

# *Cultus*, *Cult*, and *Cults*

## Suggestions for revising problematic Library of Congress Subject Headings

by Jamie Carlstone and Ermine L. Algaier IV

There are 244 Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) in which the word “cult” appears in either the heading or the subject authority record, including the widely used subject heading *Cults*. Adam Paradis adeptly explains the problems with using *cult* in subject headings for religious scholarship in the blog post “A Genealogy of a Subject Heading: ‘Cults,’ New Religious Movements, and Nomenclature in the Academic Study of Religions” (2023), so we will not go into theological analysis in this article. Instead, this article will be a subject heading analysis, meant to explore the problems with and possible resolutions for the use of *cult* in LCSH.

The fluid definition of “cult” makes it a challenge to use in LCSH, a controlled vocabulary that works best when definitions are static. Originally the term was used to describe rituals in mainstream religions, like Catholicism, as well as to describe the worship practices of ancient peoples, like the Greeks and Romans. Over time, the word began to be used innocuously to describe a “collective obsession,” as occurs in particular types of fandoms such as a “cult film” (Oxford English Dictionary n.d.). However, the term takes a negative turn when used as a label for abusive behavior in a closed group, or as a pejorative or hyperbolic statement (e.g., “That gym is like a cult”). Most concerning is when the label “cult” is given to Indigenous groups in Africa, Latin America, and Asia. This delegitimizes the religious practices of people who are not white or Christian. Scholars have moved away from the use of “cult” for the preferable “New Religious Movement,” making *cult* outdated for the researchers searching our collections. Moreover, as Harris and Clark note, self-identification needs to be an important part of subject cataloging (1979, 375). Few, if any, people are calling their own religious practices a “cult.” LCSH has not kept up with these shifts in the definition of “cult,” retaining the term in many inappropriate headings. Since this is not how people self-identify, there are a large number of headings that diminish many groups as a “cult” when they should be called a religion, sect, or social movement.

### THE ORIGINS OF *CULTUS*, *CULT*, AND *CULTS* IN LCSH

It is helpful to trace the evolution of *Cults* in LCSH to understand the current problems with the terms and reveal ways that those issues might be resolved. The term *Cultus* first appears in LCSH in the first published edition in 1909 along with *Cultus, Alexandrian*; *Cultus, Assyrian-Babylonian*; *Cultus, Egyptian*; *Cultus, Greek*; *Cultus, Jewish*; and *Cultus, Roman* (Library of Congress 1909, 1:228). “Cultus” is a noun borrowed from Latin that denotes religious praxis, often in the form of worship or ceremony (Oxford English Dictionary n.d.). It is intended to describe religious action and can be applied to ancient or modern practices. While “cult” includes the meaning of “cultus,” it has the additional function of signifying group distinction. In this sense, “cult” is a collective noun based on an arbitrary sociological distinction that negatively differentiates between types of religious groups by marginalizing or stigmatizing certain groups as less religiously authentic than others. Phil Zuckerman captures this idea in the simple phrase: “One person’s religion is another person’s cult” (2003, 62). He illustrates this point by explaining how bizarre and cult-like an evangelical service could appear to someone who has only experienced Catholic mass. Reciprocally, the

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somberness of the Catholic mass may seem odd and unnerving to an individual who has only been exposed to evangelical worship.

**Cultus.**  
*See also* Shrines.  
**Cultus, Alexandrian.**  
 Assyro-Babylonian.  
 Egyptian.  
 Greek.  
*See also* Eleusinian mysteries; Oracles, Greek.  
 Jewish.  
 Roman.  
*See also* Augustales.

Figure 1: The subject headings using the term *Cultus* in the 1909 edition of LCSH

In 1975, *Cult* was added as an LCSH term with *see also from* references: *Cultus*, *Religion*, *Ritual*, and *Worship* (Library of Congress 1975, 1:473). From these terms, we can deduce that *Cult* was intended to describe works on religious practice, related to *Cultus*. It would appear that in 1975, LCSH was trying to acknowledge the distinction between *Cultus* and *Cult* by using both terms.

**Cult (BL600)**  
*sa* Ritual  
*xx* Cultus  
 Religion  
 Ritual  
 Worship

Figure 2: The record for *Cult* as it appears in the 1975 edition of LCSH

In 1980, another term, *Cults*, was established with a scope note: “Works on groups or movements whose system of religious beliefs or practices differs significantly from the major world religions and which are often gathered around a specific deity or person.” It has *see also* terms *Nativistic movements*, *Obeah (Cult)*, and *Sects*, as well as a *see from* term: *Religions, Modern* (Library of Congress 1980, 1:600–601). From the scope note and *see also/from* terms, it appears *Cults* was intended to fill the gap where a subject was needed to describe modern cult groups and new religious movements. This makes sense, because the surge in cult movements during the 1960s and 1970s, like Peoples Temple and the Manson Family, would lead to works published in the 1980s.

**Cults** (*Indirect*)  
 Here are entered works on groups or movements whose system of religious beliefs or practices differs significantly from the major world religions and which are often gathered around a specific deity or person.  
 Works on the major world religions are entered under Religions.  
 Works on religious groups whose adherents recognize special teachings or practices which fall within the normative bounds of the major world religions are entered under Sects.

sa Nativistic movements  
 Obeah (Cult)  
 Sects

x Religions, Modern

xx Religions  
 Sects

Figure 3: The record for *Cults* as it appears in the 1980 edition of LCSH

By the mid-1980s, LCSH had three terms: *Cultus*, *Cult*, and *Cults*. This is not ideal for disambiguation, particularly given the subtle difference between *Cult* and *Cults*. Understandably, LCSH revised the terms again in 1986, likely to consolidate all concepts under one term and to roll off the use of the archaic-sounding term *cultus* (Library of Congress 1986, 1:811–813). However, this revision created our current problem, because all three terms were consolidated despite being about different things. It brought new religions and cult movements (cataloged as *Cults*) under the same heading as ritual religious practice and groups (*Cultus* and *Cult*). This creates a challenge for us to revise or split the term today. If we revise *Cults* to *New religious movements*, we will inevitably attach *New religious movements* to ancient groups and works on religious worship, breaking the subject analysis on thousands of works. If we retain or split the term, we are continuing to use *cult* in cases where it is inappropriate and offensive.

There are forty subject authority records constructed with *Cults* subdivided by another term (e.g., *Cults—New York (State)* and *Cults—Greece*). One approach would be to identify the subdivided headings that are likely about ancient groups, like *Cults—Greece*, and change the string to *Greece—Religion*. Headings such as *Cults—United States* can be changed to *New religious movements—United States* (we can assume that any cult in the United States is a new religious movement, given the age of the country). The biggest challenge is addressing records in which *Cults* is the subject with no specific subdivision terms. This is an area where automation that looks at other data in the whole record could help identify whether *New religious movements*, *Sect*, or *Religion* would be the accurate subject.

## **CULTS AND CULT AS QUALIFIER AND BROADER TERM**

Beyond the main heading, *cult* or *cults* is used in hundreds of records, either in the heading or the authority record (e.g., *Hindu cults*, *Bizango (Cult)*, *Ex-cultists*, etc.). There are too many headings to analyze each one for this article. Instead, we selected five examples that capture the issue with *cults* in LCSH. The free-floating subdivision *Cult* (e.g., *Jesus Christ—Cult*) is not covered because this paper is focused on religious movements. However, it will require future discussion and a resolution. The following examples are representative of the issues found in the records and demonstrate the need to address each example of *cults* as unique. Research for this section includes a search of the subject heading in OCLC Connexion and the Library of Congress Catalog to see how the subject is used in bibliographic records. None of these suggestions are final and may change when proposals are submitted to the Library of Congress.

### *Afro-Brazilian Cults*

According to *Subject Headings Manual H 1997—Religion*, we should “assign the free-floating subdivision —*Religion* under headings for individual ethnic groups, including groups of Indians, for works on the religion of these groups” (Library of Congress 2020). The subject string *Black people—Brazil—Religion* would be preferable to changing this to *Afro-Brazilian religions*, according to this policy. However, *Afro-Brazilian religion* is a commonly used term and therefore might be better for scholarly research. A search of OCLC returns 937 results for “Afro-Brazilian religions,” signaling the term’s popularity. The broader term *Cults* in the authority record would also be replaced with the preferable *Brazil—Religion*.

### *Crucifiés (Cult)*

This heading is not being used by any records in OCLC, although there is a work cataloged in the subject authority record for a French language book *L’Affaire des Crucifiés* (2013) by Raymond Ouimet. In OCLC the subjects on *L’Affaire des Crucifiés* are *Sects—Quebec (Province)* and *Quebec (Province)—Religion*. After consulting *L’Affaire des Crucifiés*, we noted that Ouimet included a French translation of the definition of “cults (secte)” from *Cults: Questions and Answers* by Michael D. Langone (2013, 20), indicating Ouimet’s intent to categorize the group as a “cult.” This heading could be canceled or changed to a name authority record using the more precise *Secte des Crucifiés* or *Mission des Crucifiés*, which is how the group is named in the text.

### *Hoodoo (Cult)*

This case can be resolved by removing (*Cult*) and leaving the heading as *Hoodoo*, because it does not require a qualifier to distinguish the term from another. It also better aligns the heading with the pattern established by the LCSH terms *Vodou* and *Santeria*. This straightforward approach can be used for many of the headings where *cult* was added as a qualifier in parentheses, since a qualifier is not needed to disambiguate from other terms.

### *Ifa (Religion)*

*Ifa (Cult)* was revised in 2010 to change the qualifier from *Cult* to *Religion*. This provides us with a precedent for using *Religion* as the qualifying term instead of *Cult* in other records. This record will still require revision as a part of this project because there are broader terms listed in the authority record: *Afro-Caribbean cults* and *Cults—Africa, West*, which will hopefully be revised too. While

many headings can have their qualifier removed, like *Hoodoo*, there are others where it is still needed. For example, *Batuque (Cult)* will need a qualifier to disambiguate it from *Batuque music*.

### *Lemba (Cult)*

There are two Lemba groups in Africa: one in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and the other in South Africa. This heading is for the group in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, based on its broader terms. LCSH already distinguishes between these two groups by directing the Democratic Republic of the Congo Lemba to *Kela (African people)*, while the South African Lemba are listed as *Lemba (South African people)*. There are only nine works with the heading *Lemba (Cult)* in OCLC, so the term could be canceled and directed to *Kela (African people)—Religion* in line with the *Subject Headings Manual H 1997*. Using *Kela* is consistent with the way LCSH disambiguates the Lemba (South Africa) and the Kela (Democratic Republic of the Congo) in other terms.

## CONCLUSION

LCSH's use of *cults* is messy and inconsistent—much like the use of the term in our society. This article is meant to be a stepping-off point for doing the work to revise the headings. While daunting, the cleanup is necessary and can provide us with opportunities to address inaccuracies and offensive language in the authority records and subject terms. We are working with the Library of Congress Policy, Training, and Cooperative Programs (LC/PTCP) Division to revise *cult* headings proposals. The next steps of the project will involve revising the headings in several stages to manage the large number of records impacted by the changes made to different religious groups and practices. The goal is to vastly reduce the use of *cult* in LCSH and, in cases where it is still used, make sure it is appropriate and respectful to the groups being described.

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