

## Prospects and Dilemmas of Writing a Bahá'í Encyclopedia\*

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### Abstract

This paper addresses the need for a Bahá'í encyclopedia and describes the nature, organization, and editing of the multi-volume Bahá'í encyclopedic dictionary project endorsed in 1984 by the United States Bahá'í community. The encyclopedia will serve both Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í researchers and scholars, the general reader; and university and public libraries. This paper considers the significance of the encyclopedia in terms of other Bahá'í encyclopedic works and in terms of the current stage in the development of the Bahá'í community. However desirable such a project may be, a number of dilemmas accompany its undertaking. These dilemmas relate to the present status of Bahá'í scholarship, the embryonic nature of primary sources, the high standard of scholarship exemplified by the works of Shoghi Effendi, and the relative newness of the Bahá'í religion. The prospects of the encyclopedic undertaking are expected to generate considerable scholarship and to provide intellectual vigor to issues raised by Bahá'ís and their critics.

### Résumé

Cet article considère le besoin d'une encyclopédie bahá'íe et décrit la nature, l'organisation et la rédaction de ce dictionnaire encyclopédique qui compterait plusieurs volumes; ce projet a été appuyé en 1984 par la communauté bahá'íe des États-Unis. L'encyclopédie sera utile tant aux chercheurs et erudits bahá'ís et non bahá'ís qu'aux personnes intéressées, aux universités et aux bibliothèques publiques. Cet article étudie la signification de l'encyclopédie par rapport à d'autres oeuvres encyclopédiques bahá'íes et par rapport à l'étape actuelle de développement de la communauté bahá'íe. Pour autant que ce projet soit désirable, il s'accompagne néanmoins d'un certain nombre de dilemmes. Ces dilemmes se rapportent à la condition actuelle de l'érudition bahá'íe, à la nature embryonnaire des sources originales, au haut niveau d'érudition démontré par les ouvrages de Shoghi Effendi et à la nouveauté relative de la religion bahá'íe. Les perspectives de cette oeuvre encyclopédique devraient donner lieu à un haut degré d'érudition et apporter une vigueur intellectuelle aux questions soulevées par les bahá'ís et leurs critiques.

### Resumen

Esta disertación se dirige a la necesidad de una enciclopedia bahá'í y traza la esencia, organización y redacción de un proyecto de un diccionario enciclopédico bahá'í multi-volumen endosado en 1984 por la comunidad bahá'í de Estados Unidos. La enciclopedia servirá a los doctos e investigadores, bahá'í y no bahá'í, el lector general, y bibliotecas universitarias y públicas. La disertación considera el significado de la enciclopedia a razón de otras obras enciclopédicas bahá'í y de acuerdo con el nivel de desarrollo corriente en la comunidad bahá'í. No obstante lo interesante que pueda ser tal proyecto, el llevarlo a cabo con lleva un número de dilemas. Estos dilemas se relacionan a el estado de momento de la erudición bahá'í, la naturaleza embriónica de sus fuentes primarias, el alto modelo de erudición ilustrado por las obras de Shoghi Effendi, y la novedad relativa de la Religión Bahá'í. Se espera que las perspectivas de el empeño enciclopédico generarán bastante erudición y prestarán vigor intelectual a los asuntos suscitados por los bahá'ís y sus críticos.

In 1945, an encyclopedic entry on "Baháism" carried eighty-eight words of text, including two cross-references (Ferm, *Encyclopedia* 52). By 1984, Bahá'ís apparently deserved a longer entry in a more contemporary encyclopedia—132 words (Hinnells, *Penguin Dictionary* 60). During the thirty-nine years separating these two entries, the Bahá'í community spread from 78 to 350 countries and significant territories, and translated its literature into 699 additional languages. As well, the number of localities where Bahá'ís reside grew from approximately 1,500 to over 112,888. It would appear that no encyclopedic entry is equal to the task of keeping up with the development of the worldwide Bahá'í community. A more comprehensive encyclopedic approach to the Bahá'í Faith is needed.

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In the fall of 1983, a planning committee at the Bahá'í Publishing Trust of the United States decided to act on a suggestion that they publish a Bahá'í encyclopedia. The Publishing Trust asked John Walbridge to prepare a proposal on the idea, along with a preliminary list of articles. A few months later Dr. Walbridge submitted a proposal for an eight-volume work bearing the tentative title of "A Dictionary of the Bahá'í Faith." Since this was clearly a major project with international Bahá'í significance, the proposal was submitted to both the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States and the Bahá'í World Centre. The necessary approvals eventually came through, and the project began in earnest in November 1984.

Once the decision had been made to publish an encyclopedia, the National Spiritual Assembly appointed an editorial board to carry out the work. John Walbridge was appointed general editor. I was appointed as senior editor to research and direct the social science entries. Later, the project was made a goal of the Six Year Plan of the United States Bahá'í community. An international advisory board was appointed to ensure that the encyclopedia receive the widest possible benefits from women and men known for their academic and practical expertise.

Since 1984, the two editors have compiled a 300-page document, which is the architecture of the encyclopedia. This outline lists nearly 9,000 entries by subject matter. Many decisions have been made of specific matters of style and policy. During the past four years, 258 articles have been written; another 100 are underway. This scholarly undertaking will result in the publication of several volumes of text. An index will also be published. The first volume is expected to be published in 1992.<sup>1</sup>

A significant milestone was reached when the editorial board submitted a 125-page grant proposal to the National Endowment for the Humanities in the United States. The proposed budget was US \$1.2 million. While the National Endowment for the Humanities informed the editorial board that no funding of the project was currently possible, the "evaluators were impressed with the clear description of the project [the editors] prepared and thought the methodology appropriate for an encyclopedia."<sup>2</sup> In Canada, reviewers for the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council commented that the encyclopedia "will be a significant contribution to Bahá'í literature" and that it "will play an immense role in community identity and self-perception."<sup>3</sup> In July 1987, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States voted an annual budget of US \$57,400 in support of the project.

### **Editorial Aspects of the Work**

Although it is obviously impossible to produce an encyclopedia covering all possible subjects from a Bahá'í point of view, we, nonetheless, want at least to discuss the history, teachings, and literature of the Bahá'í Faith. The encyclopedia is also being written with the needs of four distinct groups in mind. Such a goal substantially increases the educational value of the work.

### ***Non-Bahá'í Scholars***

The non-Bahá'í researcher would find the encyclopedia a natural reference work about the Bahá'í community and Bahá'í Faith. The material will be international in character and will span many disciplines. The work goes beyond merely being a reference work for Orientalists; it will contain large amounts of information on the Third World, women, and other groups that have a significant role in the Bahá'í community. The researcher will find information on the demographic character of the Bahá'í world community, the history of early Jewish converts, the Bahá'í notion of education, and the Bahá'í contribution to the development of indigenous culture.

### ***Bahá'í Scholars***

The Bahá'í scholar would find a convenient source of facts and bibliographical references and background information on subjects with which he or she may not necessarily be familiar. For example, someone translating the Bahá'í writings is likely to need specific information about the subjects mentioned and the people referred to and addressed. A scholar doing research on the early Bahá'í community of the United States will find specific information about the early believers or about that community's contact with prominent people such as Alexander Graham Bell and Woodrow Wilson.

### ***General Readers***

The general reader, both Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í, is likely to need a quick-reference work on a particular topic that happens to interest him or her. For example, the encyclopedia discusses a major writing of the Founder of the Faith, such as Bahá'u'lláh's *The Seven Valleys*, in terms of the contents, the technical and literary terms used, the people mentioned, and its literary significance. A reader may also wish to know something more about the local or national Bahá'í community in which he or she resides. A practically oriented reader may wish to know about marriage, child-rearing practices, and Bahá'í administration.

### ***Libraries***

University, public, and Bahá'í libraries will benefit from an encyclopedia on the Bahá'í Faith. University and public libraries now have no comprehensive Bahá'í reference work, while Bahá'í libraries established by Bahá'í communities and permanent Bahá'í schools in many parts of the world will view the encyclopedia as an opportunity to expand their range of subjects without needing to purchase all the Bahá'í materials in existence.

### **Organization of Knowledge**

The Bahá'í encyclopedia aims to fulfill the criteria of a good encyclopedia as set out by Collison (*Encyclopedias* 11–16): strong biographical information (about 40% of all entries); considerable coverage of the humanities (40%), especially history, geography, religion, and philosophy; a good index; and thorough cross-referencing. The biggest problem was to settle on a list of articles. It is not, as we discovered, simply a question of making an alphabetical list of all the topics having to do with the Bahá'í Faith and then writing an article on each of them. In fact, it is necessary to start with a concept of the whole subject matter of the encyclopedia, divide it into topics, and work out all the interrelations among the different articles. Not only must all relevant topics be covered with a minimum of duplication but the needs of different classes of readers must also be considered. The general article on Bahá'u'lláh must be written with consideration for the Islamicist, journalist, and child writing a report for school. While the articles on particular events, people, and places associated with Bahá'u'lláh must be useful to scholars, they must not be so arcane as to alarm the general reader.

By the time an article is assigned to an author, we have quite a precise idea of what we want. To be sure, there are some changes after this stage—usually additional short articles—but this rarely affects the general structure of the encyclopedia. The encyclopedia's subject matter can be divided into the history and ethnography, the literature, and the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith. I will discuss each of these in turn.

### ***Historical and Ethnographic Entries***

The largest part of the encyclopedia is historical. This naturally includes biographies of the central figures of the Bábí and Bahá'í Faiths, accounts of the major events of Bahá'í history, biographies of several thousand people who played significant roles in Bahá'í history, and descriptions of historical sites. There will also be histories of national and important local Bahá'í communities, along with articles on ethnic groups and languages. There will also be articles on other religions. This last type of article serves two purposes. First, information on Bahá'í teachings concerning other religions, their historical interconnections, and their links to the Bahá'í Faith is obviously within the encyclopedia's mandate. Second, these are topics continually studied by Bahá'ís, and so some articles in these areas are written as starting points for study.

### ***Literary Entries***

The second general area is Bahá'í literature. We will have articles on several hundred of the more important works of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi, and the Universal House of Justice, as well as a few key works by other authors. There will also be articles on particular classes of literature as well as literary terms and symbols used in the Bahá'í writings. These articles will include a great deal of information of value both to scholars and general readers: detailed information on bibliography and the contents of individual works, analysis of symbols, definitions of technical terms, and the like.

### ***Entries on Bahá'í Thought***

The final area is Bahá'í thought, including logic, epistemology, science and the material world; theology, ethics, and spirituality; Bahá'í law and devotional practice; Bahá'í administration; and social principles. Generally, these articles are organized according to the categories and concepts used in Bahá'í literature, but there will also be articles on disciplines and critical concepts of non-Bahá'í thought.

### **The Encyclopedia's Significance<sup>4</sup>**

The encyclopedia was conceived as a response to several intellectual needs and opportunities within and outside the Bahá'í community. Within the Bahá'í community, there has been an efflorescence of Bahá'í publishing during the past decade, producing monographs, scholarly biographies, memoirs, indices, and concordances. Dozens of other books on the Bahá'í Faith are now published every year, many of scholarly value. A recent publication<sup>5</sup> lists some 1,200 English publications on the Bahá'í Faith. Of the thirty or so studies on the theology and community of the Bahá'í Faith, all of them are dated since 1953; the number of studies during the first twenty years equals those undertaken over the past ten years.

Scholarly Bahá'í journals in several languages are now published. Even the many national Bahá'í newsletters often publish articles of scholarly value, especially on local Bahá'í history and biography. Not atypical is a recent article on the Bahá'í history of Norway, published in Persian in a French Bahá'í newsletter.<sup>6</sup> There is thus a need to heighten the interrelationships of these works.

The idea of a Bahá'í encyclopedia was not entirely new. It had been discussed informally in Bahá'í scholarly circles since at least the 1970s. Beginning in the 1940s, a number of books of a broadly encyclopedic nature were published in Iran. This literature is extremely valuable, especially for early Bahá'í history and the Bahá'í sacred writings. Most of this literature is written in traditional style, which is to say, without footnotes or careful organization. This literature is not particularly accessible even to most people interested in the subject because of its style, the difficulty of obtaining the books, and the availability of these works in Persian only. The most important of these works are (a) such glossaries as *Asráru'l-'Athár* by Fadil-i-Mázandaraní, a glossary of the Bahá'í writings in five volumes; (b) encyclopedic commentaries arranged alphabetically for several important Persian Bahá'í books by the Bahá'í scholar *Ishráq-Khávarí* (*Rahíq-i-Makhtún*, *Asrári-i-Rabbání*, and *Qámús-i-Íqán*); (c) biographical dictionaries written in Persian, one in nine volumes by Sulaymání (*Masábih-i-Hidáyat*); and more important biographical sections to be found in most general and local Persian Bahá'í histories. There are also dictionaries of Bahá'í women (Arbab, *Akhtarán-i-Tábán*) and poets; (d) systematic compilations from the Bahá'í writings produced in Persian, the most important of which are *'Amr va-Khalq* by Fadil-i-Mázandaraní in five volumes and *Má'idiy-i-Asmání* by *Ishráq-Khávarí* in nine. In addition, some of the general collections of Bahá'í scripture are arranged topically.

In the English-speaking world, some effort has already been directed at producing works of an all-encompassing nature. The closest things to encyclopedias in English are several glossaries: a very short work written for general readers by Marzieh Gail (*Bahá'í Glossary*) and a single-volume work by Wendy Momen (*A Basic Bahá'í Dictionary*). There also exists an index of quotations, a 811-page work compiled by James Heggie (*An Index of Quotations from the Bahá'í Sacred Writings*) and *A Concordance to the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, compiled by Lee Nelson (1110 pages).

Aside from the general popularity and obvious usefulness of encyclopedias, it is not difficult to find reasons within the Bahá'í community why this idea should repeatedly surface. For doctrinal reasons the Bahá'í Faith has always had a highly developed historical self-consciousness. Histories and memoirs were written as early as the time of the Báb, and conscious efforts to preserve documents and memoirs were already being made in the time of Bahá'u'lláh. The Bábí and Bahá'í Faiths are both religions based on historical events (the appearance of their Founders), and they have as their historical background Islam, another religion very conscious of its own history. The Bahá'í Faith also defines itself in terms of a historical mission for the future. Thus an encyclopedia—a codification of the community's knowledge of itself, its history, its literature, and its thought—is a rather natural Bahá'í development (cf. Turner and Killian, "Value Orientations").

Outside the Bahá'í community, concomitant with the worldwide growth of the Bahá'í community and partly as a result of the persecution of the Bahá'ís in Iran, there is an interest among scholars, policymakers, and the like in learning about the existence of Bahá'í communities in various social and cultural milieus. One reviewer for the National Endowment for the Humanities noted:

I should like to affirm that the Bahá'ís have become a significant group in American life, and a wide-spread presence in the world, about which Americans should not be ignorant. I know Bahá'í bibliography well enough to say that no comprehensive manual now exists for effective access to essential information on the history and present actualities of the Bahá'í movement.<sup>7</sup>

A reviewer for Canada's Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council commented:

The significance of this proposal rests in its practical importance. A summary of the places and significant people in the movement would be of great help to scholars who are interested in Bahá'í history, and has the potential for students of the history of religions to get first-hand information on the religion's beliefs, in the scheme of things Bahá'ís are less important than many other groups I could think of, but, as a contribution to our knowledge of a relatively recent religion, the encyclopedia will be helpful.<sup>8</sup>

## Dilemmas

Encyclopedic writing usually occurs at the end of the scholarship cycle. The main task of notable contributors is one of synthesis, going over familiar terrain of their respective discipline. In this sense, the encyclopedia on the

Bahá'í Faith is different. It comes at the very early stage of the scholarship cycle, creating its own particular dilemmas.

### ***Present Bahá'í Scholarship***

In the Bahá'í case, scholarship falls into three broad categories. First, there is scholarship generally undertaken by non-Bahá'ís focussing on the early history of the Faith, such as the work by E. G. Browne. There is, in addition, Persian Bahá'í scholarship, which has complemented the work of non-Bahá'ís. Third, there is Western scholarship undertaken by Bahá'ís, emphasizing primarily the early history of Bahá'í communities in the West and East.

An encyclopedia must do justice to existing scholarship in a given field, even if scholarship appears to be quite new and still relatively unknown. Nevertheless, the encyclopedia expects to give an exhaustive coverage of what currently already exists. Despite the importance placed on personal study, there is not a strong scholarly tradition in the Bahá'í Faith. The community is neither large nor rich nor concentrated in a particular place. There are no Bahá'í colleges to train and employ Bahá'í theologians and historians; neither is there much interest shown in the Bahá'í Faith by the academic world. Young Bahá'í scholars in the West who ignored the general Bahá'í preference for more practical professions found it necessary to turn their academic interests in other directions to find employment.

Only in Iran, home to several hundred thousand Bahá'ís still imbued with Islamic ideas about scholarship, did a Bahá'í scholarly tradition really flourish. The situation began to change in the West in the mid-1970s, as the large numbers of youth converted in previous years were integrated into the community and resumed their studies. Some, particularly in England and North America, chose to pursue studies equipping them to undertake serious Bahá'í scholarship. Also, the addition to these communities of large numbers of relatively well-educated people allowed a considerable increase in the scope of Bahá'í research and publication. Nevertheless, the Bahá'í scholarly world is very small, especially since the Bahá'í victims of the Iranian revolution have included many of its most learned members.

A more important concern, however, is the fewness of Bahá'í scholars who can be called upon to contribute to the encyclopedia. There is no reliable information available. The National Bahá'í Archives in Wilmette receives fewer than 100 researchers a year.<sup>9</sup> A recent directory of individuals interested in Bahá'í research and collections contains eighty-two names (Afsharian, *Directory*).

Only a handful of Bahá'ís have advanced training in disciplines (such as Islamic studies) most relevant to the study of the history and literature of the Bahá'í Faith. A number of scholarly and quasi-scholarly Bahá'í journals have been started in recent years, but many, if not most, of the significant topics in Bahá'í literature, history, and thought have yet to be studied seriously. This problem is exacerbated by a general lack of interest among non-Bahá'í scholars. E. G. Browne and A. L. M. Nicolas made great contributions around the turn of the century—certain of their books are still in use in English- and French-speaking Bahá'í communities—but no one of comparable stature has followed them. There are books written to attack the Bahá'í Faith by such people as missionaries to Iran and

### ***The Embryonic Nature of Primary Sources***

This brings us to the nature of primary sources in contemporary Bahá'í scholarship that will determine the quality of the work. The number of archival documents and personal papers preserved is too little in comparison to the size of the Bahá'í community. In some cases, the Faith is too new in a person's life to be appreciated by non-Bahá'í heirs, and so valuable documents have been discarded. Others, willing to preserve a deservedly good image of the Faith, may be tempted to set aside only those papers and documents that present a positive image. There is also the practical fact that so many Bahá'í communities are still relatively young—many were formed since the mid-1960s—and the question of preserving materials is just now surfacing.

The two most important centers for primary materials are the Bahá'í World Centre in Haifa and the National Bahá'í Archives in Wilmette, Illinois. In addition to the 60,000 primary source texts being catalogued and researched at the Bahá'í World Centre, there is a considerable body of memoirs and the like preserved for future study.

The National Bahá'í Archives of the United States, the second largest collection of Bahá'í papers outside Haifa, has been long active in the field. For example, 10,000 papers were photocopied by the author, to be readied for the research and writing of 75% of the entries for one of the volumes.

There are also some emerging archival centers, such as the Hasan Balyuzi Library Trust in England, the Los Angeles Community Archives, and collections gathered by the Association for Bahá'í Studies in Ottawa, Canada. Despite these emerging archival collections, many Bahá'ís would nevertheless still be reluctant to engage in any widespread effort at research for a number of other reasons. Until a generation ago there was continuous succession of authoritative Bahá'í leaders. Their presence may have discouraged others from academic study of the Faith. Mírzá Abu'l-Fadl-i-Gulpádygání, the most respected of early Bahá'í scholars, stopped writing after his conversion,

only resuming at the direct order of Bahá'u'lláh. Today, many Bahá'ís perceive that the scholarly work of Shoghi Effendi stands too close to their time to warrant a study of contemporary Bahá'í events.

### ***The Scholarly Work of Shoghi Effendi***

With regard to the high standards set by Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, Bahá'ís have rightfully been awed by the work of the Guardian, whose survey of the first hundred years has carved out many areas for Bahá'í scholarship. Much of the current scholarship does not remotely approach the style and quality of the Guardian's research. One observer of the Bahá'í community once commented that the “figure of the Guardian looms very large over the Bahá'í community...”<sup>10</sup> The editors of the encyclopedia assume that the excellent scholarship by Shoghi Effendi may, in fact, become a stimulus to the high standards set for the encyclopedia.

### ***The Concept of “Children of the Half-Light”***

Another dilemma arises out of the Bahá'í conception of “children of the half-light.” Bahá'ís hold the opinion that a fuller and more proper understanding of the Bahá'í Faith is not realizable, given the relatively close span of time between when the Faith was founded (1844) and where they stand today.

There is no question that *any* scholarly work undertaken on the Faith today is of a preliminary nature. In that respect, the encyclopedia is not different. However, the editorial board has adopted some editorial policies that may partly alleviate this problem.

The encyclopedia will not attempt to press research findings on the Bahá'í Faith into currently fashionable theories or intellectual trends. The encyclopedia is to be an empirical work, where opinion and theory are either avoided or indicated as such. The study of Bahá'í concepts and ideas will proceed from an *emic*<sup>11</sup> point of view, that is, the naturalistic structure of the ideas as addressed in the Bahá'í texts will be presented. This approach has yielded, in the past, considerable fruit in ethnographies and the like.

Other significant policies relate to the tone of the work. First, the encyclopedia hopes to avoid merely listing “successes” (however broadly conceived). Scholarly research and writing will be seriously compromised if the work becomes a catalogue of events that are nevertheless readily available elsewhere. In this connection, the encyclopedia will be circumspect in using the term “first,”<sup>12</sup> as in the case of “first believers” and the like. While there are many obvious cases where such “firsts” are in evidence, it should also be borne in mind that in many other instances it is not at all clear whether a given newspaper article, let us say, was indeed the first time that the name of the Faith found its way into print.

Another difficulty is the recentness of the events and people being discussed. The Bahá'í Faith is changing and growing rather rapidly. It is often difficult to know the significance of the people and events we include. For example, the decision in 1983 to encourage local Bahá'í communities to undertake social and economic development projects has made early Bahá'í efforts in this direction of much greater historical interest. Had the encyclopedia been written in the 1950s, it would have had little to say about India, but India is now by far the largest Bahá'í community in the world.

Related to this “recentness” is the immaturity of the analysis of Bahá'í history, literature, and thought. Generally, scholarship on the Bahá'í Faith tends either to be apologetic and theological—studies written by Bahá'ís for their own religious purposes—or attempts to subsume the Bahá'í Faith with in a particular theory of a particular discipline. The first class is likely to be naive, the second reductionist. Neither approach represents a particularly mature analysis of the Bahá'í Faith.

A final set of problems results from the fact that the encyclopedia is being produced for the most part by and for Bahá'ís. The result is pressure to cheerlead and to conform to conventional viewpoints. For example, the editors routinely submit copies of articles on national Bahá'í communities to the local Bahá'í administrative institutions for review. Frequently, these institutions are able to correct and supplement our information, warn us of expressions that are considered derogatory by the local people, and the like. We also do not want to publish anything that will put these communities into danger. It is not right, after all, to endanger human life for the sake of an encyclopedia article and scholarship. However, we are sometimes asked to omit information simply because it does not reflect well on that community. Likewise, it often falls to us to puncture myths that have grown up in the Bahá'í community. This deflation is not always well received, and the editors face pressure to change or omit. Consultation has proven to be a requirement in balancing courtesy and scholarly integrity.

### **Prospects**

In its fifth year of development, the encyclopedia has managed to produce some tangible results in the field of Bahá'í scholarship. These results are both practical and intellectual benefits.

### ***Practical Results***

First, it has prompted a number of Bahá'ís who have undertaken local historical research to publish their findings in Bahá'í journals (e.g., Rolfe, "They Built" 14–15). Given the widespread character of the work, we anticipate more of these results of work carried out on behalf of the encyclopedia.

Second, contributors around the world, such as those in the Bahamas and the Gambia, have become urgently aware of the need to preserve and develop Bahá'í archives at the national level. This will be an important legacy to future generations.

Third, researchers are pushing back Bahá'í history by twenty, thirty, or even forty years. A good example is the work currently being carried out in Canada. British Columbia history has moved from 1920 to 1908; Alberta from 1937 to 1913; Manitoba from 1939 to 1903; New Brunswick from 1938 to 1910; and Prince Edward Island from 1937 to 1917. New work (van den Hoonard, "Canada's Earliest") is being carried out on Canada's first Bahá'í family, the Magees of London, who apparently became Bahá'ís in 1898. Finally, efforts are now underway to reconstruct the Canadian Bahá'í membership list from 1898 to 1944, enlisting the active cooperation of many older Bahá'ís in the country.

There is, moreover, much in the way of historical and archival materials that are now seeing the light, including detailed accounts of the opening up to the Faith of South America, Europe, Africa, and the Far East. The important collections bearing on the world history of the Faith have now been flagged. A grant from the editorial board of the encyclopedia administered by the University of New Brunswick, allowed two researchers to work on important annotated indices of several pioneering committees, namely the United States Inter-America Committee (1939–1953), the Africa Teaching Committee (1953–1963), the European Teaching Committee of the United States (1946–1958), and the Asia Teaching Committee (1953–1958).

Finally, we are still living in a time with people with living memories of Bahá'í historical events. Although much of this information has been recorded, the encyclopedia will particularly engage these people to contribute directly or indirectly to entries touching on the Bahá'í communities of which they are a historical part.

### ***Intellectual Benefits***

This major project has brought together clusters of Bahá'í scholars who might have otherwise never had the opportunity to discuss or engage in scholarship. These clusters include a network of contributors around the world, valuable exchanges with scholars at Bahá'í archives, and the two editors who collaborate across the United States-Canada border. Indeed, geographical and disciplinary borders provide points of interesting differences, rather than points of division. A heightened sense of sharing archival findings, computer diskettes, and ideas is the norm rather than the exception.

The evident practical benefits of the work carried out on behalf of the encyclopedia should not preclude its importance on intellectual grounds. The encyclopedia, it is hoped, will actively involve women in its stimulation of Bahá'í studies. The 200 or so entries of national and important local Bahá'í communities are a concrete illustration of such involvement. Forty-six percent of the authors are women, most of whom are from the Third World.

A number of commentators on the "development" of the Bahá'í Faith have assumed that the Faith has gone through a process of westernization since the death of the Báb and particularly since 'Abdu'l-Bahá's travels to the West. Other critics have spoken of the "autocratic" character of the Bahá'í community, while others refer to the transformation of the Faith (e.g., Johnson, "Historical Analysis") as it gained support outside its Iranian home. Another intellectual argument in recent years has revolved around the differences between the Bábí Faith on one hand and the Bahá'í Faith on the other hand (McEoin, "From Babism" 219–55). Finally, some analysts have emphasized the so-called pacifist and invisible nature of Bahá'í communities (e.g., Ruff, "Invisible Community" 665–68).

The nature of scholarship does not allow us to dismiss these points offhandedly. A Bahá'í encyclopedia seems to be the essential reference tool for weighing the evidence analytically. Its descriptive rather than prescriptive character; its emphasis on facts rather than assumptions; its reliance on a broad spectrum of Bahá'í scholarship; and its extensive use of primary documents and authenticated materials—all these elements will ensure that *A Short Encyclopedia of the Bahá'í Faith* will engage the lively minds of its readers, whether Bahá'í or not.

## Notes

1. The National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States has, in March 1988, indicated its decision to publish only one major volume in 1992. This decision implies a rescheduling in the research and writing of a considerable number of new entries. Although the current article was written before the March 1988 decision, the basic philosophy and structure of the encyclopedia remains unaltered.

2. Letter from the National Endowment for the Humanities, Washington, DC, 7 July 1987, to John Walbridge.

3. Enclosures with letter from Marion P. King, Director, Research Grants Division, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, Ottawa, 28 April 1989, to W. C. van den Hoonaard.

4. The author is indebted to John Walbridge for his assistance in the writing of this article and this section in particular.

5. Joel Bjorling, *The Bahá'í Faith: A Historical Bibliography*.

6. By Hooshang Raafat, "Tárikh-i-Bahá'í-i-Nurvizh" [Bahá'í History of Norway], in *Payám-i-Bahá'í*, Supplement of *Bahá'í France* 88 (March 1987).

7. National Endowment for the Humanities, Division of Research Program. Review No. 3136-0075, 30 December 1986.

8. Enclosure with letter from Marion P. King, Director, Research Grants Division. Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, Ottawa, 28 April 1989, to W. C. van den Hoonaard.

9. Chairperson, National Bahá'í Archives Committee, personal communication to author, July 1986. former Bahá'ís. Otherwise, most scholarly comment on the Bahá'í Faith has concerned the Bahá'í Faith's relations with other areas of greater scholarly concern, such as the development of modern Iran. While there is certainly nothing wrong with this, it is of limited use to the encyclopedia editor who is more concerned with such problems as collecting biographical information on hundreds of people unlikely to be mentioned in these articles. Unfortunately, there are almost no scholars outside the Bahá'í community who have the sort of detailed knowledge concerning the Bahá'í Faith that would be of use to the encyclopedia. Secular academic bodies, such as the National Endowment for the Humanities, interpret this as a fundamental weakness of the work.

However, the work's primary strength will be its use of hitherto unknown and unpublished materials. The Bahá'í encyclopedia will itself become an important source document when future generations are called upon to assess the development of the Bahá'í Faith and community. In a modest way, the encyclopedia will become as much a statement about the Faith as of the particular time period in which it will have been written.

10. Consultation on Bahá'í scholarship at the American Academy of Religion Meetings in Los Angeles, California, 1985.

11. In "Ethnopsychology I: Comparative Psychological Processes," Douglass R. Price-Williams defines *emic* as "the way in which members of a society chop up their universe into its various domains."

12. A whole new body of information sheds light on the issue of the "first" to become Bahá'í. Such matters as nationals declaring outside their country of birth, tribal adoptions, patriarchal primacy in the case of the son who must wait for his father to declare before he can, etc., may well be featured in an entry under "first Bahá'ís."

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