

The object of subjects : some common theological subject heading problems.

Part Two : Contributions, doctrines, and controversies.

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Contributions in ...

Soren Kierkegaard wrote on the Greek word *skandalon* (scandal offense, stumbling-block) and complained about how the Bible translators did not represent the full depth of its meaning. A work by David McCracken called *The scandal of the Gospels* picks up this Kierkegaardian bone of contention, with the result, one of my favourite subdivision howlers: 'Kierkegaard, Soren - Contributions in biblical doctrine of scandal or offense or stumbling-block.'

The basic common sense use of the subdivision 'Contributions in...' is worth repeating. The subdivision is used for works on a theologian's endeavours in a particular field, and the general consensus is that we select topics that have common headings of their own and which everybody readily understands. We add topics that are recognizable and sensible in the context. The subdivision is wide open to fanciful pursuits, and two sins are regularly committed, the first out of senselessness, the second by breaking a rule. Senselessness produces a heading that names the theologian then attaches 'Contributions in doctrine of ..' where such a thing is not a doctrine or anything like what you would make contributions to. The rule that people sometimes overlook says 'Contributions in...' is not used for a work discussing the discipline for which the person is solely or primarily identified. 'Thomas Aquinas, Saint - Contributions in theology' is ponderous and needless. One favourite to appear in searching is 'Husserl, Edmund - Contributions in phenomenology', which looks pretty good really until you know that Husserl was the inventor of phenomenology. In such cases it is required simply to supply the person's name without subdivision. To what extent Husserl can be called a theologian is another argument.

Related free-floating subdivisions are 'Career in..', for works describing events in a person's career other than their most famous (e.g. 'John Paul II - Career in skiing'), 'Knowledge - [Topic]' for explicit discussion of a person's knowledge of something. And 'Views on [topic]' for discussion of a person's opinions or attitudes on a particular topic.

Because LC does not expand on 'Contributions in..' it makes no distinction between 'Contributions in the doctrine of [subject]' and 'Contributions in [subject]'. Nor between 'Contributions in doctrine of [subject]' and 'Contributions in theology of [subject]', though it does seem to drop the article 'the' before 'doctrine' and 'theology'. Because the subdivision is uncontrolled any subject term can be used within reason. One example that has come to light in our library is the instances of 'Contributions in doctrine of the church' and 'Contributions in ecclesiology', the difference between these two being hard to tell.

History of doctrines

It has been remarked how the subdivision 'Biblical teaching' is attached to modern and postmodern terms unheard of by the biblical writers and of dubious relation to the words of Scripture as such. Related to this problem in many respects is 'History of doctrines', attached to terms that were never a matter of doctrinal concern and which only a modern theologian would even know the meaning of.

Indigenous church administration – History of doctrines

Anthropomorphism – History of doctrines

Intersubjectivity – History of doctrines

This is in danger of getting out of control. In fact it is starting to be used as freely and meaninglessly as the omnipresent 'Religious aspects'. Worse, it is being linked with that subject menace in most verbose ways.

Paradox – Religious aspects – Christianity – History of doctrines

Romanticism – Religious aspects – Christianity - History of doctrines

Emotions – Religious aspects – Christianity – History of doctrines

Depression, Mental – Religious aspects – Christianity – History of doctrines

I almost went and started reading that 1st book after contemplating the looseness with which the term 'doctrines' can now be applied.

All of this has come about because the word 'History' is in the subdivision. Many see it as the one way of dealing with special topics that are talked about in an historical way. In the process the theological understanding of the subdivision, i.e. THE history of THE doctrines of THE church, has been lost sight of and clouded over with any old subject of the moment. The Free-floating subdivisions manual states bluntly that 'History of doctrines' be only used for theological topics. But what cataloguers around the world regard as a theological topic is coming to mean almost anything a theologian happens to talk about, or that anyone talks about if it happens to have theological connections.

It is worth making this just grievance because the distinction between other doctrines and other matters of religious concern is getting lost. My own feeling is that some other subdivision is needed to assist the user. Things are not made any easier either when 'History of doctrines' is used for works by the ancients, so that Augustine on the Trinity will get this subdivision even though Augustine wrote about the Trinity and not the history of trinitarian debate. Again, our understanding of history needs to be thought through, as well as our grasp of doctrinal debate.

Controversial literature

LC is seriously thinking of scrapping the subdivision 'Controversial literature' so what I say next may very soon be an argument from the past, much ado about nothing.

The subdivision 'is used under certain religious headings for works that argue or express negative views toward the topic'. Sounds straightforward. The problems begin as soon as the cataloguer must judge what is controversial, and controversial enough. One person's raging controversy is another's statement about reality. When used with topics, the book must 'argue against or express opposition to a doctrine, practice, etc'. We know though

that 'Baptism – Controversial literature' could be a firm argument for or against a particular position on baptism and still be controversial in the terms proposed. When used under religions and orders it is meant to be a work expressing 'opposition to these organizations and their beliefs', 'esp. by authors outside the group being discussed'. A moot point when using 'Jesuits – Controversial literature', the great bulk of which seems to be written by Jesuits. When used with sacred works the subdivision will express 'opposition to these writings, question their authoritativeness, dispute their inspiration, etc'. A very broad definition that could include everything uncontroversial as well as controversial. Added to which, many a theologian is known for arguing against something, not because he disagrees but in order to prove a point or to show he can argue.

People have their own definition of the word itself. 'Controversial' can mean literature that is the subject of debate, literature that causes controversy, literature that stands in opposition, literature that is no more than apologetics worded negatively. And in many of the examples on and in our own catalogues the subdivision has been used in just these senses, to denote a work that is connected with controversy in some way. Which is a long way from the definition set out in the Rules.

Being objective or neutral in our judgment of what is 'controversial' might be a gallant foray on behalf of the mind; it might also be quixotic in its finality, more representative of one's own position. Hence the increasing caution when applying this subdivision, if it is applied at all. Proposals for alternatives (eg. 'Opposing viewpoints', 'Contradictory views') are thrown around, but all of them presuppose what the original does as well, that every argument has just two sides, rather than many. The journalistic position, that where argument exists it follows there must be controversy. A need has been acknowledged, to help divide literature into pro and con positions; but a perfectly adequate means of distinguishing the different sides on a religious topic has yet to be imagined.

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The Archives of Australian Judaica
Have a web page which includes their catalogue
at : <http://www.library.usyd.edu.au/judaica>

Makor library in Melbourne will be putting up a web site soon.

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