

Encyclopedia of Human Rights

David P. Forsythe, ed. *Encyclopedia of Human Rights*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. 5 vols: 2672 pp. \$595.00. Hardcover. ISBN: 9780195334029. eBook. ISBN: 9780195336887.

The twentieth and twenty-first centuries have seen a growth in interest on an international scale of the importance of human rights. The *Encyclopedia of Human Rights* seeks to “cover four major categories of entries: rights, organizations, persons, and situations” (I: xx) since 1945, with special coverage for particularly important developments in human rights before the creation of the UN Charter, such as the French Revolution. Rather than presenting or compiling the various human rights documents produced by nations and international organizations, the *Encyclopedia* focuses instead on analysis and commentary by subject experts, which has been lacking in other encyclopedic surveys of human rights.

The *Encyclopedia* succeeds in providing a broad base for both the casual and advanced researcher. Most articles have been written in a conversational tone that assumes the reader has limited knowledge of legal terminology, utilizing definitions when necessary. All entries have been peer reviewed, include bibliographies, and are written with the needs of a broad audience in mind. Forsythe explicitly states that a concerted effort was made to include issues of sexuality and gender issues whenever relevant, with one-third of the entries written by women. International, non-Western issues are oftentimes covered by experts from the non-Western world. This broad spectrum of scholars allows the articles to cover a full spectrum of viewpoints from across the globe rather than just those of the United States, Canada, and Western Europe.

The *Encyclopedia* is arranged alphabetically. Volume 1 includes an overall table of contents that is not replicated in other volumes; a topical outline of articles is provided in volume 5, as well as the index. Articles are included for specific nations, international and national organizations, major topics in human rights, and important persons. Some aspects of the *Encyclopedia's* choice in coverage is odd, as in some instances nations are covered broadly—for instance, “Egypt from Nasser to the Present”—while at other times can be too specific—“China: The Famine of the 1960s,” “China: Tiananmen Massacre,” but no entry for China, broadly speaking. While all articles include *See Also* references, one must heavily rely on the index to get a full scope of any particular nation, organization, topic, or person.

The shortest articles (one to four pages in length) tend to be biographies of individual persons or specific nongovernmental organizations. Longer articles tend to be focused on nations, topics in human rights, and aspects of the United Nations, varying anywhere between ten to twenty pages long with bibliographies containing over thirty references.

Because of the rich and complex nature of human rights throughout the globe, a five-volume encyclopedia cannot completely cover every public or nongovernmental organization, nation, person, or situation relevant to human rights. Sometimes individual organizations are given specific coverage and analysis, such as Human Rights Watch or Oxfam, while at other times broader topics such as “Media” or “Business and Human Rights” analyze the work and influence of multiple public or nongovernmental organizations. At other times, the *Encyclopedia* chooses to group organizations topically, such as with “Women: Women’s Rights Groups in the Middle East” or “Nongovernmental Organizations: Jewish NGOs.”

Thankfully, the *Encyclopedia* provides biographies on both individuals who have helped advance human rights nationally or internationally, such as Tito, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Shirin Ebadi, as well as those who have damaged the human rights of others, such as Adolf Hitler or Nicolae Ceausescu. Entries are included for every UN Human Rights High Commissioner and all Nobel Laureates whose primary focus was on human rights.

The *Encyclopedia* provides a broad scope of coverage on national and transnational interests in human rights. Of particular interest to theological librarians would be its extensive coverage of several world religions, including Baha'i Faith, Confucianism, Hinduism, Judaism, and Islam. The *Encyclopedia's* entries on Christianity are broken up between Catholicism and Protestantism (there are no index entries for the Orthodox Church). Articles on particularly large or significant religious-based nongovernmental organizations such as the World Council of Churches are included. Religious groups and religious-based nongovernmental organizations are analyzed by including the intellectual tradition of human rights within the faith, the application of such traditions, the historical and present discourses on human rights within the tradition, their roles in defending or abusing human rights, continuing challenges, and critiques of their human rights records.

The *Encyclopedia's* coverage of gender and sexuality is surprisingly more thorough than one would expect, covering global issues around women, gender violence, human sexuality, transgender, and intersex concerns. However, one is surprised to discover that the article on "Sexual and Gender Diversity" utilizes the outdated—and to many, offensive—term "transvestite" at points and speaks of transsexuality as a separate concern than transgender identity (transsexuality usually being seen as falling under the umbrella of transgender identities). While this terminology is of concern, the coverage of gender and sexuality issues are thorough and cover many of the important transnational issues, including rape as a form of torture, human trafficking, gender and sexuality issues for refugees, and the rights of children and mothers.

Important concerns to a growing postmodern impulse in academic and public thought are discussed at key points, most notably in the articles on "Conflict Among Human Rights Norms" and "Universality," covering the history of universal human rights, cultural relativism, the idea of self-determination, and poststructural and postcolonial arguments for particularity. Here, as elsewhere (see "North-South Views on Human Rights" or "Peace and Human Rights"), issues of the difference between international law and the enforcement of such laws are discussed in a critical light, allowing the reader the opportunity to make a studied decision on the material presented.

Because of the *Encyclopedia's* focus on analysis and commentary, the reader is advised to utilize the index at the end of volume 5 for a full treatment of any topic. Sadly, the index, while thorough, is complicated to use. The index itself is 110 pages long, with entries on certain topics—such as the United Nations—covering multiple pages of references, topically subdivided. While this is useful, there are no headers or footers informing the reader of the broader index entry a subdivision is under, and one can easily become lost.

Forsythe and his fellow editors have created a valuable resource of critical analysis on internationally recognized rights of individuals and groups. Since being published, the *Encyclopedia* has received critical acclaim, including the 2010 Dartmouth Medal for creation of an outstanding, significant reference work. An eBook version is available through the Oxford Digital Reference Shelf. Theological libraries would be recommended to purchase the *Encyclopedia* for their reference collections.

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