

Review/Critique/Reseña

STUDYING THE WRITINGS OF SHOGHI EFFENDI

Editor: Morten Bergsmo

Published by: George Ronald, Oxford, 1991, 202 pages

Few would argue with the contention that a profound knowledge of the writings of Shoghi Effendi is an important asset to the task of effectively teaching the Bahá'í Faith and building the Administrative Order. The problem for many, however, especially in these busy times, is finding the most effective and efficient way to study these writings. One choice is to relinquish some degree of autonomy and to study with an “expert” who guides us through all or part of Shoghi Effendi’s writings. Another option is to navigate the sea of his literature alone. Still another is to study in a consultative fashion with a community of learners. A fourth choice, the study guide, combines the best features of all three options.

In general, study guides are useful in that an “expert” has done the advance work of organizing material for systematic learning. Through the medium of the study guide, the “expert” focuses our attention on the salient ideas or themes of a text, makes the relationships between them visible, and provides a framework for the details that flesh out the main ideas. The result is that we acquire a highly organized understanding of the subject, making it easy to add new information and to retrieve old. If a study guide is skillfully designed, we are taken beyond the confines of the immediate text to the implications and applications of its ideas in the real world. While allowing us to take advantage of an expert’s knowledge, a study guide preserves the freedom to explore and to be tangential since only those parts of the guide that are personally useful and relevant need be used. Furthermore, a study guide works just as well for those learning individually at their own pace as it does for those learning in groups.

There are two types of study guides. One is developmental in approach: its goal is to develop a student’s ability to read and process a text as well as to facilitate mastery of its content. The second approach assumes the reader has the skills necessary for access to information in the text but needs mediation to understand it thoroughly.

Studying the Writings of Shoghi Effendi belongs to the second category. Its purpose is not to teach us how to read Shoghi Effendi’s writings—it assumes that capability exists—but rather to serve as an aid to their “prolonged systematic study” (3). Really a compendium of guides under one cover, this book is a boon to all those who want to explore the entire range of Shoghi Effendi’s writings but are daunted by the enormity of the task. Prepared by an ambitious, assiduous, and insightful group of twelve youth, it provides the “expert” guidance needed for serious students of Shoghi Effendi’s work.

The text of *Studying the Writings of Shoghi Effendi* is divided into two major sections, each essential to the book’s aim. The first provides a holistic perspective on the study of Shoghi Effendi’s work and functions as a

preparation for and adjunct to the second section. Two opening pieces—a foreword by Universal House of Justice member Dr. Peter Khan and an introduction by editor Morten Bergsmo and writer Kishan Manocha—describe the purpose of the study guide: to identify recurring motifs in Shoghi Effendi's writing, to outline the principles of systematic study, and to extol the rewards that sustained study brings. A new compilation prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice calls attention to particular works and themes, and ties the relevance of their study to teaching the Bahá'í Faith and building the Administrative Order. Key articles by retired member of the Universal House of Justice David Hofman and by Helen, John, and Amelia Danesh provide an overview of Shoghi Effendi's writings and anchor them in the context of his life and in his role as the designated "Expounder of the Word of God."

The second part of the book comprises study guides to twenty-one separate "books." As Bergsmo and Manocha point out in the introduction, only one of these, *God Passes By*, is really a book. The rest are either collections of letters to national communities or compilations of various passages organized around specific topics or issues. Having the study guides all in one volume gives even the casual reader a panoramic and breathtaking view of the scope and magnitude of Shoghi Effendi's writings in English.

The sequence of the guides follows a loose order, so we can begin anywhere. The compilation in the first section can provide guidance in making this choice. Each guide, although written by a different person, employs a similar format: an introduction briefly summarizes the text followed by an extensive and detailed series of questions with no answers, just page numbers. In some guides, page numbers to other texts are given so ideas can be cross-referenced. By giving only page numbers, the young writers hope "to open doors to the given text, to stimulate independent reflection and further investigation" (3).

The questions crafted by the authors ask primarily for literal reiteration and interpretation of text. In the process of answering, we become aware of key ideas and their supporting facts, come to understand their significance, and learn of the similarities and differences that exist between Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í historical processes and institutions. Only a few questions in each guide call for analysis, synthesis, or extrapolation of ideas in the text. More questions of this type would have been useful in strengthening our ability to relate present-day events to the issues of raising a new and divine world order. Additionally, questions that asked us to consider how the ideas in the text might be translated into personal or community action would have elevated the reading of text to the level of action.

While the study guide has great value in its current form, a few additions could enhance its usefulness. For example, the fact that so many of Shoghi Effendi's writings are under one cover begs for provisions to examine themes across texts. This examination would allow us to trace the development of a theme over time, to correlate its evolution to the changing needs and

developments of the Bahá'í community and the world, and to determine the relationships that connect one theme to another. Perhaps a chart of major themes with a list of books and some analytical questions could be provided in an appendix. The chart could function as an “advance organizer,” a tool that helps a student organize learning by calling attention, in advance, to the major points of a text. We could fill out the chart as we work our way through each study guide. Passages from the compilation prepared by the Universal House of Justice (printed in this study guide on pages 5–9) could also inform the creation of materials for cross-referencing themes; for example, a chart on the “origin, nature and present-day functioning of the administrative order of the Faith” (6), or one that traces the “operation of the forces of decline and growth”(9). A second addition might be a short unit of study on Shoghi Effendi’s method of analyzing and interpreting contemporary events in light of the forces released by the spirit and teachings of Bahá’u’lláh. This method could serve as a model for improving our own teaching effectiveness. A third proposal is to add a section at the end of each guide that both consolidates learning and extends it beyond the boundaries of the text. Students could summarize the book, connect its ideas to other books and issues, and consider ways to apply the information to teaching and administration.

Even without the additions suggested, *Studying the Writings of Shoghi Effendi* is an outstanding tool for mastering the content of Shoghi Effendi’s writings. It is a gift to the English-speaking Bahá'í community that will, if used widely, have a significantly positive impact on the level of discourse, quality of service, and effectiveness of teaching not only of those who use it but also of those who are attracted by the power of knowledge exhibited by those students.

MELANIE SMITH