

The Bahá'í Faith Seen through the Eyes of Major Encyclopedias¹

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As the Bahá'í Faith becomes increasingly identified as a world religion, curiosity will be generated in some, whereas a desire to misrepresent the Faith will undoubtedly exist in others. To learn more about the Bahá'í Faith, individuals and groups will refer to texts that they consider to be impartial, and since non-Bahá'í publications are better known, they can be expected to receive more attention. Of these impartial references, the assumption will be that encyclopedias are the most authoritative. This research note will examine the representation of the Bahá'í Faith in twenty-six English-language encyclopedias in their most recent editions.

Most of the encyclopedia articles analyzed start with a short description of the Bahá'í Faith, which is usually recognized as a "religion." In contrast, *The Great Soviet Encyclopedia* calls the Faith "a cosmopolitan and religious current"; the *Encyclopedia of Zionism and Israel* introduces the Faith as a "sect purporting to be an all-embracing world religion"; and *The Modern Encyclopedia of Religions in Russia and the Soviet Union* describes it as an "Ecclectic [sic], universalist, pacifist and humanist religious system." Running counter to established dogma of some religious circles that categorizes the Bahá'í Faith as a sect of Islam, *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* refers to the Faith as an independent religion.

Most articles continue by tracing the historical development of the Bahá'í Faith and describing the lives of its central figures. The accounts are usually informative and reasonably accurate with varying degrees of emphasis on historical schisms within the Bahá'í community. *The Concise Encyclopaedia of Islam* contains a number of interesting historical errors: "The Baha'í branch [of the Bábí sect] flourished, despite a heavy 19% levy on the revenue of its followers." 'Abdu'l-Bahá is said to have "discovered that he, too, had the gift of prophecy. A similar claim was later made by his son [sic], Shoghi Effendi, but control of the organisation was placed in the hands of a council" Apparently in 1970, the *New Standard Jewish Encyclopedia* believed that "Haifa is still the residence of the leader of this religion." According to *Encyclopedia Americana*, "the international direction of Bahai affairs has been vested in a body of 9, elected by 27 Hands of the Faith." *The Great Soviet Encyclopedia* has an alternative, though erroneous, perspective on the historical development of the Bahá'í Faith: "Baha'u'llah removed the revolutionary and democratic elements from Babism and came out against the revolutionary methods of combating Iranian reaction, while defending private property and social inequality. Bahaimism reflected mainly the interests of the Iranian comprador bourgeoisie."

There are many contradictions among these articles in explaining Bahá'í religious doctrines, which, according to the *New Twentieth-Century Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, "are not universally known or followed outside Islamic countries." "Baha'ism propounds a body of doctrine that clearly originated in Shiite Islam, but closely resembles Unitarianism and Ramakrishnan Hinduism. It is syncretic and universalist," explains the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*. In *The Concise Encyclopaedia of Islam*, the Bahá'í Faith is summarized as "an accommodating mixture of syncretism, humanism, world peace, and brotherly love." The *New Twentieth-Century Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* introduces "Baha'ism" as a "syncretistic world religion." The Bahá'í Faith, according to *Everyman's Encyclopedia*, "claims that it incorporates what is best in all religions." *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, however, does not accept the charge of syncretism, and argues that it is "inexact to consider the Bahá'í religion as syncretistic. Although it accepts all the prophetic religions as essentially true, it claims that it is the best one adapted to the present time, and that it includes in itself all its predecessors." The following encyclopedias give accurate descriptions of Bahá'í social teachings: *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, *Collier's Encyclopedia*, *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, *The Encyclopaedia of World Faiths*.

The analysis of the relationship of the Bahá'í Faith to other religions generates much confusion. "An obvious echo of Christianity" is the verdict of the *Shorter Islamic Encyclopaedia*. *The Encyclopedia of American Religions* summarizes the teachings as "the essential oneness of all revealed faiths, which have been given at different stages and ages. Baha'ism is the crown and summation of the eight previous world faiths: Sabeianism, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Zoroastrianism, add the Religion of the Bab"—the reader may well be expected to ask what Sabeianism is and where Christianity fits into this scheme. The 1983 edition of *Collier's*

¹ This research note is reprinted with minor revisions, by permission, from *Newsletter* no. 3 of the Association of Bahá'í Studies—English-Speaking Europe.

Encyclopedia contains an account that is also incorrect: “The Bahá’í principle of the unity of humanity is reflected in this number [nine] as the symbol of the nine religions held identical by the faith in their mandations: Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and the Bahá’í Faith.” The article in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* states that the Buddha and Confucius are not considered as “true prophet[s], . . . rather as great masters of spiritual life.” However, the correct status of the Buddha in Bahá’í writings—as one of the “historical manifestations of God”—is given in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*.

The claim of the Bahá’í Faith to be a world religion is supported by some of the encyclopedias; it is referred to as “a universal religion” (*The Concise Encyclopaedia of Islam*) and “a world religion” (*Encyclopaedia Iranica*, *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, and *The Canadian Encyclopedia*). The 1991 *Britannica Book of the Year*, which puts Bahá’í membership at 5.3 million, estimates that in 205 countries the Faith “has a significant following.” *The Encyclopedia of Religion* elaborates: “The Baha’i Faith has spread rapidly all over the world; it is practised in 340 different countries.” In 1978, *Everyman’s Encyclopedia* states that “the Baha’i faith now has several hundred thousand adherents drawn from every important religion in every country outside the Soviet orbit,” while *The Modern Encyclopedia of Religions in Russia and the Soviet Union* claims that the number of Bahá’í is “about the same in the USSR as in the US.”

Some unusual themes appear in the encyclopedias:

- A Jewish perspective on the attitude of the Faith to Zionism is described in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*: “Baháism was favourably disposed to Zionism, believing that the return of the Jews to their land was foretold in the writings of Bahá Allah and ‘Abd al-Bahá. On June 30, 1948, Shoghi Effendi wrote Prime Minister Ben-Gurion expressing ‘loyalty and best wishes’ for the prosperity of the newly proclaimed State of Israel’ and recognizing the significance of the ingathering of the Jews in ‘the cradle of their Faith’.”
- Unique features of the Bahá’í Faith are discussed in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, which states that “the Bahá’í Faith is the only one [religion] that foresees its own eventual abolition.” The same article declares the “sole religious duties of a Bahá’í” are to go to the Nineteen Day Feast, to fast, to abstain from alcohol, and to pray daily. *The Modern Encyclopedia of Religions in Russia and the Soviet Union* states that “from the start Baha’is have not shown the devotion to Baha-Ullah’s writings that Jews, Christians, and Muslims have bestowed upon their own respective scriptures.”
- *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* provides an interesting parallel in Bahá’í teachings on the evolution of human beings with Sufi teachings: “On the phenomenon of man Bahá’í doctrine accepts the theory of evolution, not, however, as propounded by Darwin, but rather in the traditional mystic sense already present in the *mathnawi* of Mawlana Djalal al-Din Rumi. ‘Man was always man throughout his evolution,’ even though he may have passed through a series of stages of development.”

In conclusion, *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, and *Encyclopaedia Britannica* are most useful for apologetic purposes because they provide accurate information on the history and teachings of the Bahá’í Faith in addition to being widely known and well-respected volumes, although the *Encyclopaedia Iranica* article has the most comprehensive presentation. *The Concise Encyclopaedia of Islam* and *The Great Soviet Encyclopedia* misrepresent the Faith. Two articles, recently published in respected academic journals, are also valuable sources of more accurate information.²

A List of References to the Bahá’í Faith in Major Encyclopedias:

The Australian Encyclopedia. 4th ed. Vol. 1. S.v. “Baha’is.” Edited by R. Appleton. Sydney: Grolier Society of Australia, 1983.

Britannica Book of the Year. S.v. “World Religious Statistics” by D. B. Barrett. Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1991.

The Canadian Encyclopedia. Vol. 1. S.v. “Baha’i Faith” by J. D. Martin. Edited by J. H. Marsh. Alberta: Hurtig Publishers, 1988.

Chambers Encyclopaedia. Rev. ed. Vol. 2. S.v. “Babi-Baha’i” by A. Bausani. Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1967.

Collier’s Encyclopedia. S.v. “Baha’i Faith” by H. Chance. New York: Macmillan Educational Co., 1983.

² J. R. I. Cole, “The Bahá’is of Iran,” *History Today* 40 (1990): 24–29, discusses Bahá’í history and persecutions in Iran. P. Smith and M. Momen, “The Bahá’í Faith 1957–1988: A Survey of Contemporary Developments,” *Religion* 19 (1989): 63–91, has an excellent section on the growth of the Bahá’í community worldwide.

- The Concise Encyclopaedia of Islam*. S.v. “Bahá’ís.” London: Stacey International, 1989.
- Encyclopedia Americana*. Vol. 3. S.v. “Bahai Faith.” New York: Americana Corp., 1977.
- The Encyclopedia of American Religions*. Vol. 2. S.v. “Baha’i World Faith.” Edited by I. Gordon Melton. Wilmington, N. Carolina: McGrath, 1978.
- Encyclopaedia Britannica*. 15th ed.³ Vol. 2. S.v. “The Baha’i Faith.” Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1988, 1991.
- Encyclopedia Canadiana*. Vol. 1. S.v. “Baha’i World Faith” by W. I. Harvey. Toronto: Grolier Ltd., 1977.
- Encyclopaedia Iranica*. Vol. 3. S.v. “The Bahai Faith (i. The Faith)” by J. R. I. Cole. Edited by E. Yarshater. London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1989.
- Encyclopaedia Judaica*. Vol. 9. “Bahá’í Faith.” S.v. “Israel, State of (Religious Life).” Jerusalem: Encyclopaedia Judaica, 1972.
- The Encyclopaedia of Islam*. Vol. 1. S.v. “Bahá’ís” by A. Bausani. Edited by H. Gibb et al. New edition. London: Luzac & Co., 1960.
- The Encyclopedia of Religion*. Vol. 2. S.v. “Bahá’ís” by A. Bausani. Edited by Mircea Eliade et al. New York: Macmillan, 1987.
- The Encyclopaedia of World Faiths*. S.v. “The Baha’i Faith.” Edited by P. Bishop and M. Darton. London and Sydney: Macdonald, 1987.
- Encyclopedia of Zionism and Israel*. S.v. “Bahai Community in Israel.” Edited by R. Patai. New York: Herzl Press McGraw-Hill, 1971.
- Everyman’s Encyclopedia*. Vol. 1. S.v. “Bahá’í.” Edited by D. A. Girling. London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1978.
- The Great Soviet Encyclopedia*. Vol. 3. S.v. “Baha’ism” by L. I. Klimovich. Edited by A. M. Prokhorov. New York: Macmillan, 1973.
- The Hutchinson Encyclopedia*. 9th ed. S.v. “Baha’i Faith.” London: Random House, 1990.
- Longman Encyclopedia*. S.v. “Baha’ism.” Edited by A. Briggs. Harlow: Longman Group, 1989.
- The Macmillan Encyclopedia*. Rev. ed. S.v. “Baha’i Faith.” London: Macmillan, 1991.
- The Modern Encyclopedia of Religions in Russia and the Soviet Union*. Vol. 3. S.v. “Baha’i.” Edited by P. D. Steeves. Gulf Breeze, Florida: Academic International Press, 1991.⁴
- New Catholic Encyclopedia*. S.v. “Baha’ism” by J. Kritzcek. Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America, 1967.
- The New Jewish Encyclopedia*. Rev. ed. S.v. “Bahai.” London: W. H. Allen, 1970: 219.
- New Twentieth-Century Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*. S.v. “Baha’ism” by P. Hillyer. Edited by J. D. Douglas. New York: Baker Book House, 1991.
- Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam*. S.v. “Bahá’ allah.” Edited by H. Gibb and J. Kramers. London: Luzac & Co., 1961.

³ The 14th edition contains a longer section in the *Macropaedia* (vol. 2, pp. 587–90) written by Firuz Kazemzadeh.

⁴ This entry has interesting information on the history of the Bahá’í Faith in [the Soviet Union]. It also reports that Tolstoy said, “Baha’u’llah was a genuine prophet, inspired and inspiring.”