

The Rise and Fall of Union Classification

By Rebecca Butler

ABSTRACT: Thanks to the work of Julia Pettee in the early twentieth century, theological librarians had an effective system for the classification of theological books. Her work spanned more than thirty years and numerous volumes and resulted in a system that would be known as Union Classification. This article traces the rise and fall of Union from its beginnings at Rochester Seminary, to its widespread use, and to its decline in recent years. Included are past and current data regarding the use of Union in ATS libraries as well as some libraries in Australia.

INTRODUCTION

Theological librarians in the early 1900s were faced with few options when it came to the classification of theological books. The Dewey Decimal Classification System was fairly new and untested for theological collections. The Cutter system was also new, and the Library of Congress system was in its earliest stages of development. Location classification was still in practice in many libraries, and many of those who had a classification system were using homegrown systems developed for their own purposes. Beginning in 1908, however, this would all change through the work of Julia Pettee.

JULIA PETTEE AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF UNION CLASSIFICATION

Pettee was a student at the Pratt Institute's library training program, and while she "was not a notable success in her cataloging coursework,"¹ she began learning the Dewey system that was being taught at the Institute at that time. During her time at Pratt, she participated in a revision of the catalog at the University of Pennsylvania in 1899, and this "confirmed for Pettee that she already knew enough about cataloging that she would never again be happy subordinating her own professional judgment and skills to someone else's system."² Pettee graduated from the Institute and began working at Vassar College in 1900,³ and this provided the chance encounter that would ultimately lead to the development of a new classification system.

In 1908, while she was working at Vassar, Pettee met the librarian of Rochester Theological Seminary. This meeting resulted in Pettee being invited to help reorganize that seminary's library. Of this encounter, Pettee remarked, "The upshot of that was that I was invited to spend the next summer reorganizing the Rochester Theological Seminary Library."⁴ In preparation for this experience, she visited numerous theological libraries to see how they were organized. Although the Dewey and Cutter systems were in use or development at many libraries, Pettee "ultimately chose a scheme in use at the Hartford Theological Seminary...based on Alfred Cave's popular late-nineteenth-century encyclopedia, *An Introduction to Theology: Its Principles, Its Branches, Its Results, and Its Literature*, which

¹ Christopher H. Walker and Ann Copeland, "The Eye Prophetic: Julia Pettee," *Libraries and the Cultural Record* 44, no. 2 (2009): 166.

² Walker, 166.

³ Walker, 164.

⁴ Julia Pettee, "Panel on the Union Classification [part 1]," *American Theological Library Association Summary of Proceedings* 9 (January 1, 1955): 34.

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separated the branches of theological knowledge into divisions in common use among religious scholars.”⁵ She used this system along with Dewey to complete the project, but this resulted in dividing the collection, as the theological materials were arranged according to Cave, and all of the other materials were classified with Dewey. Pettee “regretted having to divide the collection”⁶ between the systems, and this regret would shape her future work.

Due to her success at Rochester, Pettee was then invited to reorganize the library at Union Theological Seminary in New York City as it moved into its new location. When she arrived, she found a library organized completely by shelf location and by the wandering fancy of the librarian, Dr. Rockwell. The location-based system in place would not work as effectively in the new space, so it was clear a new classification scheme would be necessary. Pettee rejected Dewey for this project, but she “was not alone in identifying the weaknesses of the Dewey Decimal Classifications system for a complex collection.”⁷ It had been rejected by other major libraries. Pettee believed deeply that classification schedules had to fit the library, not the other way around. To her, a classification system was “simply a device for securing the order on the shelves that your scheme calls for. Like a shoe it should be made to fit the foot, not the foot crammed into a pretty but too tight shoe. The Dewey scheme wears a lovely shoe, but it pinches so much the scheme itself fairly hobbles.”⁸ Further, she stated, “Unless whole classes are reworked, it is inadequate for a general collection of scholarly nature. For a theological collection it has nothing to commend to it.”⁹ Pettee also rejected Cutter, stating, “Adaptable, however, as the Cutter is, it is intended for a general collection; for a special collection of any kind a classification worked out with particular reference to the special field would have the obvious advantage of being able to coordinate and relate other subjects to it.”¹⁰ Pettee’s rejection of these methods and her refusal to divide the collection led her to a pivotal moment.

After her disappointment with having to divide the collection at Rochester, Pettee was determined to have a more unified approach in her work at Union. She described her thought process:

It seemed to me that the universe was an integrated whole, composed of an infinite number of correlated parts. And I wanted one single classification that would represent this unity. Then, too, for practical reasons theological students are not encased in a glass cage separate from the world. Also, in their instruction both religious and secular books are brought together. So it seemed to me that a single unified classification based on the uses and needs of the theologian would be the type of classification that would be most useful.¹¹

And thus, Julia Pettee took on the development of a single unified classification system for use in theological libraries. The project took fifteen years.¹² Much of this was due to the meticulous nature of Pettee’s approach. She

⁵ Walker, 167.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 170.

⁸ Julia Pettee, “The Philosophy of the Maker of a Special Classification,” *Special Libraries* 28, no. 7 (September 1937): 259.

⁹ Julia Pettee, “Factors in Determining Subject Headings,” *The Library Journal* 54, no. 22 (December 15, 1929): 1019.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Julia Pettee, “Panel on the Union Classification [part 1],” 35.

¹² Walker, 172.

explained, “I wanted everything within the covers of my theological books, in my catalog, under the minutest headings. But how was I ever to tie up all those multitudinous headings into one beautiful logical and organic whole: Monkeys, evolution, fundamentalism!”¹³

Despite her initial concerns for multitudinous headings and complexity, Pettee developed a concise system that encapsulated the whole of Christian thought into a logical and organic whole.

Pettee succeeded in creating a single classification that included all departments of knowledge but with the arrangement of classes from the point of view of theology. Christianity is a central theme reaching out in many directions. Underlying the schedule is the desire to keep related subjects in close proximity to each other rather than segregating disciplines in remote areas.¹⁴

Pettee outlined her theory for the development of her system in a 1911 article in *The Library Journal*. She stated, “The only justification a book has for its place in a theological collection is its contribution to some phase of theological thought or religious life, and its most logical and useful place on the shelves is as near as possible to the theological point where this contribution is made.”¹⁵ Pettee was very firm in how classification was to occur under her system. She declared, “We must draw clean, straight, rigid lines—logic not *dovetails* makes a good classification. We must know our material, decide how we want to divide it, then cut right through according to our plan—like cutting a pie with a knife or cutting a garment to a pattern.”¹⁶

Pettee cut a very specific pie. And although she believed her system could be considered ruthless, she also said, “In my long experience I have come more and more to regard the making of a classification scheme an exact science. The scheme will be most practically useful and most easily applied if it conforms to clean cut logical divisions.”¹⁷

Within her system there were four such logical divisions. Her major areas were Historical Sciences, Experimental Sciences Dealing with the Material Universe and Mental Phenomena, Normative or Speculative Sciences, and Practical Sciences. Historical Sciences was then further divided into general and introductory materials, literature, and history. The literature section included subject headings in philology and literature, the whole Bible, Old Testament, Judaism and Apocryphal literature, the New Testament, and patristics and Christian literature. The history section addressed general history, Christian history, denominational history, histories by country, history of missions, and history of non-Christian religions. Within the Experimental Sciences division were subjects in astronomy, physics, chemistry, and psychology. The Normative or Speculative Sciences division included philosophy, theory of religion, and various theological systems and theories. Practical Sciences included social institutions and activities, education (including Christian Education), religious institutions and activities, organized Christianity (including polity, law, liturgy, and hymnology), pastoral theology, preaching the “culture of the individual” which included the “care and culture of the religious and moral life” as well as personal ethics, devotionals, and religious poetry, and also fine arts and administrative concerns.¹⁸ Within each division lay a variety of potential sub-divisions.

¹³ Pettee, “Factors in Determining Subject Headings,” 1019.

¹⁴ Walker, 173.

¹⁵ Pettee, “A Classification for a Theological Library,” 612.

¹⁶ Pettee, “The Philosophy of the Maker of a Special Collection,” 257.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 258.

¹⁸ Pettee, “A Classification for a Theological Library,” 623-24.

Pettee was particularly proud of her handling of Christian Literature and considered it a unique feature of her system. Additionally, she held a particular view of the way biographies should be handled. Pettee stated, “I have a firm conviction as to what to do with biography. It seems to me that the biography of a man is most usefully classed with the subject to which he contributed his major life’s work.”¹⁹ Each of the sections Pettee developed was carefully nuanced using her experiences, her personal handling of theological materials, and her own method of delicate logic. Using her rules, Pettee reclassified over 165,000 books at the Union Theological Seminary Library.²⁰ Her classification system would hence be known as Union Classification.

UNION CLASSIFICATION RISES IN USE AND POPULARITY

Once the system was developed, other theological libraries began using it. It grew in popularity in the 1940s and continued to be used frequently through the 1970s. In total, “At least fifty libraries adopted Pettee’s classification system,”²¹ but getting to this number took several decades. By 1947, the Union Classification System was being used in over forty seminary or theological libraries. It was second only to Dewey, which was used in more than fifty seminary/divinity libraries. At that time, the newer Library of Congress classification system was only in use in fourteen or fifteen theological libraries.²² Lucy Markley, the librarian at Union Theological Seminary in 1947, commented on the popularity of the Union system, stating, “The Union classification is partial to theology... for that very reason it works better, day in and day out, with book after book. It was built by one who learned to understand all the fields of theology, with their differing yet related literatures.”²³ The incorporation of this knowledge of the fields of theology into the system and its intricate nature propelled it to its decades of greatest use.

Many libraries chose to move to Union Classification, and many new libraries found themselves choosing between Dewey or Union, as Library of Congress classification had still not reached a stage of popular usefulness. Among them, the libraries of Southeastern Baptist Seminary, Fuller Theological Seminary, and College of the Bible chose Union as their classification system. In 1953, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary “selected for our classification the Union Theological Seminary Classification scheme.” Although they did make some adaptations, they found it “quite satisfactory.”²⁴ Fuller Theological Seminary also chose Union with a few adaptations.²⁵ College of the Bible (which later became Lexington Theological Seminary) adopted Union in 1950. Roscoe M. Pierson, the librarian at College of the Bible, explained, “When we changed to Union, our library had existed historically across a hundred years—parts of it even more than that—and it was on all kinds of systems. It had been separated from a college library and had to be reclassified. I thought of every possible system and decided to use Union.”²⁶ At a 1955 ATLA roundtable on the Union Classification System, Pierson personally thanked Julia Pettee for

¹⁹ Pettee, “Panel on the Union Classification [part 1],” 38.

²⁰ Ruth Eisenhart, “The Classification of Theological Books,” *Library Trends* 9 (April 1960): 263.

²¹ Walker, 173.

²² Lucy W. Markley, “Cataloging and Classification,” *Conference of Theological Librarians Summary of Proceedings* (January 1, 1947): 37.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Edwin C. Osburn, “Panel on the Union Classification [part 2],” *American Theological Library Association Summary of Proceedings* 9 (January 1, 1955): 40.

²⁵ Roscoe M. Pierson, “Panel on Union Classification [part 4],” *American Theological Library Association Summary of Proceedings* 9 (January 1, 1955): 42.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 44.

her work, stating, “After five years and some twenty thousand volumes on the Union System, with expansions as necessary because of modern movements, I would not care to work under any other system for a theological library. It has borne the test of time, and the test of flexibility, and Miss Pettee, I’d like to thank you for giving us this classification.”²⁷

In the 1960s, while Dewey was still the most common classification system in use, most seminary libraries were choosing to switch to either Library of Congress or Union. Ruth Eisenberg noted in 1960, “As might be expected with a group of libraries which began their classing activities around 1900, the largest number use Dewey. The older seminaries, reluctant to begin reclassifying their difficult collections, have reaped the rewards of procrastination; most of them eventually adopted the newer LC or Union classifications. Today, newly established seminaries ordinarily choose Union or LC.”²⁸ A 1964 survey of theological libraries by Helen Zachman revealed that the systems in use at that time were Dewey, LC, Union, Reed, Princeton, Bliss Bibliographic, Cutter, and Friedus.²⁹ Dewey was in 41 percent of the responding libraries which was “nearly equal to the sum total of its nearest rivals, the Library of Congress and the Union Theological Classifications.”³⁰ However, Zachman noted, “More libraries are changing from the Decimal Classification to one or the other of the rival schemes.”³¹ This marked the beginning of the major shift towards Library of Congress in particular, as fewer libraries began to choose Union. The 1970s saw what would likely be the last of libraries to adopt Union as their primary classification method. “Biblical Seminary in Hatfield, Pennsylvania, founded in 1971, may have been the last new library to adopt the Union system.”³²

THE DECLINE AND FALL OF UNION CLASSIFICATION

After 1971, the rise of OCLC and the relative ease of Library of Congress classification began to lessen the appeal of the Union Classification System. Many theological libraries began at this time to convert from Dewey or Union to Library of Congress. The conversions began slowly, but by 1984, 74 percent of theological libraries surveyed for the Project 2000 report were using Library of Congress classification.³³ Of the sixty-one libraries that changed classification systems in the decade prior to the study, fifty-six changed to Library of Congress.³⁴ Of the nine libraries anticipating a change, seven were planning a conversion to Library of Congress.³⁵ At this time only 5 percent of responding theological libraries used the Union Classification system, and 28 percent had converted from Union in the previous decade.³⁶ One of the main reasons many libraries were making this change was the use of bibliographic utilities such as Online Computer Library Center (OCLC). By 1984 most theological

²⁷ Ibid., 44.

²⁸ Eisenhart, “The Classification of Theological Books,” 259.

²⁹ Helen Zachman, “Classification in American Theological Seminary Libraries,” *American Theological Library Association Summary of Proceedings* 18 (January 1, 1964): 108.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Walker, 173.

³³ Stephen L. Peterson, “Theological Libraries for the Twenty-first Century: Project 2000 Final Report,” *Theological Education* 20, no. 3 (January 1, 1984): 76.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Peterson, “Theological Libraries for the Twenty-first Century: Project 2000 Final Report,” 95.

libraries were joining or had joined a bibliographic utility, with 54 percent using OCLC.³⁷ Use of OCLC made using Dewey or Library of Congress more convenient as the numbers were readily available, and this was a reason many schools cited for their choice to convert to Library of Congress. The librarian at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary declared in a 1987 annual report

The library collection was split this year as we chose to begin using the Library of Congress classification scheme to organize all future acquisitions. The Union classification scheme which was used in the past is maintained by less than 5% of the libraries in the American Theological Library Association, and that number is dwindling for several reasons. The primary reasons are the infrequent updates of the classification scheme to keep pace with new developments in different fields of study and the development of new library automation. As libraries are increasingly linked by computers through such national networks as the OCLC system, two classification schemes are becoming dominant. One of these is the Dewey Decimal system; the other is the Library of Congress classification. The staff, in consultation with the administration, decided that a shift to the Library of Congress system would take full advantage of potential time and cost savings in classifying future acquisitions.³⁸

Phillip Harvey adds, "In the US, the faculties of many libraries were persuaded by others in the library world that LC was the way to go once LC classification came into action in downloaded MARC records."³⁹ Other reasons libraries began to switch included difficulty finding catalogers with Union experience, mergers with other libraries and collections, few major revisions to the Union Catalog in the United States after the 1950s, Voyager software's inability to use Union, and little or no support for Union on OCLC.⁴⁰

THE CURRENT STATE OF UNION CLASSIFICATION

To determine the current state and use of Union Classification, I contacted 260 libraries of those ATS institutions with valid websites and/or e-mail addresses as listed on the ATS website (many did not have current websites or contact information) and received responses from 137. Also, four librarians from non-ATS institutions responded to a follow-up post on the ATLANTIS listserv. Several of the schools represented in the responses share a library with another responding school, so there was a total of 130 libraries represented by the 141 responses.⁴¹

Of those responding libraries:

- 19 still have Union Classification for all or some of their collection
 - 2 have complete collections in Union and both are planning or currently undergoing conversion to Library of Congress.

³⁷ Ibid., 77.

³⁸ Angela Morris, e-mail message to the author, July 23, 2012 quoting from the 1987 Annual Report of the Librarian for Louisville Presbyterian Seminary.

³⁹ Phillip Harvey, e-mail message to the author, July 19, 2012.

⁴⁰ Bill Darr, e-mail message to the author, July 20, 2012; Irina Topping, e-mail message to the author, July 17, 2012; Anne Reece, e-mail message to the author, n.d.; Dale Dobias, e-mail message to the author, July 18, 2012; Linda Putnam, e-mail message to the author, July 13, 2012.

⁴¹ A complete spreadsheet of collected data is available from the author. Please contact her at beccaminister@gmail.com for more information.

- 7 have complete collections in Union, but are located in Australia or New South Wales.⁴² These locations are actively cataloging in Union and meet yearly to discuss subject headings, numbering, and other classification issues.⁴³
- 18 noted that they had once used Union for all or some of their collection but had completed conversion to another system.
 - 2 of these libraries are in Australia.
- A total of 37 responding use or had used Union, which is less than the 50 noted in other studies or articles.
- 57 currently use Library of Congress either completely or combined with other methods, including Union. (Other respondents did not state current system in use).
 - 13 had converted from Dewey to LC
 - 5 had converted from Lynn Peterson to LC
 - 3 had converted from Cutter to LC
- 8 currently use Dewey
- Other classifications in current use are Lynn-Peterson, Richardson, and other “in house” systems.
- The remaining 127 schools did not respond, did not have libraries listed on their websites, or had websites only in languages other than English.⁴⁴

The last holdout in the United States, Union Presbyterian Seminary, in Richmond, Virginia, was for many years the “home” of Union Classification. Dorothy (Dottie) Thomason, the lead cataloger at the seminary, was the leading force for Union at that location. She retired from the seminary in recent years, and according to Paula Skreslet, “probably knows more about it [Union] than any other human being alive today.”⁴⁵ With her retirement, however, even Union Presbyterian is anticipating a move to Library of Congress. According to Irina Topping, the current Technical Services/Serial Librarian at Union, “Hopefully it will be just a matter of short time before the library will switch to LC. The VERY outdated schedules, difficulty finding or training catalogers familiar with Pettee, and inability to use LC numbers in copy cataloging will be the driving force for the library to go through reclassification.”⁴⁶ Thus, the last library in the U.S. using Union will cease to do so in the very near future. This will leave a few libraries in Australia and Brazil as the only active libraries in the world using Union Classification.

CONCLUSIONS

In the early 1900s, there was a need for a classification system that would work for theological books in ways that the Dewey and Cutter systems could not. Through diligent work and theological thinking, Julia Pettee created a system that remains unparalleled in its attention to theological materials. According to Richard Spoor, “Her unique contribution to the life of the seminary library at Union in New York benefited not only Union but

⁴² Lavinia Gant, e-mail message to the author, July 30, 2012.

⁴³ Phillip Harvey, e-mail message to the author, July 19, 2012.

⁴⁴ It should be noted that it was very difficult to find a link to the library through many of the ATS school websites. Sometimes there was a direct link from the front page of the site, but very often it was hidden under a variety of tabs or not found at all. There were quite a few schools that had websites entirely in Korean, Chinese, Spanish, or French.

⁴⁵ Paula Skreslet, e-mail message to the author, January 14 2012.

⁴⁶ Irina Topping, e-mail message to the author, July 17, 2012.

theological and academic libraries everywhere.”⁴⁷ She forever changed the way theological libraries would think about classification, and when she passed away in 1967, Raymond Morris said of her, “In a generation when librarianship simply went unnoticed, Miss Pettee, by her creativeness, insight, enterprise—those matters which distinguish the extraordinary from the ordinary—made for herself and for theological librarianship a name known not only in her vicinity, but the whole nation, and indeed, beyond in the world.”⁴⁸ As times and technology changed libraries and librarianship, Pettee’s system began to fall out of use. It became more cumbersome for catalogers, and there were fewer libraries using and discussing the system. Although there are still libraries elsewhere in the world using Union, it is unfortunate that in the United States there will be no more cataloging in Pettee’s scheme. As one Australian cataloger noted, “It is a great shame that it was allowed to languish in the United States.”⁴⁹ Theological librarianship as a field owes a great debt of gratitude to Julia Pettee and her work, and although her system has fallen into disuse, her contribution to the field should not be overlooked or forgotten.



⁴⁷ Richard Spoor, “Julia Pettee and Her Contribution to Theological Librarianship,” in *The American Theological Library Association: Essays in Celebration of the First Fifty Years* (Evanston, IL: American Theological Library Association, 1996): 183–195.

⁴⁸ Raymond P. Morris, “Pettee, Julia, 1872-1967,” *American Theological Library Association Summary of Proceedings* 21 (January 1, 1967): 71.

⁴⁹ Phillip Harvey, e-mail message to the author, July 19, 2012.