Chapter 6
An Exercise in Inter-Religious Conceptualization: Towards Online Creative Conversations

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ABSTRACT

Inter-religious dialogue is expected to increasingly take on the form of online creative conversations that rely on digital data and documents. The first part of this chapter is about the current symbolic obstacles on the road to cultural and religious “intercomprehension” in this context: mainly the incompatibility and the cultural biases of classification systems. To overcome these obstacles (and some others), the authors propose using IEML (Information Economy MetaLanguage), a computable language specially suited to the online intercultural dialogue that was developed at the Canada Research Chair in collective intelligence at the University of Ottawa. The second and main part of this chapter presents some examples of the application of basic IEML categories to the religious domain.

CLASSIFICATION SYSTEMS’ CULTURAL BIAS AND INCOMPATIBILITY

Let us begin by examining the many different, incompatible and culturally biased classification systems in use today. We need to draw a distinction between data and metadata. Data refers to archived documents in digital as well as non-digital formats (texts, images, sounds, programs, journals, books, records, films), while metadata refers to the annotations added to documents in order to organize, retrieve and filter them (abstracts, key words, topics, assessments, etc.). First of all, concerning data, we do not always have
at our disposal machine translation systems that are general and reliable enough for us to be able to switch between the many natural languages in existence. As for metadata, we have to contend with multiple ordering systems as well as the many different languages in existence. Librarians and archivists in the 19th and 20th centuries developed a range of indexing and cataloguing systems. We will refer to Dewey’s hierarchical decimal system below. Ranganathan’s multi-faceted classification system or Otlet’s early attempts at hypertextual classification could also be cited. At the time of their conception, all these systems were essentially intended to manage collections of material documents stored in buildings. Whereas the collections housed in individual libraries and resource institutions remained separated by significant geographic (and cultural) distances, the various classification systems in existence did not pose too many practical problems. However, now that geographically dispersed records are converging into the online world, the failure to harmonize these systems is becoming painfully clear.

Irrespective of the various documentation languages used by the administrators of major collections, each culture and each intellectual tradition and discipline—even each theory—proposes its own terminology and way of classifying concepts. As such, the way “subjects” or concepts—or language itself, for that matter—are organized constitutes an essential dimension of thought. Therefore, we cannot simply impose a particular uniform classification system in order to facilitate online research, let alone impose English as the one and only language medium. This is why we should assume that the only possible solution lies in a metalanguage capable of encoding the diversity of languages, or if you will, a system of universal semantic coordinates equipped to handle as many different classifications as necessary. By way of illustrating the inherent cultural bias of the classification systems passed down to us from the 19th and 20th centuries, let us see how Dewey’s system (the most widely used in the world) classifies the subject of “religion.”

Below are the ten subdivisions of Main Class 200 (Religion) in Dewey’s decimal classification:

- **200**: Religion
- **210**: Natural theology
- **220**: Bible
- **230**: Christian theology
- **240**: Christian moral & devotional theology
- **250**: Christian orders & local church
- **260**: Christian social theology
- **270**: Christian church history
- **280**: Christian denominations & sects
- **290**: Other & comparative religions.

The outdated ethnocentric character of Dewey’s classification system is further confirmed in the subsections of Subdivision 290 (Other religions):

- **291**: Comparative religion
- **292**: Classical (Greek & Roman) religion
- **293**: Germanic religion
- **294**: Religions of Indic origin
- **295**: Zoroastrianism (Mazdaism, Parseeism)
- **296**: Judaism
- **297**: Islam & religions originating in it
- **298**: Mormonism
- **299**: Other religions
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