

A Concise Encyclopedia of the Bahá'í Faith

Author: Peter Smith

Publisher: Oneworld Publications, Oxford, 1999, 396 pages

Price: £12.99p stg.

Reviewer: Edwin McCloughan

This is one of a series of reference books by Oneworld on specific religions e.g. Hinduism, Judaism and Christianity.

In his Preface, Dr Peter Smith, author of three books on the Bábí and Bahá'í Faiths, referring in particular to the importance of Wendi Momen's *A Basic Bahá'í Dictionary* (1989), remarks on "the obvious need for a more encyclopedic study" than is currently available in English. The completion date of the "large-scale 'Bahá'í Encyclopedia' project... at present underway" in the United States remains uncertain. "In the interim, it is hoped that the work will be of value to those who are seeking basic information about the Bahá'í Faith and the Bábí movement from which it emerged." The *Concise Encyclopedia* is "something of a pioneer effort," and, "conscious" of its "limitations," Smith "can only aim to provide a basic summary of our present knowledge, and to point readers in the direction of other works they might consult on particular topics." Unlike *A Basic Bahá'í Dictionary*, published before the English edition of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* was made widely available in 1993, Smith's *Encyclopedia* includes much more detailed material on Bahá'í law. It is the most up-to-date reference book of its kind in English on the Bábí and Bahá'í religions.

The white and red cover has colour photographs of the Terraces leading to the Shrine of the Báb, jazz trumpeter John 'Dizzy' Gillespie and three Houses of Worship.

The *Encyclopedia* has a Chronology of key events from the early Bábí period (1844-53) until the ministry of the Universal House of Justice (1963-92) (pp. 1-10).

Immediately before the Encyclopedia proper are two pages of abbreviations, most of which appear at the end of entries.

There are three maps - of sites in and around Akka, the journeys of Bahá'u'lláh from Baghdad to Akka and of Iran, Iraq and the Levant in the nineteenth century.

There are also numerous, captioned photographs and portraits of people (including the ten Bahá'í women martyred in Shiraz in June 1983, p. 235), places and buildings and calligraphic renderings of Bahá'í Scripture. ("Calligraphy" receives a separate entry, p. 100.) There is also a diagram of the Administrative Order, a model of the completed Arc on Mount Carmel and tables of statistics.

There are two pages of Further Reading, recommending certain introductory and biographical books and correctly appraising the quality of the large secondary material on Bahá'í belief and practice as "variable," a 15-page Bibliography and an eight-page Thematic Index that greatly facilitates referencing.

The *Encyclopedia* entries themselves run to 356 pages. The title of each entry is in bold, with capitalised subheadings in the articles on the Faith's three Central Figures, the Guardian and the Universal House of Justice, as well as on several other extended topics.

The book is richly informative, containing, for example, a summary of Bahá'u'lláh's better-known Writings (pp. 67-86) and an Itinerary of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's journeys to Egypt and the West (p. 17). It is comprehensive in the range of its entries (laws, doctrines, other religions, biographies, community life and administration, canonical texts, periodicals and reviews, etc.), succinctly paraphrasing longer subjects found in such reference books as *Lights of Guidance*. It is balanced and, for the most part, characteristically objective, relying on primary sacred Writings, interpretations of Shoghi Effendi and communications of the Universal House of Justice, standard works of Bahá'í scholarship and more recent works by 'Abbás Amanat and Denis MacEoin on Bábism. Occasionally, Smith includes evaluative or contextual comments alongside purely factual information.

Unlike his father, grandfather and uncles, all of whom followed the upper-class Muslim practice of having several wives, 'Abdu'l-Bahá remained monogamous (p. 15).

The exact nature of the Báb's claims at different stages of his mission is complicated, and sometimes veiled by his allusive and esoteric language (p. 58).

The difficulty of following this teaching [not backbiting] is recognized, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi accepting that backbiting was probably the major cause of disunity amongst Bahá'ís (as amongst human beings in general) and of withdrawal from Bahá'í activities (p. 64).

[The principle of the emancipation and equality of women] appears to have received little more than passing reference from Bahá'u'lláh, but... was discussed at length by 'Abdu'l-Bahá (p. 70).

The great devotion and love that his followers felt for Bahá'u'lláh makes it difficult for us to gain an impression of what he was actually like (p. 78).

The marriage is conditional upon the payment of a relatively small amount of money by the husband to the wife. (Bahá'í sources refer to this gift as a 'dowry', giving the term a new meaning: the payment is not brought to the marriage by the bride from her family. In that the payment is not given to the bride's parents, it is not a 'brideprice' either.) (p. 233).

[Shoghi Effendi's personal life] was generally uneventful, and was largely subordinated to his work as Guardian (p. 316).

Inexact translations of some of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's theological texts limit the present possibilities of explicating certain aspects of Bahá'í theology for those reliant on Western language sources (p. 337).

Although empowered to legislate on matters not revealed in the Bahá'í scriptures, the Universal of Justice has as yet been extremely limited in its exercise of this function (p. 350).

By far the longest entry is that on Expansion (pp. 137-154). This is a thoroughly detailed history of the “missionary” establishment of the Bahá'í Faith in 190 countries and 45 dependent territories by 1995, its greatest global expansion having taken place systematically since the completion of the Ten Year World Crusade in April 1963. Expansion patterns are discussed mainly in geographical terms.

There is, however, no real attempt to analyse or explain the Faith's success or failure in terms of the rate and scope of its expansion, the largest numbers of believers being concentrated in the “Third World” and comparatively small numbers in both the West and the Far East. (This indifference to the Faith and other minority religions in the West is usually attributed to material acquisitiveness.) Nevertheless, this entry could well provide a comprehensive resource for a more extensive analysis by scholars as to the patterns of Bahá'í expansion up until very recently and what can be learned from them in regard to future expansion and consolidation projects.

Unlike that in *A Basic Bahá'í Dictionary*, the typeface is quite small (but then it is a smaller book). Also there are a number of typographical errors, though not so many as to warrant stricture.

Overall *A Concise Encyclopedia* is an invaluable reference book for religious scholars, anyone interested in learning basic information about the Bahá'í Faith and, of course, Bahá'ís themselves desiring to improve their knowledge or clarify their understanding of various or little-discussed aspects of their religion (e.g. kindness to animals, gambling, sexual morality, mysticism, etc.) and as a handy aid to teaching and presenting it. The precision, economy and clarity of Smith's style make it a pleasure to consult or read right through. True to its title, it is admirably concise.