

Brackets Theology: *The gradual disappearance of Specialist Theology* *headings in Library of Congress Subject Headings*

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The parenthetical qualifiers (Theology) and (Christian theology) used in Library of Congress Subject Headings have served more than just a useful purpose in delineating and demarcating subject areas in theology. Their original implementation answered the critical need for works in theology dealing with major subjects. Very often the theological approach to a subject necessarily involves a set of specialised questions, as is the case with any academic discipline. The subtlety and breadth of this theological discussion can be different in kind, though not in value or standing, from discussions of a subject in other fields. Very often theological discussion joins and overlaps work in other disciplines while maintaining its own exacting first principles.

Reasons for using parenthetical qualifiers include the following: "when ...the term or phrase has several dictionary definitions" ¹ and "to remove ambiguity or to make more explicit a word or phrase that is obscure." ² The qualifiers here serve this purpose superbly. The phenomenon, therefore, of rationalising or straightening (Theology) headings by replacement with the bland and vague subdivision 'Religious aspects', is not welcome in our specialist catalogues. A recent example is the new heading 'Truth — Religious aspects — Buddhism, [Christianity, etc.]' ³ This is a replacement for 'Truth (Christian theology)', a subject within theology itself that can only lose out with the broad sweep of the new heading. The very idea of Truth having a religious aspect could be the subject of whole conferences and there would still be argument years later. Meanings of veritas include the medieval understanding of truth as inseparable from concepts, statements or propositions; the position that God is truth itself, in an absolute sense; and the tradition that treats Scripture as God-breathed truth or inspired truth. These are theological discussions of great significance, not as well served by the new heading as by the old. Their definitions come from theological as distinct from religious discourse.

This widespread change observable at LC, where headings with the qualifiers (Theology) or (Christian theology) in brackets are being replaced by the subject on its own with the addition of the subdivision '-- Religious aspects — Christianity', means replacing headings with one set of meanings for a heading with a different, sometimes completely separate set of meanings. The wisdom, let alone the foresight, of this change of mood or attitude remains impossible to gauge. Specificity, that catchcry of cataloguers everywhere, is being overlooked in the name of rationalisation. Simplification of theology headings for the sake of the average user of a general catalogue is an unsatisfactory practice, a change that penalises everyone, the unknown average user included.

It hardly seems believable that theology headings of this type could be treated as a subset of religious headings, and to reduce them to an 'aspect' even more astonishing. 'Truth' and 'theology' are connected often enough, the history of the relationship so close-knit they would seem inseparable, at least to a theologian. We are led to the unfortunate conclusion that theologians and theological librarians are not consulted on these sorts of changes, as who would want '-- Religious aspects' in preference to the much more meaningful 'Truth (Christian theology)' ? The new heading would seem to be no more than an expedient, there to cover the most literature with the minimum of fuss, never mind the subtle distinctions understood by the real users of the terms. The generalists win out over the specialists, for whom the headings were created in the first place and for good reason.

'Freedom (Theology)' ⁴ has suffered a corresponding change and we can anticipate more. Then what about 'History (Theology)' ⁵? This heading, like others in the brackets (Theology) variety, no longer exists. In this case it is replaced by the non-synonym 'History — Religious aspects — Christianity'. Here is a perfect example of where the replacement heading does not represent either the scope or the subtlety of its predecessor. Books at the Joint Theological Library under the previous heading include writings on salvation history and the whole discussion of God in history, historical consciousness and theological foundations, patristic teaching on history, biblical interpretation of history including understandings of the prophetic and apocalyptic imaginations, and many works on the whole modern theology of history. All of these require 'History (Theology)' as a priority, not all require 'History - Religious aspects - Christianity', and some would be ill-served by such a heading. The replacement fails to recognise the breadth and depth of the subject under discussion, its special meaning within the discipline of theology, or its requirements as a field of enquiry separate from the generalising and hugely generalised heading 'History - Religious aspects - Christianity'.

Another problem with all this religious aspecting (from the verb, to religiousaspect) of headings is that cogent, exact subdivisions have been thrown into long precis strings. 'History — Religious aspects — Christianity — History of doctrines — 20th century' is not only getting too long to make much sense anymore, it has usually lost the user half way through. No one wants a subject heading in the form of an Emily Dickinson sentence. Headings that go for miles across the screen have lost sight of the original purpose of subject cataloguing, I would assert, namely conciseness, accuracy, directness, brevity and the plainest sense that the language can offer.

In all cases, our one solution is a concerted implementation of See and See Also references. It is critical that our catalogues do not lose sight of the original (Theology) headings, for the reasons outlined above.

This is not to say new headings are not being created with the time-honoured qualifiers. For example, one new heading is 'Theology of religions (Christian theology)'. The scope note for the heading follows: "Here are entered works on the Christian theology of religions other than Christianity as a means of salvation. Works on the relations of Christianity with other religions are entered under Christianity and other religions." ⁶ Here we have an example of the opposite kind, a new heading that tries to be specific about a subject that is still in the throes of formation. Suddenly the qualifier is of vital importance to the main term, and for reasons known only too well to a theological cataloguer.

The term 'theology of religions' is of nineties vintage, an inevitable product of interreligious dialogue and religious plurality, especially in Western societies. Previously we would have used at least 'Christianity and other religions' for any works of this type, where the direction is the very basic, "here are entered works on the relations of Christianity with other religions." In our own experience we know that this venerable heading in fact has been used to cover much more than simply relations with other religions; it has served to cover almost anything that deals with Christianity in comparison with other religions, and with the whole business of comparative religion from the Christian perspective. This new heading heralds a change in direction, if not consciousness itself. But what does it mean? The best answer comes not from the book in hand, but from a search of the terms on the internet.

Plurality is a serious obstacle for the religious adherent. The close contact that we now have with people of other religions, has forced us to acknowledge the prob-

lems that the reality of religious plurality brings. The two major problems involved are: (i) epistemology and the nature of religious truth; (ii) the basis of soteriology.

Quite simply, the fact that there is a choice of religious traditions to follow, forces the question of how we make the choice between them, and once the choice is made, how to prove that what one believes is true. If all religions are mutually exclusive, as on the whole they purport to be, then surely one is true and the others false. If this is the case, then it must also be possible to distinguish between religious truth and falsity. The problem is that this is not the case.

Soteriology is at the heart of a Christian theology of other religions. Religious truth has to be involved in any discussion of religious plurality, but for the Christian, it is the question of the status of religions that has to be embraced. It is the status of religions, including that of Christianity, that informs Christianity of its role, and its self understanding. The question of how, and if, salvation is possible through other religions, has to be at the centre of a Christian response to plurality, the purpose of which, is to reveal Christianity's identity, its relationship to other faiths, and its overall perception of the world.

It is only by means of a thorough investigation into the three main positions of exclusivism (salvation is attainable only through the Christian church), pluralism (all religious traditions are equally salvific), and inclusivism (the Christian God saves adherents of non-Christian religions), that the true perspective of Christianity's relationship with the world will be recognised.⁷

The major hazard though with this heading is its potential misuse. Those without the subtle scope note in front of them, let alone the explanation just given (and in truncated form), can interpret the heading any way they like. On the face of it, there is no reason not to ascribe 'Theology of religions' to any work dealing with the concept of religion itself, thus far covered by the heading 'Religion', or to a work on a group of religions from the Christian position, usually represented by the heading 'Religions'. The specific question of salvation is not instantly apparent, nor is that what people will go looking for in the work before daring to use this heading. Even though the subject itself is a growth area within theological discourse, another reason for infinite caution is that the discourse could veer off into other subjects or broaden to include them. We witness here another recent phenomenon, that of trust in literary warrant alone, literary warrant being the usage of the term in a substantial amount of the literature. Terms barely out of the mouths of their inventors are picked up by cataloguers as the purest objective proof of a new subject area. The innate conservatism of cataloguing is certainly being put to the test by this newfound relish for the term first used yestereven.

One theory about the disappearance of the (Theology) qualifiers is that it is part of a larger de-Christianisation of LC subject headings. This in and of itself is no bad thing, it must be said. The religious bias in LC, Dewey and other monoliths of library science has been long overdue for review. The revisions that have taken place display a growing awareness of the very experiences that helped make possible 'Theology of religions (Christian theology)'. That LC nevertheless remains inconsistent in its own practices must be owned. For instance, the heading 'Christianity - Relations' cannot be used and is a See Ref to the heading

'Christianity and other religions' ⁸ We are instructed that for "works limited to relations with one religion, an additional subject entry is made under the name of the religion with the subdivision 'Relations – Christianity', e.g. Buddhism - Relations - Christianity." All other religions have a 'Relations' subdivision except Christianity. This seems to be the result of an inability on LC's part to change its main heading, 'Christianity and other religions', created in the long ago, and make it uniform with the general practice. Thus, it must be used as a coverall for comparative study, interreligious dialogue, and theological conversations. The name of the religion being compared with Christianity is the subdivision. So, just as we are captive to the inventions of LC, LC itself is captive to its own inventions.

Sources

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