Classification in Theological Libraries Today

Ethics and Practice, Local and Global

JANE SINNETT-SMITH

*I*n a 2020 address to the Australian and New Zealand Theological Library Association, Alissa McCulloch observed that many historical cataloguing and classification biases "traditionally really suited [Christian] theological libraries" (McCulloch 2020). Engaging closely with such historical biases, this chapter explores the particular practical and ethical challenges of classification in theological libraries whose holdings and classification practices have historically focused on Christianity. It considers how theological libraries might balance responsibilities to existing collections and sensitive treatment of religions or denominations outside their traditional focus.

This chapter's discussion is set against a backdrop of two important movements in (theological) librarianship. Section one considers classification in the context of the efforts of many theological libraries in the UK to decolonise collections, fostering cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity through collection development. It underlines the

importance of classification within these efforts; that is, how we organise, represent, and provide access to these increasingly diverse collections past the point of acquisition. Across the library sector more broadly, there is well-established and increasing scrutiny of universal classification schemes' historical biases, including critiques of Christian-centric biases (Olson 2002, 7). Section two digs into debates on reforming Library of Congress Classification (LCC) and Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC), exploring why working towards equitable, ethical classification schemes matters and arguing for the importance of actively attending to this problem on the ground, from accurately representing collections to practical retrieval issues. It argues that (Christian) theological libraries have particular obligations to engage in these debates, not only as spaces serving both academic and faith communities, but as beneficiaries of historically-biased classification practices now grappling with adapting to readers' and holdings' changing needs. Engaging with these debates does not diminish Christian-centred libraries, but productively foregrounds awareness of institutions' individual contexts and histories, and can work to improve our services to our user communities. Turning more closely to theological libraries within the UK today, section three provides an overview of the classification schemes in use in ABTAPL members' libraries, and reflects on how local adaptions can, by their nature as small-scale and customised, provide helpful if imperfect solutions to the biases and insufficiencies of global, general schemes.

A significant focus of this chapter's discussion is the recognition that libraries are not neutral spaces that objectively organise and communicate knowledge, but complex institutions whose organisation and systems are informed by their specific cultural and historic context. As Hope Olson points out, claims to library neutrality can obscure the biases and exclusions many library systems continue to perpetuate, positioning one specific, contextual viewpoint as instead a universal default (Olson 2001, 640). As such, it is helpful to begin by setting out this chapter's perspective. This chapter specifically focuses on the impact of classification debate and reform on UK Christian theological libraries. This focus is informed in part by the overwhelming preponderance of current or historically Christian-focused ABTAPL members. Based on data collected in 2024 from the ABTAPL Directory of Institutional Members, of the 70 libraries listed (counting separately distinct collections housed within a single institution, such as the Angus Library and Archive at Regent's Park College, Oxford), all but three (the Aga Khan Library, the Leo Baeck

College Library, the Woolf Institute Library) have a current focus on Christianity, or have historically grown out of Christian roots (ABTAPL, n.d.). An example of the latter is New College, University of Edinburgh, which was founded for the Free Church College, and now "serves the University's School of Divinity," covering religious studies more broadly (New College Library 2024).

Christian or historically Christian libraries are a broad category encompassing a range of institutional needs, as ABTAPL members demonstrate, from departmental or college libraries within larger university institutions (such as New College or Mansfield College Library, University of Oxford) to cathedral libraries (such as Hereford or Norwich). ABTAPL membership is dominated by theological training colleges; over 50% of the 70 libraries included in the Directory serve a college or seminary training students for some form of Christian ministry (ABTAPL, n.d.). ABTAPL member libraries serve diverse communities, from single denominations to ecumenical, interdenominational, multi-faith, and secular institutions (such as those within larger university bodies; Berryhill 2020, 8).

These diverse institutions have varying classification needs. A collection of rare books housed in a historic library may choose, for example, to consciously preserve a local historic classification scheme as part of their library's heritage. The special collections of Westminster College, Cambridge, provide an example. When these items were moved into an archive strongroom, they retained their historical, location-based class marks, even while this locational information no longer accurately reflects their placement within the library. User discoverability and subject colocation may be a low priority for closed-stack libraries when library staff mediate between readers and the shelves (Harvey and Greenwood 2020, 8–9). In contrast, in college or university open-shelf libraries, where readers regularly browse collections and new holdings are frequently acquired, the demands on classification look very different; the key here is the ability of readers to quickly and easily find and retrieve items, as well as the accurate representation and browsability of subject matter (Bair 2005, 14). While this chapter primarily targets the classification needs of "working," user-facing libraries, especially in educational institutes, it emphasises throughout that there is no one-size-fits-all classification scheme or policy appropriate to every theological library.

Decolonisation and Classification in UK Theological Libraries

Discussion of historical biases within classification and other library systems is situated within broader movements to decolonise universities in the UK higher education sector. Decolonisation signals here "the idea that the legacy of empire continues to shape how knowledge is produced, circulated and reproduced" (Durham University, n.d.). The goals of decolonisation within universities involve identifying ways in which curricula are shaped by colonial legacies, making unseen biases and assumptions visible, and working to move forwards by, for example, addressing underrepresented voices and scholarship (Smith and Appleton 2023, 820).

Like UK universities more broadly, theological educational institutes – and the library collections serving them – are rooted in legacies of colonialism and white supremacy (Samokishyn 2022, 36; Meyers 2021, 11, 22). Theological and historical studies emphasise the ongoing impact and complexities of reckoning with European mission Christianity's complicity in colonialism (Ahn 2022, 334; Reddie 2021, 153–56; Wariboko 2018, 59–60; Jennings 2010, 8). Within theological education, Durham University, which validates the Common Awards ordination training of many ABTAPL members, sets out what decolonising curricula means for theological teaching institutes in particular, stressing the importance of critically engaging with "problematic assumptions" in theological teaching, wider engagement with theologians globally, and with the concrete impact of racism and inequalities today (Durham University, n.d.). Lack of representation and marginalisation of Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) voices in curricula can be a significant barrier to "belonging in theological education" for BAME students in the UK and across the world: engaging with decolonisation activities aims to create more inclusive spaces for a "diverse student body" (Durham University, n.d.). Theological education is today more global than ever; Christian theological institutes and their libraries inhabit a rapidly changing landscape, as UK student numbers dwindle and Christianity's centre shifts from the Global North to the Global South, transforming student demographics and attendant library needs (Coleman 2022, 59; Berryhill 2020, 10; Gale and Reekie 2008, 7). Many theological training colleges now offer global distance learning, emphasising the shifting needs for libraries to serve this increasingly diverse, global community (see for example, The Queen's Foundation 2025; Spurgeon's College

2022; Cambridge Theological Federation, n.d.). Decolonisation efforts allow theological institutes and their libraries to better represent and serve their user communities.

As Marilyn Clarke points out, libraries, as organisers of knowledge resources, are as complicit in perpetuating the "silencing [of] marginalised voices" as the institutions they belong to (Clarke 2021, 239). A key focus for tackling historical biases and underrepresentation is fostering cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity through collection development (Smith and Appleton 2023, 820; Coleman 2022, 58–59). For example, European and North American scholarship dominates theological holdings; libraries may seek to diversify these collections by adding publications from underrepresented diverse geographic, cultural, and religious voices, in particular "de-northernising" holdings by seeking out Global South and indigenous publishers (Samokishyn 2022, 36, 38; Clarke 2021, 244, 250; Meyers 2021, 11, 22; Morales et al. 2014, 448). While these strategies target assessing collection gaps and selecting diverse new acquisitions, building inclusive collections extends past acquisition throughout resources' lifespans.

Addressing biases in classification and cataloguing is an important thread in efforts to build more equitable libraries. Library classification schemes and subject headings have their roots in "colonial-era knowledges" that prioritise (for example) Western perspectives, while marginalising those of the majority world (Smith and Appleton 2023, 819–21). Engaging with these biases can work to deconstruct and avoid replicating harmful knowledge organisation practices within collections (Montague-Hellen 2024, 72; Clarke 2021, 241). Appleton and Smith's 2023 survey of UK university libraries' tackling of classification biases sorts such work into two broad approaches (822–23). A practical approach aims to identify and reclassify problem areas in the library (an example in theological libraries might be examination of class marks for global indigenous churches – are they given placements and class marks of their own, or are they treated as corollaries to European missionary churches?). A critical approach "seeks not to eliminate bias," but to educate users about the existence and navigation of historical biases. An example might be clear, upfront acknowledgement to patrons that a library and its catalogue contains discriminatory language that is retained for historical purposes, such as that deployed on the Lambeth Palace online catalogue (Lambeth Palace Library, n.d.). Such an approach draws attention to historical biases, placing them into their appropriate cultural and historical contexts, rather than positioning them as a default, unspoken norm.

As this chapter turns towards closer exploration of the classification of religion, discussion weaves between these two approaches, both critically engaging with classification biases and considering practical solutions. Scholarship on university libraries often cites Christian-centric classification schemes as an aspect of library biases in need of rectification (Clarke 2021, 252). What does this Christian focus look like in practice, and what does discussion regarding its reform mean for specialist theological libraries?

Biases and Reforms in the Classification of Religion

In this section, I consider the two principal classification schemes in use in UK libraries – Library of Congress Classification (LCC) and Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC) – in light of scholarly and practitioner literature concerning the reform of historical religious biases (Broughton 2017, 483). I use LCC as a prism through which to examine what we mean by religious classification biases, how they impact holdings on a granular level, and why such biases matter for theological libraries. I then turn briefly to efforts to reform DDC's classification of religion, exploring what proposed large-scale reform of global classification schemes might look like in practice.

LCC is a popular choice in Christian theological libraries worldwide for its accessibility (free online schedules, usage across shared catalogue records); centrally-managed responsiveness to new scholarship (efficient for small library teams); and extensive, granular classification for Christian theological subjects (Harvey and Greenwood 2020, 6–7). This final point forms the crux of this section's discussion: while LCC works effectively for historically Christian collections, there are stark imbalances in LCC's classification of many other religions. Since at least the 1970s, there has been an extensive body of research into the biases and omissions of LCC (Berman 1993). LCC is a general classification scheme that theoretically represents all subjects (Laddusaw 2019, 197; Olson 2002, 7). Yet as Melissa Adler and Hope Olson both highlight, the "universality" LCC constructs is highly culturally specific, reflecting the ideologies and biases of its societal context, presuming a singular, exclusive reading community (Adler 2017, xvi; Olson 2002, 12; 2001, 642–43). This community is "American/Western European, Christian, white, heterosexual, and male" (S. A. Knowlton 2005, 124–25). Readers and subjects excluded from these categories are in turn excluded or marginalised in LCC and allied systems. LCC (alongside associated

systems like the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH), and other universal classification schemes like DDC) has come under scrutiny for exhibiting biases of "gender, sexuality, race, age, ability, ethnicity, language and religion" (Olson 2002, 7). The effects of LCC (and DDC) biases are at once practical and ethical; they limit diverse and marginalised subjects' effective representation within libraries and impede retrieval for users looking for this information (Furner 2007, 154; Olson 2001, 639). Classification biases not only reflect wider prejudices in the mainstream society that created them, but replicate and reinforce these prejudices within and beyond libraries (Baker and Islam 2020, 30; Adler 2017, 2; Furner 2007, 165).

Despite extensive critiques levelled at LCC's representational biases, there has been comparatively little attention paid to religious questions (Baker and Islam 2020, 28). While Sanford Berman's seminal call to arms underscored LCC and LCSH's pervasive "Christocentrism," religion is perhaps the subject slowest to be changed, suggesting enduring Christian bias continues to inflect LCC (S. A. Knowlton 2005, 128; Berman 1993, 5). Drew Baker and Nazia Islam identify three problems with LCC's treatment of religion: "unequal real estate, ethnocentric category boundaries, and assumed universal categories" (Baker and Islam 2020, 30). A comparison of the treatment of Christianity and Islam in LCC is illustrative here. The LCC B-class Religion schedules amply exemplify LCC's "unequal real estate." Christianity occupies five subclasses: BR Christianity, BS Bible, BT Doctrinal theology, BV Practical theology, BX Christian Denominations (Library of Congress 2024b, 1–472), Islam, in contrast, shares, one subclass (BP) with Bahai, Theosophy, and "Other beliefs and movements" (Library of Congress 2024a, 162–94). Indeed, commenting on global classification schemes' Western-centrism and inadequate space offered to Islam, Haroon Idrees concludes that neither LCC nor DDC can adequately classify libraries that focus on Islamic literature (Idrees 2012, 174–75; 2011, 124, 130, 141). This inattention to a major world religion is not justified by the terms that the Library of Congress itself sets out for the inclusion of subjects within its classification – "literary warrant," that is, based on the literature that has been published on a given topic. A vast body of Islamic literature with extensive historical roots predates widespread Christian literacy (Idrees 2011, 125–26).

One proffered solution to world religions' lack of "real estate" at subclass level is using LCC's post-decimal numbers and Cutters to extend their detailed classification (Baker and Islam 2020, 30). However practical this may be, conceptually relegating expansion only

to post-decimals and Cutters continues imbalanced representation of diverse knowledge through unequal enforcement of organisational hierarchy. Again, a comparison of a particular topic within Islam and Christianity is illustrative here. Without implying one-to-one equivalency, mysticism is an important subject for both religions. Islamic mysticism (Sufism) is classified under "Sufism. Mysticism. Dervishes. صوفية," a category also encompassing asceticism and monasticism. Christian asceticism and mysticism are classified across 80 numbers, BV5015-BV5095. Monasticism is filed separately under specific Christian denominations. For example, mysticism in the Armenian Church is at BX127.2-127.3, mysticism in the Orthodox Eastern Church at BX384.5, mysticism in the Catholic Church at BX2400-4563, and so on (Library of Congress 2024b, 259, 263, 321–44). Due to Christianity's extensive "real estate" at subclass level, Christian asceticism and mysticism's classification is comprehensively refined using unique pre-decimal numbers. In sharp contrast, Sufism is classified across only two numbers, BP188.45-BP190 (BP190.5 begins "Topics (not otherwise provided for)") (Library of Congress 2024a, 187). Although LCC has expanded to provide granular classification for Sufism, these refinements operate at post-decimal levels, further down LCC's organisational hierarchy. While LCC provides sufficient "real estate" to give full, nuanced representation of Christian mysticism's importance, depth, and complexity, juxtaposed to its Christian counterpart, Sufism is represented as less nuanced and accessible. There is conceptual imbalance as Sufism's diversity, range, and complexity is afforded lower levels of hierarchical significance than Christian mysticism. LCC's inequitable real estate not only reflects its historic biases, but continues to reinforce and replicate these same prejudices through unequal representation of religions to users.

Sufism's class marks are also practically more complex for users to navigate, impeding the ease with which users seeking material published on this subject can locate and access such items; Murphy, Long, and MacDonald stress users' difficulties navigating long LCC class marks (2013, 114). Retrieval is at once a practical and ethical concern: to "facilitate access and promote discovery" is an essential facet of cataloguing ethics (Cataloging Ethics Steering Committee 2022; Fox and Reece 2012, 378). Inadequate retrieval establishes further boundaries preventing readers accessing marginalised knowledge, compounding this material's exclusion (Olson 2001, 639). The question of retrieval in physical libraries is particularly important for theological libraries. Despite much theological reading shifting to digital formats, theology

students continue to turn to print libraries (Estes and Stephens 2020, iii; Penner 2009, 58). Indeed, many critiques of classification schemes remain applicable to knowledge organisation in digital spaces, from LCSH to tagging and other forms of metadata organisation. As this section demonstrates, classification is an ethical issue – knowledge organisation shapes how knowledge is represented to library users, and can perpetuate or attenuate harm (Bair 2005, 15, 18). An awareness of classification schemes' inequalities intertwines both theoretical and practical questions, demonstrating the importance of considering the impact of classification on the ground in the library, and working towards "practical moral solutions" to the persistent cultural biases and barriers to information access that library systems continue to reinforce (Baker and Islam 2020, 33).

In their assessment of LCC's classification of religion, Baker and Islam propose a radical reorganisation of the B-class along regional lines to place religions in their geographic and temporal context and de-centre Christianity (34–35). While this proposal remains theoretical, it recalls the (optional) reshapings of the DDC 200 religion class that have been put into practice in recent decades. DDC, like LCC, has attracted substantial scholarly and practitioner critique of its historical biases, in particular regarding race, sexuality, and disability (Clarke 2021, 254). From at least the 1960s, attention was drawn to DDC's Western and Protestant perspective, rendering it inadequate for many libraries in international, non-Christian, and non-Protestant contexts (Delfitto 2009, 499). Despite successive reforms across the 20th century as DDC internationalised and responded to specific historical and geographic contexts (Delfitto 2009, 503), in the standard DDC notation, Christianity and the New Testament continue to occupy a disproportional spread of classificatory real estate: 65 of the 100 classes in the 200s, in contrast to one class (296) dedicated to Judaism, and one class (297) shared by Islam, Babism, and Bahai (Fox 2019).

In addition to reforms to standard DDC notation, the scheme also provides optional provisions for libraries and areas where Christianity is not the predominant religion, in which Christianity is classified using a single number (298), and that library's main religion can occupy 220–280 (Option A), or adapt 210 (Option B; Fox 2019). Oh Dong-Geun and Yeo Ji-Suk suggest alternative adaptions suited to libraries in cultural and geographic contexts in which there is no single predominant faith, and classifications account equitably for the multiple needs of multi-faith environments (2001, 76). Most radically, in 2012 DDC published an "Optional Arrangement for the Bible and

Specific Religions", a complete reorganisation of the 200s with the stated aim to "reduce [the standard DDC notation's] Christian bias' and improve representation of other global religions" (Green 2019; Dewey 2012). The Optional Arrangement organises religions in regional and chronological order; the classificatory "footprint" afforded to specific faiths aims for more proportional representation, mapping onto a religion's number of publications, adherents, and "perceived cultural significance" (WebDewey 2012). Thus Christianity occupies 252–279 (28 classes as opposed to the 65 in standard notation), and Islam grows from one class to 18 (281–298; Fox 2019). While I have yet to find reports of the Optional Arrangement's implementation in any UK libraries, a number of accounts from US public and academic libraries observe that in practice the Optional scheme does provide more equitable treatment, greater granular specificity, and more useful colocation and subject browsing for non-Christian religions in comparison to standard DDC notation (Thornton 2024; Mathis 2020; McDonald 2020). All accounts of reclassifying the 200s to the Optional Arrangement are situated in public and academic libraries with general collections – that is, collections serving multi-faith or secular communities. In such contexts, it is appropriate – indeed, necessary – that collections and classifications aim for equal representation of religions without privileging any single faith over another.

For Christian theological libraries for whom the standard DDC (and LCC) classifications' historically Christian focuses neatly suit existing collections, attempts to respond to broader classification reform by enacting wholescale reclassification would be both impractical and counterproductive, moving towards schema that are less suitable for their collection needs (Harvey and Greenwood 2020, 2–3). Current and proposed reforms to DDC and LCC suggest that, after over half a century of classification convergence in UK libraries owing to shared catalogue records, standardisation movements, and (latterly) outsourced shelf-ready acquisitions (Broughton 2017, 481), going forwards there may be increased proliferation of optional and adapted classification arrangements. While classification schemes that centre Christianity have been the default standard since the 19th century, the DDC's Optional Arrangement, and ongoing debate about LCC reforms, position schemes focusing on Christianity as some of the many options tailored to specific religious, cultural, and geographic contexts. As I discuss in greater detail below, a multiplicity of classifications tailored to specific collection's needs are not a

significant departure from the current realities of classification in practice in many theological libraries, and can indeed productively cater to individual libraries' highly specific needs.

Perhaps the most important impact of classification debates and reforms for Christian theological libraries is an inducement to recognise our own specific, contextual situations and foster explicit awareness of why general classification schemes such as LCC and DDC work for our collections. That is to say, Christian-centric classifications are used because they are appropriately tailored to the particular needs of theological libraries' specifically Christian collections, institutional histories, or purposes, rather than because a Christian focus is an unspoken default epistemic position to which the classification of all other faiths should conform. This awareness – this forthright statement of a library's context and classificatory needs – enriches both library staff and users' understandings of collections' histories, strengths, and gaps. Naming an explicit positionality encourages an awareness of the boundaries of a library's expertise, and potential changes in the needs of the collections and user communities they serve. Engaging with debates around historical classification biases and unequal knowledge organisation enables Christian theological libraries both to better articulate the needs of core collections, and to responsibly approach the classification, representation, and access of the literature of other faiths.

Classification in ABTAPL Theological Libraries: Discussion

Against these dual backdrops of UK higher education libraries' engagement with decolonisation and general classification reforms, what is the current landscape of theological libraries in the UK? Using the ABTAPL Directory of Institutional Members 2024, I surveyed the publicly available library websites and online catalogues of current ABTAPL members for information on which classification schemes they use. As my discussion focuses as much on the ways that libraries frame and communicate their classification practices to their user communities as those practices themselves, I collected data only from institutions that publish information about their classification schemes or have open online catalogues; that is, institutions whose classification schemes form part of their public-facing presentation.

Within these parameters, of the 70 institutions in the ABTAPL directory, classification data was publicly available for 55 libraries, as set out in Table 1.

Table 1: Classification schemes used by ABTAPL members

CLASSIFICATION	NUMBER OF ABTAPL LIBRARIES
LCC only	18
LCC with other scheme(s)[1]	5
DDC only	14
DDC with other scheme(s) [2]	4
Nonstandard only (includes in-house, adapted, and specialised schemes)[3]	16
Nonstandard with other scheme(s)	5
Elazar	1

In summary, of the 55 ABTAPL libraries whose classification information I reviewed, the greatest proportion (23, or 42%) used LCC, while 18 ABTAPL libraries (33%) use DDC. One library, Regent's Park College, Oxford, is in the process of reclassifying from DDC to LCC (A. Knowlton, n.d.). This corresponds to broader long-term patterns across theological libraries worldwide; a 1984 survey showed more than 74% of US theological libraries used LCC (Peterson 1984, 106). It is also broadly in step with classification trends across UK higher education libraries; a 1967 survey of UK university libraries showed 41% of libraries adopting LCC (Friedman and Jeffreys 1967, 227), while Broughton's more recent 2017 survey of 50 UK universities reported 36% using LCC (483).

As noted above, different types of holdings have different classification needs, and many ABTAPL libraries accommodate multiple collections from working, lending holdings to closed store or special collections, each with individual classification demands. Of the 55 ABTAPL libraries whose classification information I reviewed, seven used multiple schemes concurrently (see Table 1). For example, the Gamble Library at Union Theological College has collections classified using both LCC and "old classification" schemes, as well as separate

sequences for special collections such as pamphlets and rare books (Gamble Library, n.d.). Classification practices are adapted to local conditions, tailored to institutional contexts, and the histories and needs of sub-collections.

It is striking that 21 ABTAPL libraries (or 38%) maintain nonstandard classification schemes. Nonstandard schemes are defined as a loose "spectrum" encompassing both entirely "home-grown," in-house classifications and specialised adaptations of global published schemes (Lee 2011, 26). I include here formalised denomination-specific adaptive classifications that are themselves in use globally, such as the Lynn-Peterson Alternative Classification for Catholic Books used at Heythrop Library (Gresser 2024; Lynn and Peterson 1954). The remarkably high proportion of ABTAPL libraries using in-house, local, and denomination-specific schemes noted above is not unusual in UK higher education contexts. Many UK universities retain classification schemes that are entirely in-house (as in the Cambridge University Library) (Waldoch 2015) or highly localised (such as the Garside scheme instituted by Kenneth Garside at University College London and the University of Leeds) (Meehan 2020, 16). Similarly notable is the high proportion of adaption and customisation of universal schemes used in ABTAPL members: of the 42 libraries using general classification schemes, over half apply some level of modification (see Table 2).

Table 2: ABTAPL members who customise or adapt a global classification scheme

CLASSIFICATION	NUMBER OF ABTAPL LIBRARIES THAT CUSTOMISE OR ADAPT SCHEME	ALL ABTAPL LIBRARIES USING SCHEME
LCC	13	23
DDC	9	18
Elazar	1	1
All global schemes	23	42

These modifications range from adoption of global denominational-specific adaptations to LCC and DDC, to significant in-house alterations such as alternative letter prefixes replacing LCC classes in Lambeth Palace Library, and more minor adjustments such as the

addition of authorial suffixes to DDC in use in Regent's Park College Library. In total, over two thirds of ABTAPL libraries use specialised, local, or modified classification schemes (see Tables 1 and 2). Once again, this conforms to longstanding UK library histories of classification modification. Friedman and Jeffrey's 1967 survey of UK university libraries noted that over three quarters of libraries using LCC applied some form of customisation or supplementary notation (Friedman and Jeffreys 1967, 228). Lee's more recent account of UK higher education art libraries similarly notes the enduring preponderance of adapted classifications, in particular for specialised libraries (Lee 2011; see also Currier 2002, 20). While the adoption of Online Computer Library Centre (OCLC)-led record-sharing in the 1970s and 80s, and more recently the growth of vendor-supplied shelf-ready classifications may have shrunk the proportion of UK higher education libraries using nonstandard or adapted schemes (Broughton 2017, 481–82), this review of ABTAPL members indicates that such schemes are alive and well in theological libraries.

While this brief overview of ABTAPL members' classification has concentrated on a quantitative account of classification schemes in use, it has highlighted the need for future qualitative research into not just how many libraries retain customised or in-house schemes, but why such schemes retain this strikingly robust presence in theological libraries. I speculate that a significant contributing factor is the highly specialised nature of theological libraries, created to serve one principal subject, and often related to a single faith, denomination, or tradition. Universal classification schemes that aim to describe all knowledge can be an inexact fit with specialised collections requiring in-depth classification of one specific knowledge area. Despite the critiques that LCC and DDC's Christian-centrism unduly privileges Christianity above other religions explored above, these universal schemes may not wholly serve the purposes of a specialised theological library either, and require customisation to make them fit for purpose. Julia Pettee, the creator of the Union theological classification scheme, for example, decreed the 99 digits DDC then awarded to Christianity in the 200 class inadequate for concentrated theological collections (Pettee 1937, 254). This complaint from 1937 neatly illustrates the problem of general schemes: inequitable for capturing diverse, multi-faith, and multi-denominational collections, yet not specific enough for collections focusing on a specific religion, tradition, or denomination.

This may be particularly notable in libraries serving single denominations – in particular those that are most active outside the US.

The Christian-centric nature of LCC and DDC is rooted in particular forms of 19th-century American Protestantism that can marginalise other traditions (Tan and Robertson 2018, 30). For example, the United Reformed Church (URC), an important denomination in the UK, is confined in LCC to less than one class mark: BX9890.U25-U258. It shares BX9890 with four other denominations from Curaçao to Australia. Conceptually, these denominations are marginalised, their complexities and depth minimised; practically, user browsing, access, and retrieval is impeded by homogenous and complex class marks. To tackle these problems, Westminster College Library, which serves the URC, applies some small-scale local customisation, expanding the URC over the unused class marks BX9891-9894 (Library of Congress 2024b, 471), rendering this locally modified LCC more suitable for the UK context of this denomination.

ABTAPL libraries also deploy more formalised modifications to universal schemes in order to target the needs of their denominational collections. For example, the Roy Graham Library, Newbold College, uses an LCC adaption for classifying Seventh-Day Adventists employed by more than a dozen specialist libraries worldwide, which expands LCC's original five class marks (BX6151-6155) to 46 (BX6101-6146), replacing classifications for Adventists more generally (Library of Congress 2024b, 390; Tan and Robertson 2018, 32). While this form of adaption (modifying class marks already in use in LCC) may not be suitable for theological libraries serving ecumenical, multi-denominational collections, for those serving specialist denominational libraries, it effectively modifies LCC to provide an appropriate level of granularity for its specific collection's needs. For libraries serving a Christian community, universal schemes like LCC and DDC may provide a "good enough" service with some customisation.

It is significant that the single ABTAPL member focusing solely on Judaism, the Leo Baeck Institute Library, does not use a general scheme, but an adapted version of the Elazar Classification (see Table 1), a specialised scheme for Judaica materials devised from the 1950s as a response to LCC and DDC's Christian-centric biases and inaccuracies in representing Judaism (Catanese 2023, 275; Hansson 2022, 116; Boeckler 2008). The Elazar Classification is structured intentionally to reflect Jewish "cultural history and practice" and its users' browsing habits (Schoppert 2014, 423; Elazar 2008, 21). For libraries serving a single faith community, such specialised schemes, tailored to a specialised collection and user group, offer robust alternatives to universal schemes like LCC and DDC.

Overall, then, the picture that emerges of theological libraries' classification practices suggests a high level of comfort with nonstandard, specialised, customised, and localised schemes that pragmatically and conceptually adapt to individual collections' needs. If discussion above has focused on how classifications are tailored to suit the needs of single denominations or faiths, the following section considers a brief case study of how such local and small-scale changes can be deployed to tackle collection-focused questions at points of historical gaps and interfaith encounter.

Local Adaptions and Small-Scale Change

Running through discussion of universal, global classification schemes' biases is the conclusion that it is impossible to design a "single, bias-free system that would be appropriate in all libraries" (Smith and Appleton 2023, 823). Indeed, the very project of pinning down a single description of all knowledge that LCC and DDC propose is rooted in a particular 19th-century universalism that seems out of step not only with practical realities of fitting classifications to individual collections, but with the plural, diverse range of experiences and understandings that today's users bring to our libraries (Kaipainen and Hautamäki 2011, 504). Instead, Olson and others advocate for local, responsive changes that suit the demands of individual libraries and users (Thornton 2024, 56; Smith and Appleton 2023, 842; Olson 2001, 639). Although local changes are inherently limited, they are also, through close engagement with individual collections and user groups, able to respond to their community's specific needs in ways that global, general schemes cannot (Pettitt and Elzi 2023, 5).

As the review of ABTAPL libraries' classifications suggests, theological libraries are well-placed to engage in this sort of local adaption. Indeed, modifications and customisations are already embedded in many libraries. Examples of what productive small-scale changes to address historical biases might look like in Christian theological libraries include assessing shelf labels for outdated language, reviewing the arrangement of non-Christian religions to ask whether they are accurately represented and easily retrievable by users, and evaluating whether the appropriate response to problem areas is reclassification or user education on the historical context of why certain knowledge structures or language are in place. Local changes also involve pragmatic assessment of available library resources to enact them – from

direct financial costs to staff time, particularly challenging for the many theological librarians working solo or in small teams and under tight budgets. In-house classifications and local adaptions can be labour intensive, representing ongoing commitments to perpetually update and adapt (Lee 2011, 30). Deborah Lee's concept of "guerilla reclassification" in her 2012 article "Guerrilla Reclassification: A Call to Arms", published in *Catalogue & Index*, is a helpful tool here to manage local adaptions. Rather than seeking wholescale reclassification, Lee focuses on rapid tackling of individual problems on a small-scale, case-by-case basis that works within existing library resources to target those areas in which change is most needed and would most directly benefit library users. Such small incremental changes contribute to long-term improvements of a library's classification practices (Lee 2012), offering theological libraries a realistic model for local classification reform.

A brief case study of classification adaptions in a multi-faith library brings into focus how small-scale customisations can be tailored to both community and collection needs. In June 2023, the Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi Society reached an agreement to house their 1,000-volume collection in the Woolf Institute Library. After 40 years in a private residence, MIAS (an academic society "founded to promote a greater understanding" of medieval Muslim polymath Ibn al-'Arabī) sought a permanent, accessible home for its unique multilingual library (Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi Society 2019). The Woolf Institute Library, an interfaith institution focusing on Jewish, Christian, and Muslim relations, and dedicated to "improv[ing] tolerance and foster[ing] understanding between . . . different beliefs," was judged suitable. As David Perry (2023) observed, there are many resonances between Woolf's principles and Ibn al-'Arabī's "inclusive and undogmatic" philosophy.

While classifying and cataloguing this new collection, an important consideration was questions of how to sensitively treat Islamic spiritual works within the library. While there are cultural differences across the Islamic world, it is customary practice for the Qur'an and (by extension) other sacred books to be housed on top shelves, and especially not shelved near the floor (Long 2010, 214, 221; Museums, Libraries and Archives Council 2008, 41). As Dallas Long writes, "responsible stewardship of . . . holy works" requires libraries' adherence to expectations for "culturally-appropriate handling;" libraries have a duty to treat sacred works respectfully in culturally-specific ways (2010, 213). There is no provision within standard LCC or DDC for enacting such an arrangement. Minor local classification adaption responded to this collection's needs, aiming for care and attention

to cultural and religious specificity (Fox and Reece 2012, 381). The Woolf Institute uses an adapted LCC scheme: the simple addition of an S-prefix – denoting sacred books – appended to these works' classes marks a double sequence within the collection which could be shelved horizontally on the top shelves of each bay. These minor adjustments accommodate Islamic spiritual works' need for upper shelves while maintaining simple user retrieval and access. This case study also underlines the importance of collaboration, and libraries working alongside the communities they serve; academic and religious experts from the Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi Society collaborated to advise on the shelving and selection of works requiring specific treatment. Working at the scale of individual collections, local classification adaptions contribute to sacred books' culturally-appropriate treatment.

As Long suggests, questions of whether such attendance to cultural sensitivity concerning religious texts has a place in academic libraries (scholarly rather than faith-related institutions) can be fraught, and open to politically-motivated opposition (Long 2010, 217). These questions look rather different for theological libraries in educational or research contexts. As institutions that serve both scholarly and faith communities, it is appropriate that when theological libraries encounter denominations, traditions, and religions beyond their own current or historical focus, they attend with care to collections' and users' culturally situated needs, considering appropriately tailored faith-specific classification and library practices. Local classification practices allow for inter-faith encounter and collaboration that hospitably opens up theological libraries to multiple user communities. Small-scale adaptions suggest ways in which local changes can go beyond global classification schemes to respond actively to individual collections' and user communities' needs, transforming libraries' ability to responsibly represent and provide access to their collections.

Conclusions

"[T]he classification of knowledge," wrote Julie Pettee in 1937, "is a living, growing thing. The book schemes are the garment. They need constant letting down and making over to fit." (256). Nearly a century later, Pettee's work remains a helpful prism through which to view the challenges and opportunities of theological classification discussed in this chapter. Her own work is rooted in a specific early 20th-century historical and cultural context centred on assumptions

of a dominant Western and White Christianity that UK theological educational institutes are working to dismantle through engagement with decolonisation activities (Pettee 1937, 255–56). Participating in debates over the ongoing inequities and biases of library systems such as classification, this chapter argues, equips theological libraries to productively contribute to such efforts, addressing mis- and under-representation within our holdings, and more effectively serving both collections and users.

Pettee's emphasis on the need to fit classifications to the actual books on the shelves (257–58) underlines that there is no one-size-fits-all classification scheme that will be appropriate to serve all libraries, tackle all historical biases, or represent all subjects. Throughout, the chapter has argued for the importance of tailoring classification schemes and adaptions to the needs of individual libraries, collections, and user communities. Engaging with critiques of Christian-centric general classification schemes does not entail a criticism of Christian-centred libraries, nor indeed inherently of the continued use of Christian-focused classifications in institutions for which they are appropriate. Rather, these critiques are a timely reminder that no libraries are neutral spaces for the objective organisation of knowledge: our classification choices actively reflect and communicate our distinctive identities. Theological libraries' awareness and acknowledgement of their own specific cultural, religious, and historical context prepares us to work towards equitable, ethical classification practices that approach all faiths and none with equal seriousness, respect, and hospitality, while maintaining our responsibilities to our core collections.

Finally, Pettee's evocative metaphor – the constant tailoring and re-sewing of a garment – drives home that just as our collections, communities, and priorities shift and grow over time, so must our classification practices. As this chapter's focus on small-scale, local, incremental changes suggests, classification is not a static, definitive document, but an iterative process that entails regular critique and re-evaluation within the pragmatic bounds of our resources. Addressing colonial knowledge structures and inequitable treatment of religions in theological classifications will look different in each institute and library. Rather than seeking a singular, definitive solution, this chapter proposes a starting point for long-term critical reflection and enquiry that centres the multiple, evolving needs of individual holdings, collections, and communities over time.

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Notes

1   Including three libraries using both LCC and local schemes concurrently, and one library using LCC and DDC concurrently: Regent's Park College main library currently uses DDC, but is reclassifying to LCC from 2025–27 (A. Knowlton, n.d.).

2   Including three libraries using both DDC and local schemes concurrently, and one library (Regent's Park College) using LCC and DDC concurrently.

3   Including the six libraries noted above running concurrent local schemes.