



# *Classifying Religion: A Conversational Survey of the Three Main Classification Systems*

*by Philip Harvey & Helen Greenwood*

Member libraries of the Australian and New Zealand Theological Library Association each use one of the three established classification systems for arrangement of their physical collections. At this year's Virtual Conference in September, a Pre-Conference Cataloguing Workshop was conducted on the Association's e-list. The following is a distillation of ideas and experiences expressed in the Workshop. Helen Greenwood presented the summary of the Library of Congress Classification.

## **Dewey Decimal Classification (Philip Harvey)**

Most of us work in libraries with an inherited classification system. This means that if we use Dewey, for example, we also inherit numbers and numbering processes that predate the current electronic WebDewey version.

<https://www.oclc.org/en/dewey/webdewey.html>

Differences in numbering for many books are therefore inevitable because 1) a library has developed ways of using Dewey, including in-house expansions of numbers, that are fixed practice, 2) classifying books by subject means cataloguers will place the emphasis on one main subject rather another, with the result that the same book can justifiably go in different parts of the collection, and 3) the classification numbers inside books and on databases are themselves not always consistent, and even offer a choice. Consistency across libraries is an impossibility, which is why we must acquaint



ourselves with in-house practice in our own libraries and keep to the traditions of our own place. It is paramount to be consistent within our own collection.

This is the case in my own library, the Carmelite Library in Melbourne, where alterations to the standard 200s were done long ago with little thought for the internal logic of the subject arrangement. Added to this, the library has a General Collection and a separate Carmelitana Collection (first element of the call number is capital-C), both using modified Dewey, each with their own special expansions. This is why the numbers are of no earthly use to other cataloguers seeking authoritative Dewey numbers for their own collection; our evolved system is so in-house it is only authoritative within the four walls of that library. (1)

DDC 23 would seem to be the last print edition, after the editorial staff announced in 2017 that an English print edition would no longer be produced. My guess is that some of us use the latest WebDewey, others consult the much-annotated print version of one of our own Dewey editions, while others work between a print Dewey edition and the sheaves of precious expansions and changes in homemade manuals or computer files.

But we still face similar daily issues. Here are some of the regular questions that were presented in the Workshop:

1. Which online sites do we use to make our numbers? (2)
2. Do we work from the book, with assistance from whatever online sites are available?
3. How many numbers are justified after the decimal point before the purpose of the number is lost? (3)
4. How many libraries have made overhauls of the numbering to keep in line with Dewey changes, e.g. shifting general Religion numbers from the 290s to 200-219?
5. How far can we justify expansions and alterations to the 200s?
6. Do we invent new numbers for new subjects, rather than wait for WebDewey to come up with a number? Or must we invent a new number in order to fit the in-house Dewey system that has evolved over time? (4)
7. Which subjects are currently causing headaches due to lack of an appropriate number?



8. Is WebDewey user-friendly? If not, how so?
9. Do we ever receive a book that defies classification and where do we number it?
10. Do the Schedules' inherent biases or emphases, reflective of a worldview a century ago, cause problems for us in today's subject classifying?

This last question has become a somewhat standard matter of discussion in some quarters. (5) I find it useful and sensible to phrase the question that way when questioning the Christian-bias in Dewey, rather than simply adopting the attitude that yes Dewey has a Christian-bias, so let's change it. Experience teaches that change will happen when change is necessary.

History, please. Dewey developed out of Amherst College, a liberal arts college in that bastion of liberalism, Boston, Massachusetts. DDC's establishment occurred on the east coast of the United States in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, where Enlightenment thinking and Christian religion rode side by side. This is why sentences like the following on The Dewey Blog deserve scrutiny: "While Dewey was working there, the Amherst College library's collection was heavily skewed towards books about Christianity, as was the first edition of Melvil's Decimal Classification." This is like complaining that a horticulture library is heavily skewed towards horticulture. In that society, to create sections for the other major religions indicated a knowledge of those religions that betokened an openminded quest for knowledge in American society at large, not least in Boston, and as expressed in constitutional rights about freedom of religion.

This emphasis on Christianity is perhaps less of an issue in our theological libraries, where Christian literature is the vast majority of the holdings, than in public libraries, where collection policies ask for equal coverage of religion. In my mind this only truly becomes an issue however in multi-faith libraries, and libraries of other major faith traditions where the majority of the holdings represent (I wouldn't say are skewed) towards that tradition.

This was the Dewey editorial's purpose in offering whole adjustment of the 200s. The editors were more enlightened than their detractors. Options are available to re-arrange the 200s to suit a Jewish, Islamic, Hindu, or Buddhist library, just to name four other major world religions. How many libraries have taken up the options is not clear in 2020. But what is noticeable is how little change there is in general use of the established Dewey 200s. It could be argued that the reasons for this are simple. Cataloguers in most public libraries find the existing 200 Schedules satisfactory for their immediate needs. Cataloguers in any Christian theology library are not going to change something that works for them, as near a perfect fit as may be possible. Their concern is not on emphasis, but on



how Dewey deals with variations within Christian tradition, as well as how it allocates numbers for new and emerging subjects.

## Union Classification (Philip Harvey)

Julia Pettee (1872-1967) was the woman for the job. She responded to the need for a proper classification of the library of Union Theological Seminary in New York by devising an informed and specialist scheme for any theology library. The first edition was published in 1924. Its similarity to LC Classification, also a two-letter and number system, is no accident. Pettee took time off during the creation of the Union system to work at the Library of Congress on its emerging classification scheme, more particularly on Religion. Her wiki declares her immortal words that should be carved in stone at the library door: 'Throughout her career, she emphasized that "there is no infallible substitute for the good judgement of the cataloger"'. (6)

Union Classification, commonly referred to simply as Pettee, is a product of its time, but then much of what goes on in theology is timeless and much about classification is subject to contingency. Pettee's great strengths are its sophisticated tables for Bible, Patristics, Medieval and Modern Theologians, Systematic Theology, Church History, and Liturgy. She did a sizable job of arranging the literature of the major world religions into some order, given the spread of knowledge about those literatures available at the time in the United States. Obviously too, if what you are classifying is a vast library of mainly Christian literature, then that's where you start. You start with what you have, not with what is hypothetical. Union Classification continues to operate effectively in many theological libraries worldwide, including a fair number in our part of the world.

Pettee has no web presence. This is because no formal international editorial authority has operated since the 1980s. There is no website dedicated to updates. The implosion happened in the United States at that time, when college decision-makers were persuaded of the long-term advantages of switching to LC Classification. The advent of automation prompted many to believe that LC would become the universal system for classification, a casual belief taken up more dogmatically by library boards than librarians. Conversion away from Pettee ensued rapidly in North America, while Australia was insulated from the changes abroad. Pettee is a nice thought in New Zealand.

In the absence of an international authority, the cataloguers who maintained some management of Pettee at Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond, Virginia graciously approved ANZTLA's request to workshop new subject numbers at annual conferences. At these workshops, which continued into the new millennium and were light-heartedly known as Pettee Sessions, ANZTLA cataloguers tabled expansions to their own manuals, discussed the whys and where-puts of new



subjects in the field, and generally arrived at agreed changes which were then adopted by all users of the scheme.

Conversion from Pettee in Australia has not been a high priority. This seems to be the case with the larger theological libraries, due as much as anything to the time and costs involved in such a massive undertaking, and for what? The reality about Pettee is quite simply that it is a tailor-made theological classification system, ideal for handling the categories of knowledge that are the stock of Theology. It is the only specialist theology classification of its kind. Where the Dewey 200s (Religion) are spread across ten main subjects, Pettee has 26. It is user-friendly and infinitely more capable of updates than either Dewey or LC.

## Library of Congress Classification (Helen Greenwood)

The Library of Congress Classification (LCC) was developed by the Library of Congress as a means of organising and arranging their own collection. Over the years, it has been adopted and used by many libraries, especially academic libraries and especially in the US. It is developed and maintained by the Library of Congress Policy and Standards Division. (7)

The classification is based on literary warrant, so it is under constant development and is very responsive to new concepts and trends. Subject specialists develop and maintain individual schedules and are responsible for additions and changes.

The use of LCC at my workplace, the John Kinder Theological Library in Auckland, is a happy historical accident. Many years ago an Anglican layperson was called in to advise on the library. He happened to be the librarian at the Victoria University of Wellington which used LCC and recommended its implementation. For many years, we were the only ANZTLA library using LCC, but we have been joined by others in recent years.

## Advantages

1. It is easy to use, Unlike Dewey you don't have to build numbers, they are enumerated in the schedule. You can achieve specificity without requiring 23 numbers after the decimal point, which has practical implications for printing on spine labels and borrowers being able to easily locate on the shelves.
2. There are unique numbers for a wide range of subjects, including theology and religion.



3. It is continuously revised and is responsive to new areas of scholarship. For example, it didn't take long for Postcolonial Theology to be assigned a unique number.
4. It is enormously expandable without needing wholesale revision, meaning numbers don't often disappear or move. There are exceptions, e.g. Buddhism required expansion and was moved from BL to BQ.
5. LCC numbers are in most online records for ease of copy cataloguing.
6. It has the backing of the Library of Congress.
7. The LCC schedules are now freely available online. <https://www.loc.gov/aba/publications/FreeLCC/freelcc.html> so they are always current and you no longer need to purchase and store physical volumes. Having the schedules online means they are searchable, up-to-date and easy to transport to the home office.
8. It is available online via Classification Web – although we have never subscribed to this.

## Disadvantages

1. It is American-centric, although this is becoming less so as they entertain new class number proposals through SACO.
2. We have ended up creating our own expansion for the Anglican and Methodist churches in New Zealand because the depth of material we hold in these areas was not catered for with a single LC number.

## Responses and Sources

- (1) Erin Mollenhauer (Moore College) posted the following, which is reproduced with permission and for the record. “Here is our in-house classification scheme, devised by one of my predecessors for the Rare Book Collection:

A: Patristica, liturgica and Bibles (includes Books of Common Prayer) – some folio

B: Foreign theology – folios



- C: English Short Title Catalogue quartos (1475-1640) [Pollard, Alfred W., Redgrave, G. R. A short-title catalogue of books printed in England, Scotland, & Ireland and of English books printed abroad, 1475-1640. 2nd ed. London: Bibliographical Society, 1976-1991]
- D: English Wing quartos (1641-1700) [Wing, Donald. Short-title catalogue of books printed in England, Scotland, Ireland, Wales, and British America, and of English books printed in other countries, 1641-1700. 2nd ed. New York: Modern Language Association, 1972-1998]
- E: Foreign Short Title Catalogue quartos
- F: Foreign Wing quartos (and foreign non-Wing items)
- G: Biblical criticism folios – 17th and 18th centuries
- H: Bray library – Port Jackson 1809
- I: Protestant library 1839
- J: English and foreign 18th century quartos
- K: 19th century to 1840 quartos, non-Broughton collection
- L: Broughton collection – 19th century to 1839
- M: Broughton, Watson, Broughton personal, Barker, Smith 18th & 19th centuries
- N: Broughton collection 18th century and some lexica of other periods - folio
- O: Secular and literary works
- P: English theology – 16th to 19th century folios
- Q: Conciliana and legal works - folios
- R: Broughton, Bray etc. 19th century collections
- S: Post 1840 – 1st editions, associated volumes, secular works, etc.
- U: Serials – Alphabetical by title



V: Croft Collection: Books of Common Prayer, 1549-2000

W: Bicentennial Collection – sent by SPCK on Young Endeavour, 1988

The books in each section have a number added to the letter (A1, A2, B1, B2 etc.) but the numbers are purely numerical and have no other meaning.

Bishop Broughton's books ended up spread over several sections, but otherwise they're grouped by general subject (Biblical criticism), size (e.g. folio), age (e.g. within the age range of Wing or STC) or provenance (e.g. the Bray library was donated by the Associates of Thomas Bray). Shelving folios together works well as we can lay them flat instead of standing them upright.

As all the Rare books are in a locked room with access mediated by me, having a subject classification system is less important than it is for the main collection. New acquisitions are added on to the existing categories where appropriate, although we would set up a new category if we obtained a substantial acquisition with significant provenance. I suppose we will have to think about what we'll do when we fill up the alphabet! In any case this classification system, although somewhat peculiar, may be considered part of the history of Moore College's rare book collection. Australiana Rare books are all shelved together with DDC numbers, as are Rare pamphlets which are all in individual envelopes, then boxed." ANZTLA-Forum post Monday 31 August 2020, 1:18 PM.

(2) Stephen Morton (Christian Heritage College Library) in response to Deborah Decru (St. Athanasius College Library): "Deborah, a sometimes overlooked and easy to access resource that assists with considering what Dewey number to assign, is the OCLC Classify website at <http://classify.oclc.org/classify2/>. Use it with discretion, as I suspect that many libraries simply import the CIP record and use the default classification that comes in with that record. Also, the majority usage is not necessarily from the latest DDC edition, so a careful check against your DDC-23 resources, and the locations within your existing collection, will be a further useful step in the process." ANZTLA-Forum post Friday 28 August 2020, 1:13 PM.

(3) Philip Harvey, The Longest Dewey Number in the World: <http://thecarmelitelibrary.blogspot.com/2020/08/the-longest-dewey-number-in-world.html> The Carmelite Library Blogspot, 30 August 2020.

(4) Erin Mollenhauer (Moore College): "I don't work much with Dewey myself anymore as my colleagues do most of the print cataloguing. However I have used WebDewey in the past and



although it did take a bit of getting used to how it works, I preferred it to flipping through the book. If you need to construct a number using the tables it can help you compile it. In the past cataloguers here have created some excessively long numbers! Nowadays we generally try to get a balance between being specific enough to be meaningful and short enough to be easily printed on the spine label. If there are two possible numbers for a book, and one of them is in the 200s, then that's the one we choose. We stick to numbers prescribed by Dewey as we would prefer to adhere to an international standard rather than making up our own." ANZTLA-Forum post Friday 28 August 2020, 1:30 PM.

Philip Harvey in response to Erin Mollenhauer: "I think your rule of thumb is absolutely right; "We generally try to get a balance between being specific enough to be meaningful and short enough to be easily printed on the spine label." Some cataloguers take seriously the view that you only go past the decimal point when you must, and even then the numbers after the decimal point should be kept to a minimum. I have come increasingly to this way of thinking too, as practically speaking the book is just as likely to be found on the same shelf if it has four digits after the point, or forty. It is sensible to use the 200s number where there is a choice; we are theology libraries, after all! I would only stray from that where the book related directly to another book outside of that 200 range, reason being a user then finds both books together. But that's just me."

(5) On Dewey's religious biases: <https://ddc.typepad.com/025431/2019/11/why-are-the-200s-so-heavily-focused-on-christianity-an-explainer.html>

(6) 'Julia Pettee, librarian: the life and work of Julia Pettee (1872-1967)', by Lennart Pearson, published in 2011, is a valuable addition to your collection. Elizabeth Call wrote an admiring brief history entitled 'Organizing the Divine' in 2016:

<https://blogs.cul.columbia.edu/burke/2014/11/03/organizing-the-devine-julia-pettee-and-the-union-classification-system/>

(7) You can read more about the history and development of LCC at <https://www.loc.gov/catdir/cpso/lcc.html> and in Wikipedia at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Library\\_of\\_Congress\\_Classification](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Library_of_Congress_Classification)