

From Religion Class to Religion Classification and Back Again: Religious Diversity and Library of Congress Classification

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ABSTRACT This article addresses the gap between recent scholarly critiques of the broader categorization of religion and the persistence of those categories in the LC classification system. On one hand, since recent scholarly critiques of the category of religion have generally not escaped the ivory tower, the application of these critiques to LC classification functions as a helpful test of the practical viability of these critiques. On the other hand, these critiques expose significant bias in the LC classification of religion that needs to be addressed. Through this novel conversation, this article articulates two possible revision suggestions to the B class and subclasses that would distance the system of categorization from those troubling politics and better reflect the full diversity of human cultural expressions.

INTRODUCTION

“What is the definition of religion?” Professors often begin introductions to religious studies by posing this question to their classes. The exercise continues as the professor raises critiques and counter-critiques of the various suggestions raised by the students (i.e., “Would that definition not make seemingly ‘non-religious’ things religion, or vice-versa?”), until the students either learn the value of nuanced critique or simply become frustrated by the process (likely both). At the end of the class, when the students are exhausted by every possible definition suffering from problems, the professor chuckles and exclaims “See how difficult this field of study can be?” and the following session, the class moves on as though the problematizing class had never happened.

This state of intentional amnesia is not confined to the classroom, as many religion scholars often cite with gleeful delight the original critique of the modern category of religion, W. C. Smith’s 1953 text *The Meaning and End of Religion*, only to move on as though it were never written. This passing invocation makes it seem as though Smith’s (1991) body of work only reflects the difficult complexity and insight of the field, rather than a central, perhaps inescapable, problem at the heart of it (1–14). Anecdotally, we have also found that many librarians share this approach to the problems in the categorization of religion; while many metadata librarians and catalogers are aware of some of the issues in the categorization of religion reflected in Library of Congress classification and subject headings, they have usually ignored the idea that dominant categorizations of religion (shared by many metadata schemes) might be inherently problematic.

And yet, the categorization of religion should not be understood as a harmless exercise that can be largely ignored. Recent scholarly critics of the category of religion have demonstrated that dominant categorizations of religion have disturbing political legacies that live on today. In particular, they argue that the 19th-century emergence of the modern essentialized assumptions that religions necessarily include “sacred texts,” “foundational beliefs,” and “soteriologies,” are intrinsically linked to American and European colonial efforts to simultaneously privilege Christianity and otherize colonized peoples as “heathens” not conforming to these religious norms.

By the end of the 19th century, just as these modern conceptions of religion had taken full shape, Herbert Putnam and many others began to develop the Library of Congress classification scheme. The B class (philosophy and religion) was formed at the height of the colonial era and deeply reflects the politics of this era even today. Given this reality, this article provides an overview of the relevant academic litera-

ture on this topic, an assessment of the essential problems at the heart of the LC classification of religion, and two options for revising the B class in order to make it reflect the full diversity of human cultural expressions better.

LITERATURE REVIEW

While the LC classification system has had progressive critics from its very origins, Sanford Berman was the first to systematically evaluate the ethical and political flaws in the classification system pertaining to race, gender, class, religion, and ethnocentrism in his now classic 1971 text *Prejudices and Antipathies* (15–24). In the book, Berman argues that LC classification and LC subject headings (LCSH) are culturally biased to favor the perspectives of white Christian men while further marginalizing already marginalized groups. Beyond rejecting stereotypes and insulting language, Berman’s (1971) primary method of critique is pointing out inconsistencies in LC classification and LCSH that suggest bias; for instance, at the time of writing, he noted that while the LCSH included “Women in the Bible,” it did not include “Men in the Bible” (Berman 1971, 203). These inconsistencies indicate that a particular group—white Christian men—are the assumed norm that need not be verbally contextualized; in this specific case (now changed), the general categories pertaining to characters in the Bible were assumed by default to include just men. Berman also critiques several seemingly general categories that are more contextually specific than the categories make them appear; for instance, “religious education” as a category effectively just included materials on Christian education at the time, but the category made it appear more universal than it actually was (Berman 1971, 82). Berman proposes several concrete solutions to these issues by suggesting that the specific categories pertaining to only marginalized groups should be deleted (if they are unnecessarily negative) or mirror categories should be created for the equivalent dominant groups that sufficiently contextualize those groups.

Since the publication of *Prejudices and Antipathies*, most critics of LC classification and LCSH have ignored religion and focused on rethinking LC classification concerning the topics of race, gender, culture, and sexuality instead.¹ Since Berman, Hope Olson has been the leader in critiquing LC classification. She has rethought the LCSH through a postcolonial lens, reflected on how library classification systems can adequately represent otherness, critiqued the overall patriarchal framework of LC classification for assuming a universal system of representation, reconsidered how LC classification could affirm the agency of marginalized groups by drawing upon the resources of third-wave feminist thought, and argued that one of the primary methods to solve the political issues in LC classification is to further cultivate diversity among catalogers (Olson 2000; 2001a; 2001b; 2002; 2007). Olson’s deconstructive projects are always closely linked to reconstructive projects that reflect several various ways systems of classification can be changed to more adequately represent diverse groups.

The literature specifically on religion and LC classification is fairly limited. While the critics that have focused on gender, sexuality, and race have argued for reform within the LC classification system, information science critics focusing on religion have simply rejected the LC classification system entirely for alternate systems more sensitive to non-Christian religious traditions. While Christian theological classification schemes once used in many church and seminary libraries have generally fallen into disuse with the rise of standardized digital records, David Elazar (2008) notes that many synagogues and rabbinical schools still use Elazar (a system developed by his brother) and other classification systems specifically tailored to Judaism because of Christian bias inherent in LC classification. Similarly, while most mosques and Islamic schools use expanded versions of LC and Dewey classification, Haroon Idrees (2012) discovered that a substantial majority of Muslim librarians he surveyed believed that these settings would benefit from “new, independent” classification systems designed for the needs of Muslims communities (Idrees 2012, 179–80). Idrees concludes that standard cataloging systems (like LC classification) too often misrepresent Islam because of Western biases.

Turning to religious studies, as we mentioned previously, Smith is generally understood as the progenitor of the modern critiques of the category of religion. While most of his critiques of the category are logical and epistemological, Smith (1991) makes political critiques of the category as well when he notes that the common assumption that religions are essentially textual cultures is a misguided byproduct of a biased Christian-Protestant perspective (1–14). Realistically, however, Talal Asad is responsible for the emergence of significant extended political critiques of the category of religion. At the time Asad wrote his now classic book *Genealogies of Religion* (1993), Clifford Geertz' anthropological theory of religion as cultural structures of meaning-making was not only dominant, but understood to finally escape the Christian origins of the field of religious studies and achieve completely secular, unbiased neutrality. For Geertz (1973), the phrase *meaning-making* designates a universal cultural structure that could be termed “religion” without being culturally bound like earlier scholarly assumptions that religion was essentially about God or even belief. Asad (1993) responds to Geertz' famous notion of religion by arguing that the definition of religion as cultural structures of meaning-making is just as culturally bound as earlier definitions and still privileges Christian concepts. The concept of meaning-making, Asad notes, is inherently a cognitive enterprise that, while potentially describing practices and rituals in the world, still falls back on the assumption that religion begins in the mind, i.e. belief. Asad argues that this universalizes a Christian concept (religion primarily concerns the internal life of humans) and then disguises this universalization under seemingly neutral and secular language. Given the interrelated histories of the terms, Asad troublingly concludes that the universalization of Christianity might be endemic to the category of religion itself (Asad 1993, 54).

While Asad's specific and narrow critique had a significant effect on a discipline that had relied on Geertz' theory for two decades, his broader point about the common historical concealment of scholars smuggling Christian concepts within the seemingly neutral category of religion set off a firestorm of more recent scholarly critiques of the category of religion along similar lines. Timothy Fitzgerald (2000) argues that the scholarly assumption that religion and ethnicity are separate categories is closely linked to modern Christian conceptions of the universality and unembodied-ness of religion in comparison to conceptions of ethnicity. Tomoko Masuzawa (2005) suggests that the modern emergence of the category of world religions was a byproduct of rising Christian anxiety over a growing awareness of cultural diversity with the rise of globalization; while Christianity became only one religion among many, several Christian concepts were preserved in universal form by the scholarly claim that all world religions shared them in common (beginning, but not ending, with theism). Daniel Dubuisson (2003) argues that the “science of religion” gave new authority and credence to particular Christian claims in new garb. David Chidester (1996) claims that the modern categorization of religions (and non-religious or proto-religious “savages”) provided support for Western colonial efforts in seemingly more subtle language than the vocabulary of overt Christian evangelization.

Of particular importance for this project is the shared feature across the literature that the critics of the category of religion have not considered how people outside the discipline should alter their approach given these critiques. J. Z. Smith (2004), Russell T. McCutcheon (1997), and Timothy Fitzgerald (2000) all claim that the modern concept of religion is scholarly in nature and, therefore, it can be simply reconstructed to fit less problematic ends (Smith 2004) or scrapped entirely (McCutcheon 1997 and Fitzgerald 2000) without concern for the wider effects of such decisions. For the most part, Masuzawa (2005), Asad (1993), and Dubuisson (2003) simply engage in projects of pure deconstruction without positive practical proposals for reconceptualizing religion in response to those critiques. These authors limit their conclusions to the academic discipline itself. And yet, the academy is not separate from the rest of the world; the ways people conceptualize religion impacts much outside the classroom—including something as seemingly innocuous as where someone might find a book.

Given the different gaps in the literature of both religious studies and information studies, the question is relatively simple: can these two fields mutually benefit each other by being placed together in conversation over the topic of recent critiques of the category of religion?

ANALYSIS

While Berman and subsequent critics of the LC classification of religion have generally focused on providing a list of individual line problems in the classification system, in this article, we consider broader issues that permeate entire sections of the LC classification of religion—individual line edits will not address these problems. In light of recent critiques of the category of religion from religious studies scholars, we identify three significant problems in the LC classification of religion that must be addressed: unequal real estate, ethnocentric category boundaries, and assumed universal categories.

The real estate problem in the B class is easy to identify even at a glance of the LC classification tables, and we are hardly the first to recognize this issue. In the B classification alone, Christianity has four different full subclasses (BR, BT, BV, and BX) mostly by itself in addition to several other more general subclasses it shares with other traditions (BF, BH, BJ, BL, BS). In terms of overall real estate, Judaism and Buddhism are second with one full subclass each (BM and BQ respectively) in addition to the other shared subclasses. Islam shares a subclass with several other traditions (BP). Other traditions have even less classification space; Wicca, for instance, has one shared call number (BP 605 W.53). Many so-called “indigenous” traditions are not even contained within the B classification. Many religious traditions are categorized by region (Hinduism, Jainism, Sikhism) within a small range of call numbers.

Some might suggest that there are good reasons for this inequality in classificatory real estate. For example, someone might suggest that the classification system simply reflects publication numbers; this person might argue that more classification space for Christianity is a product of more books on Christianity on more varied topics. Such a point is ultimately misguided. To our knowledge, no one has done a numerical analysis on the amount of books on different religious traditions, so any argument along these lines is speculative at best. Even as speculation, there are good reasons to be suspicious that classification real estate is equitably split up based on publication numbers. By sheer number of adherents, Islam is only slightly smaller than Christianity and is roughly four times the size of Buddhism. Islam also has a longer history of more widespread religious literacy than both Christianity and Buddhism. However, Islam shares one class with several other religious traditions. We should resist the urge to assume that Christianity is the most prolific religious tradition simply because it has played a privileged role in Western history.² Assumptions rooted in privilege are precisely what caused the LC classification issues pertaining to religion in the first place. Even if the LC classification system had been accurately based on publication numbers at one time, such an approach raises difficult problems for future classification. As the proportion of texts on different religions changes, should librarians continually reassign classification real estate based on new publication information? If so, how can librarians be expected to undertake the nearly impossible task of constantly assessing and reassigning classification real estate? If not, why should classification real estate be based on one arbitrary moment in time?

While most catalogers are aware of the disproportionate assignment of classification real estate pertaining to religion, we suspect most dismiss the issue (or hold it at a distance) as a relatively harmless product of a less “enlightened” time—the notion being that addressing this problem would simply not be worth the effort. After all, one of the strengths of the LC classification system is that particular classifications can be nearly infinitely expanded through cutters and decimals. Practically, librarians can get around the fact that Wicca effectively has only one shared call number by just expanding that territory again and again through cutters and new decimals. In reality (if not in the abstract LC classification tables), in some libraries, books on Wicca and books on Christianity might take up the same physical space and still be discoverable despite the latter having significantly more classification real estate.

The problem with this approach is that it assumes classification systems should only be evaluated based on their ability to assist in practical discovery of particular items.³ Classification systems also both reflect and reinforce particular ideologies and cultural structures; before dismissing concerns over the political effects of classification with a wave of a hand, we should—at the very least—interrogate those political effects so that we know what they are. Privilege and bias function best when they are invisible.

Librarians' obligations to patrons go beyond the topic of practical discovery—librarians are also responsible to patrons for the political and moral ramifications of their work.

When we interrogate the real estate issue with recent critiques of the category of religion in mind, we discover that the problem runs deeper than being a simple artifact of a less educated or multicultural context. Even today, the significant discrepancy in real estate reinforces imperialistic and colonial representational ideals of different religious traditions. On one hand, Christianity and, to a lesser degree, other “more tolerated” religious traditions are represented through classification as immensely complex and rich traditions with significant range and diversity. On the other hand, other religious traditions are essentialized and otherized through their limited classification. Wicca is represented as lacking the diversity and complexity that would require more in-depth classification. Other religious traditions, like Hinduism, are classified as geographically confined and limited; Christianity is culturally diverse with global ambitions, while Hinduism and “indigenous” religious traditions are represented as being culturally and geographically bound with little justification.

The classification system assumes Christianity as the norm for defining religion. Other religious traditions are placed on the classification map based on their political and conceptual similarity to Christianity; as Masuzawa (2005) and Chidester (1996) have both noted, at varying times, religions and cultures understood to be threats to colonial enterprises have been represented as very different from Christianity in order to justify imperial expansion. Christianity is the classificatory center, and the traditions that have been pushed further to the conceptual periphery for various reasons receive less classification real estate. In a way, the LC classification of religion incarnates a kind of colonial utopia. In reality, colonized peoples have resisted the territorial expansion of Western empires. In the life of the mind and classification, information science scholars could rewrite the world to fit their political and religious desires. They could mask and conceal diversity that did not suit them, and enhance the diversity of their own culture and religion. While different colonial empires have risen and fallen since the creation of LC classification, the inequality in real estate in the LC classification of religion still contributes to a privileged ethnocentric logic that persists through today. One need not go any further than the abundance of media presentations of “the fanatical Muslim” as the *essence* of Islam in order to see that this logic operates today as much as it did a century ago. Far from being simply an inconvenient artifact of earlier times, the inequality in classification real estate is far more troubling. It suggests that colonial politics are still very influential today, and librarians continue to be complicit in these politics in part through the classification of religion.

The role the LC classification of religion continues to play in colonial politics is broader than just the issue of real estate. As we noted in our literature review, recent critics have noted that the category of religion also relies on several seemingly arbitrary boundaries between various categories. For example, the common separation between religion and culture privileges Christian aspirations of being culturally universal and marginalizes other traditions under the assumption that they are culturally bound. In many cases, as Chidester (1996) notes, the value of different colonized peoples (like colonized African groups) has been questioned by denying that they have religion at all. The idea that these groups do not have easily recognizable religion has been used to justify efforts to ‘civilize’ them or attempt to eliminate them entirely. We can recognize the byproducts of this notion in the LC classification of religion. Beyond the religious traditions that are listed under different regions, some native groups (like American Indians) are not classified at all in the B class. Instead, they are classified by region and culture under E and F (pertaining to American history). Beyond a few minor exceptions, a survey of the LC classification of religion would leave the reader with the idea that American Indians are not religious. The overall picture the B class paints is that some are religious and others are not; again, the traditions that are classified under religion share the most in common (conceptually or politically) with Christianity and various historical Western colonial interests.

Category boundaries pertaining to religion invoked by the LC classification system also privilege Christianity in other ways. Historically, modern Western Christianity is truthfully the outlier for representing itself as being distinct from its surrounding culture. Fitzgerald (2000) notes that in most cases, “religions”

and “cultures” are not so easily separable, nor do they purport to be. This distinction emerged in modern Western history due to a number of factors including modern Christian global aspirations to spread Christianity across cultures to an unparalleled degree in addition to the rise of modern secularism. Even other evangelizing traditions like Buddhism have not relied upon such a distinction until very recently. For most of Buddhist history, Buddhism has fused with local cultures to create a unique cultural-religious product in each location. In these cases, religion and culture are not easily separable (Fitzgerald 2000). Unfortunately, the LC classification of religion leads us to believe that the norm for religion (defined by Christianity) is that it is easily separable from culture and that traditions that do not fit this norm are aberrations. Why are culture, region, race, and ethnicity understood to be essential in the categorization of certain traditions (Hinduism, Jainism, etc.) and not others (Christianity, Buddhism, etc.)? In this way, the category boundary between “culture” and “religion” that so much of the LC classification of religion relies on is hardly arbitrary—it favors Christian self-understandings and interests over others.

The culture-religion category boundary is hardly the only boundary in the LC classification of religion that accomplishes this goal. For example, several classifications rely on a distinction between religion and superstition, another binary that plays an essential role in Christian supremacy. A litany of practices, beliefs, and narratives commonly considered non-normative by mainstream Christianity are classed under the pejoratively named “Occult sciences” classification under BF. While many of these practices, beliefs, and narratives have played an important role in the lived religious lives of many Christians, the classificatory distinction between mainstream Christianity (and normative religion more broadly) and “superstition” or the “occult” serves to reinforce the rational authority of Christianity in the face of critiques from the sciences. The distinction also helps to create an idyllic self-image of Christianity in juxtaposition to several practices, beliefs, and narratives that have been historically understood in much of Christian history to be dangerous, threatening, and anti-Christian. Truthfully, there is little classificatory reason why all the “occult” practices (from ghost belief to fortune-telling) are grouped together besides their negative relationship to mainstream Christianity. The category is based upon Christianity being the default epistemic position. Certainly, the “occult” for other traditions would necessarily be a different list of practices, beliefs, and narratives. Furthermore, one person’s “occult” is another person’s religious life.⁴

Finally, beyond these binaries, the recent critiques of the category of religion also show us another central flaw in the LC classification of religion—it commonly represents Christian notions as religiously universal regardless of empirical evidence. For example, the multi-subclass model for Christianity (BR-history, BS-texts, BT-theology, BV-practical theology, BX-ecclesiology) is often repeated in microcosm for other religious traditions as though all religions share these features in common (for example BQ Buddhism has primary categories in “history,” “literature,” “doctrinal and systematic Buddhism,” “practice,” and “schools”). In many cases, however, religious traditions do not have texts or formal institutions and, in even more cases, different traditions have these features but they hardly make up some of the most central aspects of those traditions. For example, it is only in recent history that texts became more central to the majority of Buddhists’ religious lives (in part due to Western colonial influence) (Masuzawa 2005). By structurally defining religion through seemingly universal classification based on Christian categories, Christianity becomes the norm by which all other traditions are judged. Aspects of other religious traditions (and even Christianity itself) that do not easily fit into one of these categories are made invisible, while a fundamentally political claim is made about what characteristics primarily define a religion. In some cases, entire religious traditions (mostly “indigenous” religious traditions) are rendered invisible in the B class because they do not conform to any of these characteristics.

To be fair, the LC classification of religion does attempt to address this problem through the BL subclass—the supposed location for all religious traditions and topics that do not fit easily into another B subclass. This subclass does contain significant diversity within it—particularly within BL660–2680 (“history and principles of religions”), a section that is designed to cover the entirety of global religious history from the very beginning of humanity. Many indigenous religious groups are disturbingly contained within this section because they are understood to be part of “primitive” religious history on a simplistic

linear evolutionary model that leads up to modern Western Christianity. More troubling, however, is that the BL subclass extends Christian ideas through seemingly secular categories. The BL class is generally broken up into a variety of topics from “Natural theology” to “Eschatology.” Christians universalized Christian concepts like these under the garb of “religion” beginning in the 19th century, in the face of new awareness of cultural multiplicity (Masuzawa 2005). Many of these concepts were woodenly imposed on various religious and cultural traditions around the world in order to epistemologically justify Christian claims. Scholars attempted to silence doubts in the existence of the Christian God, Masuzawa (2005) suggests, by presenting belief in God as a cultural universal. As an extension of these historical efforts, the BL subclass presents itself as a list of the defining features of religion and, unsurprisingly, Christianity possesses all of those characteristics. The idea that the LC classification of religion would include major categories for concepts that apply to many religious traditions besides Christianity in non-pejorative fashion is simply unthinkable. Like with Asad’s (1993) critique of Geertz, even the supposedly secular notions of religion (like the LC classification of religion), ultimately privilege Christian worldviews. The LC classification of religion undergirds explicitly Christian theological claims through the presentation of these religious “universals.” In this way, we might even say that the LC classification of religion—in that it makes contested and contestable claims about religion—is itself inherently a Christian theological enterprise.

This analysis of the LC classification of religion has demonstrated that recent critiques of the category of religion not only can be applied to this classification system but also reveal that political flaws can be traced throughout that system all the way to the foundation. However, given how integrated these problems are into the very bedrock of the B class, we might honestly wonder if it is possible to rectify these issues without scrapping the system entirely and beginning from scratch. The real test of the recent critiques of the category of religion is not so much evaluating whether they can reveal problems in the LC classification of religion, so much as whether they can help us discover practical moral solutions to those problems.

TWO CONSTRUCTIVE PROPOSALS

In the previous section, we identified three problems in the LC classification of religion: unequal real estate, ethnocentric category boundaries, and assumed universal categories. The question remains: to what extent can these problems be addressed without scrapping the system entirely? Some issues can be addressed relatively easily by renaming many of the worst pejorative classification titles (such as BL 1000–2370 “Asian. Oriental” and BF 1404–2055 “Occult Sciences”). However, rebranding alone cannot fully address the structural issues at the foundation of the LC Classification of religion. Below we propose two potential solutions for consideration that strive to be both practical and responsible.

One option would be to engage in targeted and limited shifting of the most problematic sections. Many religious traditions that only get small sections of an individual subclass could be moved to a new subclass (with plenty of letters in the alphabet). Wicca, Neopaganism, and other so-called earth traditions could have their own subclass (BG “Earth Religions”). Theosophy could be moved to a more relevant section (like the currently named “Occult” section), so that Islam would have most of a single subclass. Many of the subclasses on Christianity could be combined into joint subclasses (BR, BX, and potentially some of BS could be merged into one subclass “Christian history,” and BT and BV could be merged into one subclass “Christian theology”) to make classificatory space for other traditions. If all of Wicca can fit into a single range of call numbers, Christianity should easily be able to fit into two subclasses. Decimal places can always be expanded to provide more space, and several of the current subclasses on Christianity do not even use all or even most of the numerical range provided (for example, BR does not even go above 2000). Section shifting could also break up the problematic localization of only some religious traditions—Hinduism could be moved to a new subclass (such as BK “Hinduism”), and most of the BL subclass that is split up by region could be split up completely. Sections problematically not originally included in the

LC B classification (American Indian religions) could be moved into B classification (perhaps as part of a new BZ “Indigenous Religions” subclass).

Even though this proposal requires more radical changes than simply revising classification names, it is still relatively manageable. While entire sections would move under this proposal, for the most part, these sections would remain intact. The order would remain the same and sections would remain together—simply in different sections. In other words, the proposal would function like an “airlift” for various call number ranges. Many books would have to receive new call numbers, but the actual changes would require relatively little mentally demanding work. The structural reordering of the entire B class would free up new real estate and help decenter Christianity from the classification system without calling for radical alterations to the original system.

Of course, this proposal would leave the microstructures of individual sections mostly intact; as such, Christian ethnocentric assumptions about the presumed nature of religion that permeate individual sections on other religious traditions would remain largely unchanged. How might we address this particular problem?

Our second proposal addresses this problem by calling for radical shifting based on alternate approaches to the classification of religion designed to decenter Christianity within the category of religion. Rather than follow the model of classifying various religious traditions by mostly Christian concepts (theology, scripture, eschatology, etc.) as the primary organizing principle, the B class could be organized by a different foundational organizing principle less bound to Christianity. While several options might work, the easiest to implement might be an organizing principle that the LC classification already uses in part—region. Most sections could be reorganized and reclassified by region of thought or topic. As we have already noted, several sections are already ordered this way with rather problematic Christocentric results. The only Christian sections organized by region relate to history; other religious traditions are completely organized by region. For example, BL 1100–1295 covers “Hinduism” as a subclass of “Asian. Oriental” religions. BL660–2680 (“History and principles of religions”) is subclassified by racial and regional demarcations (including “Indo-European. Aryan,” “Mediterranean region,” “African,” “American,” among others) that are rooted in 19th-century colonialism. However, the problem with this approach is not the regionalization itself; it is the inconsistent use of regionalization justified by scientific racism. In fact, if most sections were contextualized by region, not only would the approach be made more consistent, but it would also deconstruct the Christian universals embedded into so much of the LC classification of religion. The overall structure of the B class could be left intact with smaller alterations to many of the individual categories in different subclasses to more consistently apply the use of region for classifying religion. For example, BT “Doctrinal Theology” is primarily divided by conceptual distinctions (like “Christology,” and “Creation,”); instead, BT could be primarily divided by origin of thought (like “Doctrinal Theology. Africa.” And “Doctrinal Theology. Europe”) with secondary conceptual distinctions. Nothing is presumed to be universal if it is contextualized.

Another option would be to scrap most of the current subclasses and create new primary subclasses framed around region. Imagine, for instance, the B class redesigned such that “Religion in India,” “Religion in Africa,” “Religion in America,” and “Religion in Europe” were primary subclasses designed to be far more inclusive of all the texts related to those regions and not simply some arbitrary subset. Each of these regions could include subclasses for different traditions in these areas, such as, “Religion in India. Christianity” and “Religion in India. Islam,” in turn further divided by religious aspects like “texts” and “doctrine” when applicable.

While such a proposal might sound like starting from scratch, much of the work for such an undertaking is already done. Many non-Western, non-Christian classifications are already separated by region. In these cases, these classifications would simply have to be reevaluated, retailored, and moved to new locations. Only non-contextualized classifications would have to be completely reworked. The overall order and real estate of the B class would also need to be reworked, but, like in our earlier proposal, in most cases this would simply entail giving books new call numbers. The regional basis of religion is already

an aspect of the LC classification of religion; this proposal would simply rework the B class to be more consistently built around region. Making the contextual origin of knowledge more transparent in the classification system would also likely be helpful to many library users in their search for information.

All classification systems have their flaws, and radically reorganizing the B class by region of thought or topic would certainly create new problems. (What about books that discuss multiple regions? What about books that originated one place but discuss another area? What about concerns related to the segregation of knowledge? What about books that complicate the idea of an original location altogether?) However, such a proposal would go the furthest in decentering Christianity within the B class by reworking the classification system to address unequal real estate, ethnocentric category boundaries, and assumed universal categories.

These proposals do not claim to be perfect or to represent all of the reasonable options at hand. Truthfully, even simple language revision would help. Recent critiques of the category of religion can lead to practical improvements in the LC classification of religion. These critiques fail if they aim for the perfect system. There is no such thing. And yet, if we balance these critiques with the practical concerns of information science, we can see that there are in fact potential solutions.

For some, any project designed to decenter Christianity in any relevant context will appear to be hostile criticism and inherently anti-Christian. And yet, projects designed to decenter Christianity in these sectors are necessary partly because this illusory appearance is itself a manifestation of a privileged tradition. Challenging privilege is not marginalization; it is rectification. Berman (1971) famously wrote that *Prejudices and Antipathies* was not an “attack” on anyone—instead the book was an urgent “plea for finally grappling with a significant matter—the reexamination of inherited assumptions and underlying values” (Berman 1971, 19).

CONCLUSION

This article weighs two of the highest conflicting goods at the heart of classification and metadata as such: practicality and just representation. In this balancing act, there are no perfect solutions, only solutions that walk the fine line between pragmatism and ethics. The helpful, if flawed, suggestions we propose follow this simple truth; while they fix some problems, neither of them fix all of the problems in the LC classification of religion, and, if adopted, they will necessarily create new unanticipated problems as well. The goal is to not aim for perfection—the goal is to aim for improvement. We do not understand our solutions to be definitive; we understand them to be conversation starters on a topic not discussed nearly enough. Rather than attempt to be exhaustive in our discussion of the problems with the LC classification of religion or the solutions to those problems, like Berman (1971), we have understood that “...[t]he cited examples and complaints may well be multiplied, and perhaps even more penetratingly analyzed, by an alert and sensitive profession” (19). The community is the solution.

Ultimately, the endless problems of representation might lead one to believe that the ultimate end of all metadata projects is paralysis. That idea could not be further from the truth. Of course, metadata always entails Sisyphean tasks. New solutions to old problems will often cause new problems. Perfection is not the goal; it cannot be, because perfection is impossible in the world of metadata. The real goal of metadata is to keep the conversations going—always aiming uphill. As we mentioned in the introduction, for too long, religious studies and information science scholars have referenced problems with the categorization of religion as an amusing parlor trick only to move on with their (metadata) lives. This information amnesia must end.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Interestingly, in a retrospective on *Prejudices and Antipathies* three decades later, Steven A. Knowlton (2005) notes that while LC classification has adopted most of Berman's suggested changes pertaining to race, gender, culture, and sexuality, religion classification largely remains the same (123–45).
- 2 Arguing that such Christian-centricity is justified because most texts related to religion written in English pertain to Christianity simply supports one form of bias with another—linguistic bias. LC Classification was not designed to only classify English-language texts, many library collections around the world that use LC classification are not primarily in English, and even though the LC classification system itself is primarily in English, this fact alone does not justify bias toward favoring English-language texts within this system. Similarly, justifying the Christian-centricity of LC Classification by appealing to speculation about the religious background of library users is also misguided. While the majority of library users in particular institutions might be Christian, the majority of library users in LC libraries in general likely are not. Furthermore, even if the majority of LC library users were Christian, affirming any classification system that is biased toward the majority without consideration of minority groups is inherently problematic. Finally, assuming Christian library users *en masse* would prefer a classification system biased toward Christianity is not only essentialist but disrespectful to Christians.
- 3 Some also might argue that LC classification issues disappear with the rise of digital formats. In reality, however, the cataloging of digital items is still heavily dependent on the overall information architecture of LC classification (necessary for features like virtual browsing), and even newer metadata schemas designed for digital formats often still use LCSH and LC classification.
- 4 It is easy to imagine that, for some person in the world, given her particular background and assumptions, mainstream Christianity is the definitive “occult” tradition. The lesson here is that classification is always a matter of perspective and, while bias is inevitable, there are no good reasons why information scientists should prefer classification systems that assume the perspective and biases of the already societally privileged.