

BERMAN'S BAG: "CONTROVERSIAL" CATALOGING

by
Sanford Berman
U*L Contributing Editor

What have I just read? Christopher Hitchens' God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything (Twelve, 2007). I largely agreed with his arguments and conclusions. Which wouldn't be especially noteworthy except that it directly relates to how the Library of Congress cataloged the work. LC did furnish this somewhat redundant note:

SUMMARY: "A case against religion and a description of the ways in which religion is man-made"--Provided by the publisher.

And mandated solely one access-point, apart from the prime title:

1. Religion--Controversial literature.

It's the subheading that rankles. I didn't find the book controversial. I found it congenial. Indeed, any tome that approached religion positively, favorably, I--and many others--would deem "controversial." So what's going on here? Library of Congress Authorities specifies that the subdivision, CONTROVERSIAL LITERATURE, is to be used "under names of individual religious and monastic orders, individual religions, Christian denominations, and uniform titles of sacred works for works that argue against or express opposition to those groups or works." The result of this practice is two-fold: to segregate or ghettoize criticism of religious entities and holy books, and to make it appear--by extension--that pro-religious material is not "controversial," but rather normal, mainstream, ^{non-contentious,} and acceptable. The remedy, of course, is simply to drop the subhead, CONTROVERSIAL LITERATURE, from the thesaurus, so that apologetic and critical works intermingle under major headings like RELIGION, CHRISTIANITY, ISLAM, and JUDAISM. (Hennepin County Library, in Minnesota, made such a correction at least two decades ago.)

The bib-record for Hitchens' volume could also have been made more useful in other ways. A more detailed (and searchable) note might have been easily crafted:

PARTIAL CONTENTS: A note on health, to which religion can be hazardous. - Arguments from design. - Revelation: the nightmare of the "Old" Testament. -The "New" Testament exceeds the evil of the "Old" one. -The Koran is borrowed from both Jewish and Christian myths. -The tawdriness of the miraculous and the decline of Hell. -Does religion make people behave better ? -There is no "Eastern" solution. -An objection anticipated: the last-ditch "case" against secularism. -A finer tradition: the resistance of the rational.

And these further subject headings and added entries would not only more fairly represent the work but also heighten and simplify access to it:

2. God. 3. Miracles. 4. Bible--Criticism and interpretation.
5. Koran--Criticism and interpretation. 6. Secularism.
7. Atheism. 7. Health--Religious aspects. II. Title: How religion poisons everything. III. Title: Religion poisons everything.
- IV. Title: God is great.

Incidentally, while equipped with a mostly comprehensive and helpful index, these entries are oddly missing:

Darfur, 190

Lord's Resistance Army, 189-90

Rusesabagina, Paul, 192

The IC treatment of the University of Minnesota Press title, Transgender rights (2006), qualifies an yet another example of gross under-cataloging, which no amount of data manipulation or cyber-fixing will compensate for.

These are the original note and tracings:

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Transsexuals--Civil rights. 2. Transsexuals--Legal status, laws, etc. 3. Sex and law.
- I. Currah, Paisley, 1964- II. Juang, Richard M. III. Minter, Shannon.

This is how the actual content might have been better disclosed and rendered more accessible:

Note: Contains material on transgender family law, binary sex categories, employment discrimination, intersex children's rights, transgender communities, transgender marriage, and "The International Bill of Gender Rights."

Subjects: 4. Intersex children--Civil rights. 5. Transgender people--Civil Rights. 6. Transgender people--Legal status, Laws, etc.

Added entries: IV. Title: International Bill of Gender Rights .

While it's gratifying to observe that LC has instituted more than two dozen personally-recommended subject headings and changes over the past 4 years--among them, AMERICAN DREAM, ANTI-RACISM, COMMUNITY-SUPPORTED AGRICULTURE, CONFLICT DIAMONDS, GOD (CHRISTIANITY), KRUMPING, MORAL PANICS, MIXED MARTIAL ARTS, PLUTOCRACY, QUEER THEORY, SEX TOYS, SEXUAL FREEDOM, SINGLE PAYER HEALTH CARE, WICCA, TWO-SPIRIT PEOPLE, MOUNTAINTOP REMOVAL MINING, ZINES, INTERSEX PEOPLE, TRANSGENDERISM, INTERSEXUALITY (replacing HERMAPHRODITISM), INTERSEX CHILDREN, TRANSGENDER PEOPLE, DIDDOS, and STRAP-ON SEX--these suggestions (as of late November 2007) have not yet been implemented:

*Recommendation	+Date
AFRO-BRAZILIANS (replacing BLACKS--BRAZIL)	7-22-04
ALTERNATIVE PRESS (replacing or in addition to UNDERGROUND PRESS)	2-1-05
ANAL FISTING	9-27-05
ANARCHO-PRIMITIVISM	6-26-06
ANARCHA-FEMINISM	11-27-05
ANTI-ARABISM	2-25-06
ARMENIAN GENOCIDE, 1915-1923 (replacing ARMENIAN MASSACRES, 1915-1923)	9-26-05
BUTCH AND FEMME (LESBIANISM)	8-24-05
CULTURE WARS (presently a UF under CULTURE CONFLICT)	12-26-04
DRAG QUEENS (presently a UF under FEMALE IMPERSONATORS)	8-24-05
EROTOPHOBIA	11-7-05
EROTIC GRAPHIC NOVELS	2-10-07

FEMINIST ZINES	11-27-05
GI MOVEMENT	12-12-05
GI UNDERGROUND PRESS	12-12-05
GENDERQUEERS	7-20-06
INDIVIDUALIST FEMINISM	12-20-05
INFOSHOPS	7-31-04
GAY PULP FICTION	8-2-06
LESBIAN PULP FICTION	6-21-06
LIVING APART TOGETHER	6-26-06
NATIVE AMERICAN HOLOCAUST (1492-1900)	2-1-05
POLYAMORY (presently a UF under NON-MONOGAMOUS RELATIONSHIPS)	11-04-04
QUEER ZINES	7-20-06
RECOVERED FACTORY MOVEMENT	8-5-05
LESBIAN BIKERS	1-22-07
SECOND-WAVE FEMINISM	11-27-05
SLOW MOVEMENT	7-25-05
SWEATSHOP-FREE PRODUCTS	11-8-02
THIRD-WAVE FEMINISM	11-27-05
TRANSHUMANISM	7-2-04
STUDENT ANTI-SWEATSHOP MOVEMENT	11-02
FAT STUDIES	7-28-06
AFRILICHIAN/AFRILICHIAN/BLACK APPALACHIANS (cross-references to AFRICAN AMERICANS-- APPALACHIAN REGION)	7-17-07
ABSALOOKE INDIANS (replacing CROW INDIANS)	7-2-07
ASSISTED DYING (replacing ASSISTED SUICIDE)	7-29-07
COLLEGE DISORIENTATION GUIDES	6-26-07
CRITICAL LIBRARIANSHIP	5-16-07
DARFUR GENOCIDE, 2003- (replacing SUDAN--HISTORY-- DARFUR CONFLICT, 2003-)	3-13-07
FREEGANISM	6-28-07
GSMs in SCHOOLS (cross-reference to GAY-STRAIGHT ALLIANCES IN SCHOOLS)	7-25-07
SEXUAL SLAVERY	3-13-07

BOLLYWOOD FILM MUSIC	8-14-07
BOLLYWOOD FILMS	8-14-07
FEAR OF ISLAM/FEAR OF MUSLIMS/HATRED OF ISLAM/ HATRED OF MUSLIMS/ISLAMIC PHOBIA/ISLAMPHOBIA (cross- references to ISLAMOPHOBIA)	2-15-07
HOMOPHILLY	9-13-07
SOUSVEILLANCE	9-13-07
FOLKSONOMY	9-25-07
THEOFASCISM	10-15-07
ISLAMOFASCISM	10-15-07
WATER SPORTS (SEXUALITY)	11-6-07
EXTRAORDINARY RENDITION	11-9-07
WATERBOARDING	11-13-07
PATIENT DUMPING	11-16-07

Unhappily, even though rightly substituting TWO-SPIRIT PEOPLE for the previous BERDACHES, the new scope-note^{narrowly} limits its assignment to material on Indian men who assume female dress and roles, rather than correctly applying it to all GLBT Native Americans.

Anyone wishing to support, emend, oppose, or expand these recommendations should directly contact the Cataloging Policy & Support Office, Library of Congress, Washington, DC 20540-4305. (Identifying assignment-candidates for specific new headings would be particularly welcome.)

11-28-07