

PETTEE REACTIONS

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Pam Zweck's article in the last newsletterⁱ is a useful introduction to two of the main classification systems for theological libraries, Pettee and Dewey. This article exists solely to add to her statements and to extend the argument.

Advantages of Pettee

1. As emphasized in Zweck's article, Christianity and the theological disciplines are central. Bible, church history, mission, philosophy, social issues, doctrine, liturgy - these main subject areas are given their due space and logical sequence in the alphanumeric scheme. One area that will always give Pettee an edge over Dewey is the Christian literature section (G).ⁱⁱ Individual numbers for the Christian apocryphal writings, the Fathers, the reformers and later theologians are a splendid means of ready access to authors who would otherwise be scattered throughout a collection and often not in the most appropriate places. From this point of view, Zweck's conclusion must be supported; Pettee will suit a special library better than Dewey.

2. Avoidance of long numbers á la Dewey has the advantage not only of greater simplicity in classifying and shelving, but also of quicker access. Twenty-five areas of knowledge make for considerably finer divisions than Dewey's ten.

ⁱ Pam Zweck, 'The Pettee and Dewey classifications : a comparative study.' *ANZTLA newsletter*, 9, 1989, p.5-11.

ⁱⁱ Julia Pettee, *Classification of the Library of Union Theological Seminary in the city of New York*. Union Theological Seminary, New York, 1939, rev. 1967, p.220.

Disadvantages of Pettee

1. The most glaring and jarring problem with Pettee is its American Protestant bias. As Pam Zweck explains, the system was devised to suit the needs of a certain kind of theological library, and one of them in particular. Julia Pettee herself had an enlightened approach to the productions of the Catholic Church, but, seen now, it seems the Catholic Church is included grudgingly in church history, theology and other areas. The Orthodox and other members of the Church Universal fare even worse.

Likewise the American part of the bias is often felt, it often seeming that theology is a discipline unique to Europe, Great Britain and North America. These problems are solved only by patience with the Pettee worldview, by remaining amenable to change where the schedules are not. You must devise new numbers where you see fit, be ready to give privilege to the Catholic, and indeed ignore some of the occasional extraordinary assertions.

2. Unlike Library of Congress and Dewey, Pettee is not updated by a central authorizing executive. Therefore many areas, theological or not, have remained stationary. In theology, for example, there is no allowance for such flourishing branches as liberation, feminist, political and contextual. In other fields, for example in the sciences, numbering is astonishingly simple; biology would seem to be single cellular.

Some cataloguers solve this problem by creating new numbers to suit their own collections, borne of a combined feeling of necessity and isolation. Though such invention can spring up wildly like Salvation Jane, it is nevertheless Paterson's Curse. Without a national (let alone international) means of organizing all these new subject numbers, agreement will become more difficult, the system will become increasingly awry.

Attempts have been made in Australia to coordinate the disparate systems invented by different cataloguers and this does continue. But, in fact, a complete revision of Pettee is long overdue. Publication of lists of new numbers and revisions of special sections has been welcome, but actual universal authority has not been sealed on these and it is virtually impossible to gauge their general acceptance.

What is really required is the funding of a revision panel by one or several of the library associations. This revision panel would take responsibility for collecting all lists of revisions and collating them. Furthermore, it would have to address itself to the large gaps in the existing schedule, and to the varieties of new subjects within particular fields, especially in ethics, the sciences and theology itself. Such a panel would have to consist of librarians experienced in Pettee's nuances of style as well as its problems; it would have to allow for a long period of time in which to do justice to each section of the classification; and it would have not merely to reform but revolutionise its view of denominational history and thought in the process.

3. No firm rules can be followed concerning the use of standard subdivisions. They exist, but how they are to be applied in every case is not always clear, is sometimes a matter of guesswork and is often a flat impossibility. This disadvantage is offset by the precision Pettee can achieve with its letter and number format, but there are times, especially in subject areas of greater sophistication or where there is a plethora of material in one subject, when the accurate delineations shown in Dewey subdivisions would help.
4. Unlike Pam Zweck I do not find the Index always precisely precise. It is better than the Dewey Index, which I have felt leaves you frequently treading in the deep end with nothing to grab on to, but the Pettee Index is not always direct and comprehensive. Like the rest of the system it could always do with further revision.

Advantages of Dewey

1. In the Bible criticism especially, Dewey has a more developed system of subdivisions to allow for different critical approaches. In a highly specialised collection this can be an advantage.
2. Dewey can be a good choice for a smaller theology library that is not rapidly expanding. Numbers can be kept brief. The cataloguer can afford to be more reliant on the copy cataloguing, and often has to be in such circumstances.
Dewey should almost certainly be the choice of a small library where theology is only one of the collection strengths or not even the most important. Its wide coverage of the areas of knowledge is a distinct advantage for a general collection.
3. The new 20th edition has for the first time tried to shift the pre-eminence of Christianity as the religion. Options for treatment of specific religions are suggested. A religion can be classed in 230-280 with its sources in 220. Christianity, in such an instance, could then be placed in the unassigned 280. Various other options, each with their own disadvantages and advantages, are also available at the appropriate heading at 292-299.

Disadvantages of Dewey

1. Dewey is inflexible and limited in its numbering, Placing everything in, of, from, on, about and vaguely concerned in any way with Theology at 230 makes for a monolith of disparate material. It is inevitable that the expansions Zweck mentions are created.
2. The American Protestant bias is even more blatant than in Pettee. The system itself is not formulated to truly, adequately and equally treat the literature it is intended to classify.

3. In larger collections of highly specialised material in one subject area, or in collections where there is a real need to separate materials distinctly, longer numbers become a must. This is a very real disadvantage when contrasted with Pettee's brevity of numbers and diversity of choices.

The whole debate about theological classification schemes has had a long and colourful history. That there exist no hard rules for choice of schemes is an indication that the debate is going to continue. One excellent bibliographic article that any librarian considering this question ought to look at is that written by Gary Gorman.ⁱⁱⁱ The annotated bibliography is copious, sure to give leads for those wanting to read further in this area.

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ⁱⁱⁱ G.E. Gorman, 'The classification of theological literature', *International library review*, 17, 1985, p.203-231.