

Human Rights & Human Welfare

Volume 5 | Issue 1

Article 11

6-2005

David E. Guinn on The Wilson Chronology of Human Rights: A Record of the Human Striving for Freedom from Ancient Times to the Present. Edited by David Levinson. Bronx, NY: H.W. Wilson, 2003. 581pp.

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Recommended Citation

Guinn, David E. (2005) "David E. Guinn on The Wilson Chronology of Human Rights: A Record of the Human Striving for Freedom from Ancient Times to the Present. Edited by David Levinson. Bronx, NY: H.W. Wilson, 2003. 581pp.," *Human Rights & Human Welfare*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 1 , Article 11.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/hrhw/vol5/iss1/11>

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The Wilson Chronology of Human Rights: A Record of the Human Striving for Freedom from Ancient Times to the Present. Edited by David Levinson. Edited by David Levinson. Bronx, NY: H.W. Wilson, 2003. 581pp.

The Wilson Chronology of Human Rights is one of a series of chronologies including: The Wilson Chronology of the World's Religions; The Wilson Chronology of Asia and the Pacific; The Wilson Chronology of Women's Achievements; The Wilson Chronology of Ideas; The Wilson Chronology of the Arts; The Wilson Chronology of Science and Technology; and The Wilson Calendar of World History. As stated in the subtitle, it is an effort to establish a record of human strivings for freedom from ancient times to the present. This Chronology is divided into nine parts, with separate chronologies within specific human rights issue areas, such as civil rights, religion, women, indigenous people, children, sexual orientation and gender, the disabled, and refugees.

The idea of doing a chronology is in some ways ambitious—yet ultimately it is unclear what purpose the book is intended to serve. The current format simply identifies a date that the editor considers important for human rights and what explains what happened on that date. However, without first defining what is meant by human rights, it is not always clear why a particular event has significance for human rights—or what that significance might be. For example, under “Human Rights – General,” the editor includes an entry on c. 500-300 B.C.E., identifying the founding of Buddhism and its teachings that “humans can overcome the suffering inherent in life by practicing moral and physical purification.” How does that relate to human rights? Which rights? If he is simply identifying the founders of the major religions (Muhammad is also included), why is Jesus omitted?

Moreover, there seems to be a curious arbitrariness surrounding which dates are included and which are not. “C. 1200 B.C.E.” is the first entry on human rights arising upon “God give[ing] Moses the Ten Commandments....” “1939” is identified as “The first worldwide violation of many human rights begins....” The 1945 adoption of the UN Charter, with its explicit identification of protecting human rights, is *not* mentioned, but the 1995 Human Rights International Film Festival is cited.

The book does highlight some interesting dates and might serve as a useful source for someone casting about for ideas related to developments during a particular period. However, the book rarely identifies the source of the information it contains, so that the introduction it provides does not extend to giving further resources.

All in all, this particular format does not appear to lend itself well to addressing the topic of the development of human rights. While any history will be subject to interpretative bias, at least with histories such as Micheline R. Ishay's The History of Human Rights: From Ancient Times to the Globalization Era (2004) or Paul Gordon Lauren's The Evolution of International Human Rights: Visions Seen (1998) the asserted fact is justified and placed in context.

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June 2005*