international cooperation depends on strong, well-functioning national systems.

This is sometimes a part of the discourse we may overlook when explaining Bahá'í perspectives: the Faith does not reject the importance of the nation-state. It affirms its continuing legitimacy as a legal and political entity. If humanity is to move toward global governance, it must do so through these established frameworks, not in a vacuum. National interest and national identity—shaped by history, culture, and language—provide continuity and belonging. At the same time, global challenges call for contributions from every nation and for collective security. This does not mean dissolving national identities but rather integrating them into a broader framework of unity, where the integrity of each nation is preserved while contributing to a cooperative international system. So this is another example of where apologetic writing, and Bahá'í scholarship in general, must engage: addressing sources of misunderstanding about Bahá'í teachings and providing clear responses to them.

Situating the Bahá'í Faith within Religious Studies: Another form of Bahá'í studies has already been well established, mainly in the Western world—in the United States and Europe. This remains a promising line of research, where the Bahá'í Faith is treated as another religion, another religious tradition, situated within the broader field of religious studies. The goal of this

approach is to clarify the purpose and provide the necessary academic context by situating the Bahá'í Faith within the prevailing scholarly discourse on religion. Because the Bahá'í Faith is still new and not widely known, this attempt has been especially useful.

Historically, this approach has not challenged the established norms of academia, but rather has sought to demonstrate how the Bahá'í Faith can be understood alongside modern religious discourse. That is an important point: here the emphasis is not on presenting the Bahá'í Faith as a religion with a mission to build a new civilization—although that might sometimes be mentioned—but primarily on introducing the Faith within the parameters of dominant academic discourse. This has often taken place in departments such as Middle Eastern studies, religious studies, or history, where the Bahá'í Faith is studied as yet another modern religious movement. In this way, Bahá'í studies contributes to broadening comparative perspectives for other scholars, which has been very helpful.

Introducing the Faith as a New Paradigm: The next area that could be developed as a topic for Bahá'í studies is what I call *introducing the Faith as a paradigm*. This approach is significantly different from the one I just explained. The idea here is that we need to articulate a new paradigm—one that is rooted in the past yet oriented toward the future.

This approach is becoming increasingly necessary as inherited frameworks of thought reveal their limitations in addressing contemporary crises. When other social theories and studies fail to account for what is happening in the world, the need for a paradigm approach becomes more urgent. The purpose here is not simply to situate the Faith within existing religions or academic categories, but to introduce it as a bold idea that reimagines central theological and social concepts. It is revolutionary in the sense that it seeks to reframe these concepts—such as God, the human soul, the role of religion in society, freedom, justice—by assigning them new meanings that transcend traditional categories of scholarship.

We know that a paradigm represents a major shift in thought, and such shifts often demand new language and conceptual frameworks. They challenge prevailing vocabularies and assumptions. In the Bahá'í texts, articulating a vision of human progress, unity, and governance may require terms and constructs that move beyond conventional religious or political discourse. This presents a potential challenge for scholars: their contributions are not primarily about reproducing or citing the existing literature but about reframing the intellectual discourse itself.

This approach is different from the one that introduces the Faith as simply another religious tradition, which relies heavily on reviewing and supporting claims with existing literature. While literature review and grounding remain necessary here as well, the paradigm approach is more difficult because its aim is not just to work within existing frameworks but to reproduce, reimagine, and reframe intellectual discourse itself. History shows this is not new—many modern philosophers developed entirely new terminology because the existing language was

inadequate to express their ideas. Such intellectual breakthroughs often required a fresh vocabulary. I always remember Pitirim Sorokin, the sociologist, who advocated for a paradigm-shifting approach and criticized the routine, cliché-driven production of scholarship. He remarked that if Plato were to write *The Republic* today, publishers might not even publish it—because it would be considered too bold and too revolutionary.

So while this paradigm-shifting approach is vital, it also brings its own challenges. It requires careful and skillful methodology to ensure that innovation does not collapse into mere abstractions, lack of clarity, or inaccessibility. If done thoughtfully, however, it can offer a transformative contribution to scholarship, expanding the horizon of inquiry and revealing the true nature of the Bahá'í teachings.

Focus on Materialism: Another area that I have assumed to be a source of further scholarship in the Bahá'í Faith is the concept of materialism. Let me briefly explain what I mean by that.

First, materialism in its common, everyday sense refers to a way of living that emphasizes or prioritizes material well-being—seeking pleasure, wealth, fame, power—while neglecting the spiritual and transcendental dimension of the human soul. That is one prevailing definition of materialism.

The second meaning is materialism as a philosophical framework: a worldview and interpretation of the nature of reality. In this sense, materialism rejects the concept of God, the human spirit as a metaphysical reality, religion as divine truth, and life after death. It advances the idea that matter is the organizing substance of reality. Bahá'í thought rejects this, of course, but Bahá'í writings also distinguish between dogmatic or crass materialism and the broad-minded works of philosophy that contribute to discourse even when written from a materialist perspective. This is what I explained briefly earlier, and that is my understanding.

Now, there is a third aspect of materialism, which to me is the most critical, and that is the way materialism has become the organizing principle of existing civilization. In other words, it has become like a regime, the *modus operandi* of our present culture. Civilization today tends to define reality—existence, the world, the arts and sciences, philosophy, religion, moral values, norms—all within the parameters of a materialistic worldview. This worldview is deeply intertwined with the structural problems of global civilization and underlies what we now recognize as the crisis of our time.

If we accept this assumption, then it shows that the crisis we face in the world is not simply a maladjustment in one sphere—politics, international relations, or economics—but rather the dominance of materialism itself as the overarching trajectory of civilization. As a worldview,

materialism incorporates many elements. While technological advances and economic prosperity have fueled certain aspects of materialistic gratification, the core issue is not technology itself, nor any single political or economic system. Rather, it is the essence of this metaphysical anxiety, this materialistic alienation, that defines much of our modern experience.

I once remarked, in reinterpreting Marx's statement in the *Communist Manifesto* that a ghost was haunting Europe—namely communism—that today the ghost haunting not just Europe but the entire planet is materialism.

Therefore, scholarship must investigate how materialism functions not merely as an economic or cultural tendency but as an overarching system of values. This is the point: materialism is a system of values, shaping thought and action. It is not just about individual greed—such as overindulging in consumption—but about a comprehensive framework of values and assumptions. Particular attention could be given to the relationship between materialism and concepts that have emerged from it, such as alienation, the loss of human dignity, existential anxiety or dissatisfaction, and the weakening of social cohesion. These are crucial areas for social research.

Inquiry should also explore how materialistic motivations can infiltrate religion itself, where symbols, rituals, and institutions risk being co-opted for power and status rather than serving genuine spiritual expression. When this happens, it fuels religious extremism, stagnation, and the transformation of religion, spirituality, and ethics into instruments of material gain and political control.

Thus, scholarly efforts in this area have the potential to clarify how materialism—whether in secular or religious form—undermines the moral and spiritual foundations of society.

Interdisciplinary Approach to Knowledge: The next item I identified (and I'll try to keep this explanation shorter since it's already becoming quite lengthy) is the importance of Bahá'í research and scholarship—particularly in higher education—in employing interdisciplinary methods and promoting an integrative or pro-interdisciplinary approach to knowledge.

This is very important because my assumption is that the Bahá'í concept of the unity of knowledge, when expressed through education, research, and study, naturally and almost automatically takes on an interdisciplinary dimension. The reality is that most of the world's problems are deeply interrelated, and we cannot study them in isolation—from environmental issues to wars to drug cartels, and from smaller challenges to global crises.

When we look carefully, we see that these problems demand a combination of disciplines, approaches, and methodologies working together in order to find solutions. Therefore, if we advance this kind of approach—whether in the research that we ourselves produce or in

encouraging such methods across education and other fields—it would be a very significant and valuable contribution to Bahá'í scholarship.

Harmony of Science and Religion and Epistemology: Another important area—one we have already discussed—is research and scholarship that explore the harmony of science and religion. This is not a new subject; it has been a part of Bahá'í scholarship, particularly in the West, for the past forty to sixty years.

However, my understanding is that we must now move beyond the traditional approaches, which often focus only on mutual respect or simple acknowledgment that both domains—science and religion—are good and should work together. What is required today is deeper: along with fostering communication between science and religion, we need to work on developing a new epistemology. This new epistemology would redefine prevailing conceptions of reality and the scientific method, giving rise to an emerging paradigm of inquiry that is fundamentally distinct from earlier approaches.

A discussion of the harmony of science and religion can be approached on multiple levels. At a general level, it involves examining their historical relationship and identifying the factors that led to periods of divergence and convergence. At a deeper level, however, it requires engaging with the philosophical foundations of materialism and reductionism—returning to the issues we previously discussed. This could lead to a framework that demonstrates the necessity of a more integrative approach between the material and spiritual dimensions of civilization. It would also illuminate how the Bahá'í worldview is reflected in emerging normative values across religious, philosophical, and social thought. In other words, it highlights how Bahá'í spiritual principles have influenced and permeated constructive developments in our time.

Now, here is a very critical point. I am not suggesting that we simply superimpose Bahá'í doctrines, teachings, or assumptions onto existing values emerging from different disciplines. Rather, my understanding is that there is already sufficient data, evidence, and normative values emerging from science itself—independent of the Bahá'í Faith—across many disciplines: natural sciences (especially in their philosophical implications), social sciences, political economy, political philosophy, ethics, history, sociology, and social theory in general. Therefore, the task of Bahá'í researchers is to identify those values and establish a dialogue with them, rather than forcing Bahá'í perspectives upon them.

This discourse must remain aware of the dynamic interplay between past and future, between change and stability, between continuity and renewal in scholarship. We cannot disregard the traditions, the background, and the body of literature already established, nor can we build a future model in a vacuum. There must be a constant dialogue between what has been said and done in different disciplines and what still needs to be done, with attention to how the Bahá'í perspective can contribute.

By framing social teachings as instruments that foster spiritual growth, Bahá'í scholarship can demonstrate how the Bahá'í vision harmonizes both stability and renewal in the development of knowledge. This, however, is one of the most difficult aspects of today's discussion, because it contains so many dimensions. I may not have fully done justice to this subject here, but in any case, it is a theme that requires much deeper exploration and discussion.

Civilizational Studies and Western Culture: Another area that I have identified is what I call *civilizational studies*. By this I mean that, as a social entity, we need to focus on civilizations. This does not mean we should ignore the study of local, regional, or national contexts; those remain important. But alongside them, we must also adopt a broader vision—one that contrasts with the study of individual societies and instead seeks to examine the wider patterns and dynamics that shape the course of human history.

A focus on civilization opens up many lines of inquiry. We could, for example, explore modern ideas about civilization, the so-called “clash of civilizations,” and the internal and external chaos affecting civilizations today. Even when these concepts arise from conflicting or opposing sources, the vocabulary of civilization continues to be central.

Within this framework, I believe that the study of Western civilization is particularly valuable. The Bahá'í writings acknowledge the many positive contributions of Western civilization while also critiquing its shortcomings—especially its lack of a strong spiritual foundation. At the same time, there is one point that requires further clarification: the medium of Western culture as a powerful vehicle for advancing the spirit of the Faith has not been sufficiently recognized.

Even though Western culture suffers from its own crises—and perhaps the crisis of materialism is more deeply rooted there than anywhere else—when we consider the historical trajectory of civilization as a whole, Western civilization stands out for its immense contributions. From the scientific and technological advances of modernity to the rise of social institutions and the articulation of human rights, the West has played a pivotal role in shaping the modern world. The emergence of a “New World Order” after the First World War, symbolized by the establishment of the League of Nations and later the United Nations, also reflects this influence. Even though this order is now facing strain, fragmentation, or decline, it nonetheless remains a powerful socio-political structure. Current challenges may in fact be understood as corrective ones, pushing the system toward renewal rather than outright collapse.

For this reason, we must avoid one-sided views. I have noticed that some works of scholarship reflect excessive negativity toward the West, often shaped more by cultural or political bias than by a balanced assessment of what Western civilization actually represents. To illustrate my point, I often reflect on a striking example: after years of exile and imprisonment, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá chose to direct His steps toward the West. What did He discern as the potential of those societies for the growth of the Faith?

Too often, the materialism of the West is highlighted as the sole reason for His journey, as if His aim were only to save it from decline. That may be part of the story. But it is equally important to recognize that the West at that time may have been more receptive than any other region to hear, embrace, and spread His message.

Integrating Spiritual Principles and Social Teachings: Hopefully, we are getting closer to the end. The next item I identified is the relationship between the spiritual principles and the social teachings of the Faith.

We know that Bahá'í scholarship on themes such as racial harmony, economic justice, and gender equality has long been central to the Faith and has been effective in engaging social discourse. In fact, when 'Abdu'l-Bahá came to the West, He heavily emphasized these themes. But if you carefully review His talks in the West, you will notice that He always began by speaking about the need for the Holy Spirit, for spiritual renewal, and then expanded His discourse into the realm of social teachings.

Many of these social principles have now become mainstream. My understanding, however, is that we need to frame these social teachings within the spiritual foundation and context of the Faith. This is even more important today because of widespread misunderstandings about social principles. If they are not firmly rooted in their spiritual context, there is a risk that the Bahá'í Faith could be misrepresented as merely a secular movement for social change. A discourse centered only on social issues could create the impression that the Faith is simply a liberal reform movement, rather than a comprehensive spiritual path with the goal of transforming human civilization. There is a profound difference between these two interpretations.

In the Bahá'í framework, spiritual teachings form the core, and the social vision radiates outward from that core, that center, that foundation. We have to preserve this order so that social teachings faithfully reflect Bahá'u'lláh's intent and reveal the spiritual foundation of civilization. If the spiritual center is neglected or subordinated, the discourse may be drawn into cultural trends, political ideologies, or academic theories—losing its universal perspective, its spiritual grounding, and its deeper vision of civilization.

Of course, it is useful and important to discuss modern social reform ideas, many of which can be found in the writings and speeches of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. But we must never forget to link these ideas to their spiritual foundation and begin the discourse there. If arguments fixate solely on secondary outcomes and overlook the root cause of social renewal—particularly in the context of progressive revelation—then the broader perspective of the teachings may be lost.

The Bahá'í teachings present a unified vision—a universe of ideas with a central core and a social periphery. Bahá'u'lláh Himself gave a profound example in the *Seven Valleys*, where He said (to paraphrase) that a believer must see the drop in the sea and the sea in the drop. This

means that the whole vision must be reflected in every single teaching of the Faith, and likewise, every single teaching must reveal the totality of Bahá'u'lláh's message.

From the universal to the particular, and from the particular to the universal, there is a necessary two-way relationship in the Bahá'í perspective. Social principles such as race unity, gender equality, and economic justice must always be seen in their dynamic interaction and in the context of the broader ocean of Bahá'í knowledge and understanding. If studied or applied independently—outside of that universal and spiritual foundation—the outcome risks becoming like a fragmented mosaic, a collection of disconnected pieces.

Thus, the Bahá'í principle of the oneness of humanity, rooted in spiritual foundation, must navigate identity-based struggles for justice in a way that prevents fragmentation and instead orients diversity toward unity. This, I believe, is one of the critical areas of discourse for Bahá'ís today.

The Station of Bahá'u'lláh and the Spiritual Void

Along with the focus on Bahá'í spirituality, I believe there is a pressing need for more research and scholarship that engages candidly with Bahá'u'lláh's role as the promised figure of all religious dispensations and His unique station—approached within a paradigm-shaping framework.

Our scholarship must explore how Bahá'u'lláh defined and redefined religion, how He warned of the chaos that ensues when the light of religion is extinguished, and how He underscored the necessity of placing God at the center of human worldviews. Addressing this subject is both intellectually compelling and spiritually profound, while at the same time presenting considerable challenges.

Closely connected to this is the urgent need for Bahá'í studies to examine the spiritual void that characterizes modern society. In daily life, many experience this void—not simply as a decline in organized religion, but as a pervasive sense of alienation, loss of purpose, and moral fragmentation. This line of inquiry must investigate how materialism, ethical uncertainty, and identity crises erode human well-being, and how the Bahá'í teachings—through divine standards, spiritual renewal, and the balance of the material and the spiritual—offer a coherent framework for true prosperity.

Liberalism and Its Challenges: Do we have time? Yes—we do. I think I have two more items to mention.

Another idea that I believe is very important concerns scholarship on the concept of liberalism. Liberalism has made profound contributions to knowledge, human understanding, and modern social development. It has expanded rights, autonomy, and space for dissent. Historically, it has been an engine of social progress, emphasizing pluralism, human rights, and consensus building. These are undeniable contributions of modern liberalism.

However, there are also challenges that require careful attention and reflection from a Bahá'í perspective. One of these is the moral and spiritual void I mentioned earlier. Another is the tendency of liberalism to drift from a neutral framework of coexistence into a kind of orthodoxy of its own.

The economic dimensions of liberalism also raise questions. While the idea of expanding the human neighborhood into a global vision has been valuable, it presents challenges in practice. In particular, we now see the rise of identity politics and group absolutism across different sectors of society. Without a universal framework, these forces erode common purpose and lead to division. Thus, while liberalism's promise endures, it must be reintegrated with a shared moral purpose and renewed emphasis on character, morality, rectitude of conduct, and conscience.

This is a vast subject requiring much deeper explanation, but let me briefly illustrate with one example. Adam Smith, often considered the father of capitalism and one of the most broad-minded philosophers of liberalism, advanced a sophisticated and valuable model of free enterprise. However, his assumption was that society would rest upon a moral order—that people would retain a fear of God in their hearts and recognize a divine center to the universe. Within that moral context, he envisioned free enterprise as a highly successful system.

What he did not foresee—or at least did not adequately account for—was the rise of dominant materialism in the 19th and early 20th centuries, accompanied by the neglect of religion and the downplaying of moral values. In other words, liberalism produced thinkers like Adam Smith, but subsequent historical developments exposed vulnerabilities when moral and spiritual foundations were eroded.

Another issue is the notion that liberalism represents the “end of history.” Such an assumption risks repeating the same kind of finality and exclusivity that has at times constrained religious traditions. If liberalism is not continually advanced, reinterpreted, and reframed in light of new realities, it will inevitably experience stagnation—paralleling the decline that religions have faced when they failed to renew themselves.

Education and Learning: Another area of research is education. Education, of course, constitutes a vital domain of scholarly inquiry within the Bahá'í framework. By education, I mean not merely schooling, but also educational philosophy, educational theory, curriculum development, the social foundations of learning, the psychological foundations of learning, and the moral and spiritual dimensions of education. This scope extends across every level—from childhood through higher education, from the education that takes place in the home to the education provided by institutions of society. In this very broad perspective, education opens vast spaces for research and development.

There have already been significant contributions in the past—for example, the ANISA model comes to mind as one that demonstrated the potential for Bahá'í-inspired approaches. But this field still requires much deeper exploration.

Education is absolutely essential. From the Bahá'í teachings, we know that Bahá'u'lláh describes the Manifestations of God as divine Educators. That image alone carries profound meaning. Education, in this sense, can be understood as the “gravity” that sustains the entire tree of knowledge. While education itself may not appear to have much “content” on its own, it provides the essential structure through which all branches of knowledge are nourished, directed, and enabled to flourish—ultimately allowing civilization to be established and ensuring that knowledge and culture are transferred from one generation to the next.

We must therefore view education as a uniquely significant force. Just as the tree of knowledge branches out into diverse natural and social sciences, it is the process of education that gives shape, purpose, and direction to the totality of these fields—integrating them into a framework capable of sustaining civilization and guiding humanity's advancement.

Social Trauma and the Inheritance of Stress Effects: Another area that crossed my mind—though not directly related to the earlier points—is research that Bahá'í physicians or Bahá'ís with expertise in biology could explore. Scientific studies now show that cultural norms, social behaviors, and environmental factors—such as diet, stress, and trauma—can influence human physiology by altering how genes are activated or expressed. In other words, life experiences can affect the way our biology functions and, in some cases, these effects can be passed on to the next generation.

For example, severe social experiences such as war, famine, or oppression have been shown to leave lasting biological marks. Research on the children of Holocaust survivors illustrates how trauma endured by one generation can influence the health and behavior of the next.

There is also evidence suggesting that the decline in moral and social values contributes to chronic stress, fragmentation, and instability—effects that not only weaken individual health but also shape behaviors and predispositions across generations.

This area of study is still in its infancy, but it may in the future provide profound insight into how values, trauma, and social conditions interact with human biology, and how spiritual and moral renewal could play a role in healing these inherited wounds.

The Epistemology of Nonpartisanship: The last item I want to discuss is the concept of nonpartisanship. We live in a time when partisanship is rampant everywhere—it has become a global phenomenon, not only between nations but also within them.

From a Bahá'í perspective, nonpartisanship cannot simply be understood as a matter of moral restraint or self-discipline, a kind of personal effort to resist partisan impulses. While that is important, it is not sufficient. Nonpartisanship must be grounded in deeper knowledge—what I call the *epistemology of nonpartisanship*. I use this broad philosophical term deliberately to underscore that nonpartisanship is not just a protective teaching for Bahá'ís; it is part of our worldview, part of the way we know and interpret reality. It is, in essence, a way of knowing.

This integrated approach to truth and knowledge enables individuals to rise above ideological polarization. If nonpartisanship is practiced merely as obedience to a rule, it may collapse under social pressures as divisions intensify. Without a grounding in knowledge, it risks becoming superficial—what I call “twoness,” meaning a person may privately express partisan loyalties but publicly claim neutrality. Such an approach undermines integrity.

Authentic nonpartisanship, however, is a principled, dynamic orientation that sustains fairness, unity, and meaningful contributions to public discourse. It flows from the Bahá'í conviction that lasting change requires spiritual, moral, and social transformation that transcends partisan rivalry.

This principle calls us to cultivate compassion and solidarity with the suffering of humanity as a whole. Yet it must be guided by impartial truth-seeking rather than ideological conformity. Bahá'í scholarship can therefore play a vital role in showing how the teachings of the Faith offer a constructive alternative to the ideological divides that dominate contemporary public life. Here we can draw inspiration from the example of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, who consistently practiced this principle throughout His life.

Further research is needed on how nonpartisanship provides a framework that transcends the dichotomy between liberal and conservative positions. This requires an epistemological grounding in human and social reality as understood through Bahá'í teachings.

This epistemological grounding of nonpartisanship naturally opens into the Bahá'í concept of balance—showing how the Faith integrates seemingly opposing perspectives into a higher synthesis that transcends ideological divides.

For instance, from a liberal perspective, one often finds emphasis on collective responsibility, social justice, and state intervention. From a conservative standpoint, there is a focus on individual self-reliance, free markets, moral accountability, and the spiritual value of work.

If we examine the Bahá'í writings, we find elements of both orientations. Bahá'í scholarship must therefore help us see how these perspectives can be elevated into a higher synthesis. The Bahá'í approach provides balance—not as a mechanical equation where equal parts of liberal and conservative ideas are placed side by side, but as a *living rhythm*, a dynamic synthesis that integrates the strengths of both into a coherent framework.

For example, the Bahá'í teachings affirm both the responsibility of government to address poverty and reduce extremes of wealth, and the dignity of labor, emphasizing each individual's duty to work and contribute meaningfully to society. This dual emphasis—on institutional responsibility for justice and personal responsibility through purposeful work—illustrates the holistic balance the Faith envisions.

Such a balance transcends partisanship, grounds civic engagement in principles of unity and cooperation, and provides a spiritually informed model for advancing justice, prosperity, and human dignity in a polarized world.

These are some of the areas—developed historically and emerging anew—where Bahá'í scholarship can contribute to intellectual discourse and offer fresh insights for the future.

Further Reflection and Engagement

Dr. Filip Boicu: Thank you. You have offered a philosophical view of Bahá'í scholarship and education, and I really appreciate having this broad platform with which to engage. What I would like to do now is briefly return to the diagram we had with the three phases. My intention is to quickly comment on it and share a few of my own observations. These are not of major importance, but I think they may be useful in providing some engagement with what you have put forward. Afterward, you can feel free to respond, expand, or simply move on depending on how you feel, since you have already been presenting for a while.

The reason I want to return to this scheme is that the transition from the first stage to the second stage—or phase—of your development model always constitutes one of the key epistemological challenges facing any religious community. In other words, it is a sensitive and delicate transition. With that in mind, I will mention a few observations that might be considered either

challenges or opportunities at this point in time. Once I run through them, you should feel free to engage with them as you see fit. I will try to be brief.

Phase two might, at times, become too disconnected from the contributions of phase one, including the original sacred writings or the compilations that were produced, or it might simply underutilize them. Another issue is that apologetics could come to dominate scholarship, reducing it to an instrumental purpose rather than a broader intellectual endeavor. A further problem is that the contributions in phase one may not be strong or comprehensive enough to fully support the transition into phase two.

I have also noticed what could be called nonlinearity. For instance, in the field of education, there were phase two contributions already present in phase one—for example, the ANISA model in the 1970s. Yet there was no continuity afterward, and by the time phase two emerged, it was almost as if ANISA had never existed.

This problem of nonlinearity seems to have a deeper origin. Sometimes the transition from phase one to phase two occurs without sufficient attention to, or ordering of, the quality of earlier scholarship and the types of contributions already made. Such ordering normally develops within a field when authors read and engage with each other's work, commenting on and building upon it. But in many areas of Bahá'í studies, there are too few authors, or those who exist work in different intellectual schools without engaging with one another. This leaves some fields incomplete or underdeveloped. In other words, if Bahá'í authors do not interact with each other's work, they fail to establish a kind of hierarchical ordering of contributions. Without that foundation, it becomes difficult to build on the field itself; new work appears, but without grounding in what has come before.

Another recurring problem is the tendency to draw strict equivalencies—what you referred to as the superimposition of Bahá'í language. Instead of translating the language of revelation into terms that can meaningfully engage social disciplines, there is sometimes a tendency to simply overlay Bahá'í terminology onto them. This can mean only accepting the aspects of theories that appear to fit neatly with one's paradigm while dismissing others. The question then arises: on what basis are such strict comparisons being made? And have those assumptions themselves been carefully examined or re-examined in a reflective way?

A further challenge, and one that emerged clearly from your talk, concerns the curriculum that supports the transition from phase one to phase two. It seems that such a curriculum must be interdisciplinary, or ideally integrative, if it is to be effective. Without that, the transition may be limited. Of course, many curricula exist with different emphases, but it seems to me that interdisciplinarity is particularly crucial at this stage.

Another issue, which we haven't yet discussed, is the extent to which religion can contribute to the academic disciplines at all. Not acknowledging such limits could itself be problematic. For example, Frank Lewis argued that the Bahá'í Faith cannot really produce a distinctively Bahá'í methodology for academic disciplines, except perhaps in relation to ethics—how we apply knowledge, and how we adjudicate conflicting truth claims in a consultative manner. I see this as a kind of minimalist position. Within the community, there seems to be an ongoing debate between this minimalist approach and others that allow for broader contributions.

Finally, one last observation—really a question. When you speak about a comprehensive philosophy, how exactly would we extract that? Is such a broad philosophy already visible and accessible in the Bahá'í writings, or is it something that must be developed in the context of an interdisciplinary curriculum? How do we move between phases one and two in this regard? For example, in phase one, do we map the teachings of the Faith in a systematic way, and then in phase two begin to identify key themes within scholarly discourse and the scientific domains, analyzing them from within their own frameworks and relating them back and forth to Bahá'í teachings?

I realize my comments may not be entirely clear, but I offer them in the spirit of engagement. Please feel free to address them in whatever way you think best. I also believe that in the future, one of the most important areas of discussion could be this idea of a comprehensive philosophy—and especially the methods by which it could be articulated. Thank you.

Dr. Sabet: Thank you—excellent. You have discussed very profound issues, and each of them really requires independent research and dialogue, a broader social discourse. What I can say first is that the relationship between these three phases is not strictly systematic. In other words—and I know you didn't mean otherwise—it isn't as if phase one is a mechanical step and, once completed, we move to phase two, and once that is done, we proceed to phase three.

It reminds me of the *Seven Valleys* of Bahá'u'lláh, where one can move from the state of search to a state of complete personal annihilation. It is a journey. That is the first point that comes to mind. As I said at the beginning—and I repeat—it is a pattern. It may not fully describe how education and scholarship emerge in different dispensations, but, roughly speaking, we can observe the same trajectory. That is another point I want to emphasize.

Returning to phase one: first we have a nucleus of new knowledge and then the immediate cultural environment. In the context of the Bahá'í Faith, the immediate cultural environment was the Shí'a Islamic discourse. Geographically, we can clearly see that the Faith was not a Western phenomenon until later. The scientific, theological, and philosophical knowledge of the broader environment was shaped by developments in the Western world—scientific revolution, modernity, and all the associated changes.

So there are stages: from the immediate cultural environment to a broader discursive environment. In phase two, we see the exchange of ideas between these concentric circles—a period of dialogue, movement from infancy to a more advanced stage of maturity, and so on.

Another point is that the development of these phases may be impacted by culture, geography, and place. For instance, since the Faith originated in Iran, the first phase fit very comfortably with Bahá'í development there. In other countries, it may not be so. In Iran, because of the severe attacks and persecution against the community, two major scholarly methodologies advanced: (1) compilations of the writings—including compilations related to specific aspects of Bahá'í practice, holy days, the laws of *'Ahd* (oath), social teachings, and so on—and (2) responses to attacks against the Faith.

Bahá'í scholars produced extensive and valuable materials in these two areas until—speaking roughly—the 1960s and perhaps the 1970s. Then we began to see elements of dialogue with the broader environment: scientific and philosophical knowledge in the surrounding culture. There were translations of writings by some Western Bahá'ís, and a new generation of scholars in Iran began producing materials that continued the traditional focus on compilations and apologetics, yet showed deeper knowledge of Western philosophy, ideas, and modernity.

Some of these individuals went to the West, studied, and returned to Iran to contribute to Bahá'í scholarship—people like Dr. Davoodi, Dr. Muhammad Bagher Houshyar, Dr. Shapour Rasekh (and I apologize for any names I've forgotten). Many distinguished scholars helped move the stage of infancy toward a more developed phase.

In the West, compilations were also part of Bahá'í scholarship. Apologetics were produced, though not as prominently—largely because the sociopolitical environment did not demand it to the same degree. That may change in the future, not only from religious quarters but also from secular political and social domains.

What did emerge in the West, especially in the 1960s and early 1970s, were efforts by individuals with rich academic backgrounds who began developing ideas about dialogue between the Bahá'í teachings and the scientific, theological, and philosophical ideas of the time. There are many names; to mention a few: Dr. William Hatcher (philosophy, social sciences) and Dr. Daniel Jordan (education). Their work contributed to this new approach. The Association for Bahá'í Studies was initially developed as part of this process, to establish dialogue and bring the Faith from a period of infancy into higher interaction with social, political, and philosophical issues of the time—both in the United States and perhaps in Europe.

All of this shows, first, that development has not been linear—things move forward, regress, return to origins, then advance again with greater maturity—and, second, that different sociocultural environments produce different kinds of scholarship.

A personal example: I once wrote a paper for a Bahá'í journal in Iran, similar to *World Order* in the United States. It was about education and scholarship but included references to Marxism and communism—not in defense, but noting a scholar's critique of communism while teaching at a university. After the 1953 events in Iran, the Communist Party was disbanded, and the editors—though they liked the article—were very sensitive to those references because of the political environment. We managed, and it was published. When I came to the United States, however, I experienced cultural shock at the openness: one could speak far more freely. The differences in how a Bahá'í could express ideas in the two environments were striking. These are all issues relevant to this discussion.

You mentioned interdisciplinarity and core curriculum in education—that is very important. In my research, studies, and practice in higher education, I have tried to advance interdisciplinarity wherever I could. I believe the future belongs to interdisciplinary studies. I have also developed core curricula in some institutions of higher learning. A core curriculum is a subset of this interdisciplinary approach. Universities typically offer general education (e.g., reading, math) and specialized courses (e.g., biology, computer science). There needs to be a space between these—usually called the core curriculum. Courses in this space are neither general education nor specialized; they provide a broader, universal perspective on the unity of knowledge—how different disciplines are interrelated—and help us approach science and knowledge without becoming trapped in over-specialization. Over-specialization can become so intense that, for example, an engineer or biologist cannot meaningfully communicate with someone in music or literature.

The idea of the core curriculum is to mediate between specialization and general knowledge, creating a universal, interdisciplinary perspective on knowledge, purpose, and the value of science. Although core curricula and interdisciplinary initiatives are difficult to implement—especially given how degrees and grades are assessed—ultimately, I believe the future of higher, secondary, and even elementary education will benefit immensely from interdisciplinary and core-curriculum principles.

To clarify for those unfamiliar with these concepts: a core curriculum is a series of modules within an academic program, organized and carefully planned to be offered to all students across programs. “Well planned” means well coordinated with the entire scheme of knowledge across those programs. It is complex, and interdisciplinary curricula are often expensive because they require faculty to operate at a higher level of integrative complexity and thus demand more resources.

Despite these challenges, many universities around the world have adopted such programs to some extent. Often all students—whether in computer science, biology, or another field—must take a set number of core credits (varies by university). To give one example, courses on “Civilization I” and “Civilization II” are used in many core programs. This links to our

discussion today about looking at the world from a civilizational perspective. When you study civilization, you must naturally consider culture, norms, values, ethics, education, religion, demographics—many facets—not just one. By the end of such courses, students gain a broad perspective on civilizations and cultures that transcends particular histories and geographies. I have written a paper on core curriculum and hope to make it available when finished; it's an important topic.

You also mentioned the view that social sciences can only be affected by religion in the area of ethics, referencing Dr. Frank Lewis. His paper has its own historical context, but he was mostly saying that the scientific method would largely remain as it is in academic disciplines; religion could shape how we apply results ethically—how knowledge should operate once the scientific method has been applied. I was simply noting that there are different kinds of Bahá'í scholarship and I identify that as a minimalist position. Others take broader positions asserting that more can be done, while still acknowledging limits in how religion interacts with social and natural sciences. I have immense respect for Dr. Frank Lewis—brilliant, kind, and learned. I met him several times; Bahá'í scholarship truly lost a gem when he passed.

I also agree that many scholars emphasize the role of the empirical approach across disciplines. However, my personal response—without precluding dialogue or agreement with aspects of their ideas—is that the realm of religion, ethics, and philosophy (the “first domain” we discussed earlier) provides the initial impulse. When this domain is mixed with empirical evidence and results—through the process of education—it flows into social discourse, social theory, governance, law, peace, and collective security. These domains influence one another. My primary approach, rooted in religious and philosophical background, is that the initial force comes from values and meanings. This initiates a process of continuous change and growth.

I also emphasized in our earlier diagram that I am strongly against attempts—seen in some theocratic democracies or secular communist regimes—to dictate what social scientists must think. In such systems, principles of materialist ideology were imposed on social science and literature. Pasternak was condemned while Maxim Gorky was elevated because he supported the revolution. I am absolutely against this. The boundaries between domains must be respected.

Having said that, religion, philosophy, and the domain of values and ethics have much to offer the social sciences—indeed, to clear away a good deal of confusion. This is my position; it needs discussion and explanation. I believe there is a genuine “crisis of the social sciences.” We need to address it with some of the methodologies we discussed today—not to disregard or discard these disciplines, but to effect profound changes in content and process, making them more relevant to the issues of our time: peace, collective security, emerging concepts in ethics and psychology, the role of consciousness, and more.

One example—perhaps imperfect but still instructive—comes from the field of “Sovietology” before the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1980s. At the time, it was a flourishing academic specialty, and countless dissertations analyzed the Soviet system. Yet the possibility that the system itself might disintegrate was rarely taken seriously (though a few did predict it). In my view, this was because the field was too deeply entrenched in its own assumptions. To recognize the Soviet Union’s eventual collapse required more than quantitative data or elite political analysis. It demanded a broader, integrative lens—one that could bring together ethics, literature, and the lived experiences of intellectuals under Soviet rule into a coherent interpretive framework. That kind of multidimensional perspective, however, was largely absent.

Thank you for engaging with all these themes and complex subjects. I think we will finish now. But I want to add an observation: I see you, in a sense, as a curriculum theorist and developer—someone working in education from a broad philosophical perspective. Curriculum theory is essentially the philosophy of education with an applied dimension, a field that has been diminished in recent decades, as has philosophy of education more generally. That is a different discussion.