

11th June 2022

Sorting

“Without a rag of a label ...”

T H Huxley, *Collected Essays, 'Agnosticism'*

A few weeks ago, I participated in an amazing event which had been suspended for two years because of the Covid-19 pandemic. This was the *Christian Aid* Book Sale in a church in the centre of Edinburgh. It's a remarkable enterprise, with two weeks of sorting the donated books, and six days of selling them during *Christian Aid* week. This year we raised over £100,000, and it was a privilege to be part of this enterprise once again.

The two weeks of sorting the books is a logistical masterclass. Books are handed in at the front door – bags, boxes and car-loads – where they're "categorised" and delivered to the appropriate section, from "Scottish" to "Law", from "Music" to "Children's", from "Classic Literature" to "History", and lots more. Not surprisingly, "Religion" is my section. And there the books are further categorised – NT, OT, Prayers, Commentaries, Church History, World Church, Bibles, and much more besides. Each category has a label, clearly indicating where a book should be deposited. And, of course, these labels direct potential purchasers to the section of their choice during the sale. Logistics ... Sorting ... Categories ... Labels ...

But what if a book doesn't fall into an obvious category? What was I to do with *Rules for Compositors and Readers*? Sort it under "Sermons" or send it back for the "Literature" section? And where was I to place *The New Testament in Pitman's Shorthand*? Drop it into the "Bibles in Other Languages" box, or take it to the Secretarial/Office department?

Some things in life, like books, can be easily categorised. But though we know that can be helpful as we group *things* together under a common label, sometimes we're too quick to use such labels for *people*, for they can unfortunately lead to unfair stereotyping. We can make too much of categories and finding "a rag of a label" when people don't easily "fit". So, let's treat them as the unique individuals they are. If we bind together with common purpose and cause, so be it. Let's make a label for that. But if we can't, let's celebrate individuality – and don't worry if *The New Testament in Pitman's Shorthand* has to begin a new category all of its own.

A prayer for today

Help me not judge a book by its cover, but to value it by the unique story it tells. Amen

An original reflection by © Tom Gordon

Also available at <https://swallowsnestnet.wordpress.com>