Questioning "Illegal Aliens":

The Christian Theological Concept of the *Imago Dei* as a Foundation for Promoting Human Flourishing in Library Metadata

by Christa M. Strickler

ABSTRACT: Debates about problematic language in metadata abound in the library profession, and the now-deprecated Library of Congress Subject Heading "Illegal aliens" has been a major flashpoint, but the Christian library community in the United States has been silent in these debates. Using the "Illegal aliens" subject heading as a focal point, this paper contends that the dignity and responsibility inherent in the Christian concept of the imago Dei require that Christian librarians identify and remove language that does not promote human flourishing in library metadata. To care for the migrant is to reflect God's image in the world, and the language we use has the power to uphold or diminish the dignity of others. The term "Illegal aliens" exemplifies a broader problem in the profession that requires more reflection and engagement from Christian librarians, so the paper concludes with practical recommendations for further engagement.

Debates about language abound in the cataloging and metadata branch of the library profession these days, forming an important part of the movement for diversity, equity, and inclusion in the library. Though the work of metadata creation can appear as mere data entry, many in the profession recognize the public-facing nature of library metadata and the effects that it has on society as a whole. Cataloging and metadata are a critical part of promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion in the library, as "more inclusive descriptive data drives a more inclusive discovery experience" (Frick and Proffitt 2022, 10). As a library standard used throughout the world, the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) vocabulary plays an important role in that experience, and the language it employs has garnered much attention.

The now-deprecated LCSH term "Illegal aliens" has been a major flashpoint in the language debate. In 2014, a group of Dartmouth College students and librarians petitioned the Library of Congress to replace the term "Illegal aliens" with "Undocumented immigrants" in LCSH, finding the former term to be offensive and dehumanizing. After lobbying groups from the American Library Association (ALA) became involved, the Library of Congress agreed to replace "Illegal aliens" with "Noncitizens" and "Unauthorized immigration" (*The New York Times* 2016). Two months later, the US House of Representatives "voted 237–170 to order LC to continue using the term ... in order to duplicate the language of federal laws written by Congress" (Peet 2016), even though Congress had never before intervened in LCSH. In 2021, the Library of Congress announced it would be replacing the subject heading "Illegal aliens" with the paired headings of "Noncitizens" and "Illegal immigration" (Hines 2021). The controversy continues, however, as many in the library profession argue these new terms do not go far enough in removing language that dehumanizes immigrants, and recent political shifts have some wondering if the US government might continue to scrutinize LCSH terms related to immigration.

While the language used in LCSH has initiated much debate in the library profession, the Christian library community in the United States has been largely silent on the matter, at least in the scholarly arena. As of this writing, *The Christian Librarian*, the official journal of the Association of Christian

Christa M. Strickler is the electronic resources metadata librarian at the University of Notre Dame.

Librarians, contains no articles on the topic, and neither does *Catholic Library World*, a publication of the Catholic Library Association. Atla's *Theological Librarianship* (TL), which publishes "on subjects at the intersection of librarianship and religious and theological studies that potentially impact libraries" (Atla n.d.), also contains no work on the topic from the perspective of Christianity or any other religion. The two important essay collections on Christian librarianship also lack engagement with the topic (G. A. Smith 2002; Trott 2019). None have studied LCSH from a Christian theological perspective, leaving a major gap in the scholarly conversation.

On the surface, it is not obvious where theological reflection fits into the conversation. The Bible does not directly discuss the complex workings of LCSH, but both Scripture and the Christian tradition have much to say about what it means to be human and what it means for human beings to flourish. Theologians Miroslav Volf and Matthew Croasmun argue that "the purpose of theology is to discern, articulate, and commend visions of flourishing life in light of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ. The flourishing of human beings and all God's creatures in the presence of God is God's foremost concern for creation and should, therefore, be the central purpose of theology" (2019, 11). If this is true, how might Christian theology help librarians promote ways in which LCSH can contribute to such a flourishing life? How might it help in discerning areas of LCSH that diminish human flourishing so librarians might recommend ways of improving it? These questions are too large to address in total here, so instead, I start in one small area by using the Christian concept of the image of God (or *imago dei* in theological language) to question the subject heading "Illegal aliens." I argue that the dignity and responsibility inherent in the *imago dei* require Christian librarians to recognize and remove language in library metadata that does not promote human flourishing. I provide a brief biblical and theological overview of the *imago dei* to show how it confers dignity on all humanity and entails a responsibility for followers of Christ to reflect God's image in the world—the model for which is found in the revelation of God's character in Scripture and the incarnate Jesus Christ, the true image of God. The demonstration throughout Scripture of God's care for the migrant shows that to reflect God's image in the world is also to care for those who migrate. Language use has the power to uphold or diminish the dignity of the *imago dei,* and I argue that the formerly used LCSH term "Illegal aliens" obscures the image of God in those who migrate and diminishes their ability to flourish as human beings. Though "Illegal aliens" is now officially deprecated as a subject heading, it serves as a concrete example of a broader problem of dehumanizing language in library metadata, which requires deeper reflection and engagement from library professionals who profess Christianity and are therefore called to reflect God's image in the world. For that reason, I end with practical recommendations for Christian librarians to engage solutions to the problem through library practice and scholarship.

PROLEGOMENON

Before I delve into the theological content, I will make a statement about my background: I am a Protestant Christian with Reformed leanings, and my theological background is in Protestant theology. Thus, my understanding of the *imago dei* is made in that light and might not reflect understandings in other branches of Christianity, such as Roman Catholicism or Eastern Orthodoxy. When I argue from Scripture, I assume continuity between the Old and New Testaments, so my understanding of the *imago dei* and scriptural views of immigration builds on that assumption. Additionally, the United States is my geographical context, so I am most familiar with challenges in that location. I do not aim to be comprehensive; rather, I seek to examine from a particular viewpoint the challenge of language in library metadata. Challenges and appropriate solutions may look different in other contexts.

OVERVIEW OF THE *IMAGO DEI*

The concept of the *imago dei* is central to Christian views of humanity, despite being notoriously difficult to interpret. In its biblical origins, the concept first appears in Genesis 1:26–27, when God creates humanity in God's image. Very little biblical material covers the idea directly. In the Old Testament, only three passages explicitly address it: Genesis 1:26–27, 5:1–3, and 9:6. Despite the relative paucity of material, the passages available are significant. John Kilner, a theologian and bioethicist, notes that the first mention, in Genesis 1, occurs at a key moment in the creation of humanity, while the second mention appears in Genesis 5, reaffirming the *imago dei* just after the Fall. The third mention appears in Genesis 9, just after the flood, at a point of a new beginning for humanity (2015, 37–38). The New Testament shows a reaffirmation of humanity created in God's image (1 Cor. 11:7; Jas. 3:9), along with a concept that frames the Christian version of the concept: the *imago dei* associated with Christ (2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15). Though the passages are few, the Christian community has seen them as significant enough to write a large body of literature on the topic (Kilner 2015, 38). Interpretations vary in detail, but scholars typically categorize them into three major groups: a metaphysical approach that locates the *imago dei* in the human capacity for reason, a functional approach that draws from ideas of royalty in the ancient Near East (ANE), and a relational approach that links the *imago dei* with human relationality (Treier 2019, 149). Each approach comes with insights and concerns that are too complex to survey here.[1] I draw primarily from the functional approach.

The functional model of the *imago dei* arises from the exegesis of Genesis 1:26–27 combined with an ANE concept of image as it would have been understood in the symbolic world of the Old Testament writers. Ancient Egyptians and Mesopotamians both saw their rulers as images of their gods, with royalty acting as intermediaries or representatives on behalf of the deities (McConville 2016, 19). The concept of image takes further shape in the form of cult statues, or idols, also used as extensions of the gods' presence on Earth (McConville 2016, 35). Each statue underwent an initiation rite that turned it from a mere sculpture into a "living presence of deity on earth" that was neither "a merely symbolic reminder of deity [nor] the actual, literal god" (Middleton 2005, 127–28). Some scholars see parallels between this ceremony and Genesis 2:7, the passage in which God breathes life into the first human being, not only granting life but also transforming humanity into representatives of God's presence on Earth (McConville 2016, 35–36).

This functional view of the *imago dei* conveys both dignity and responsibility. One indication of dignity appears in the sharp contrast between the Genesis account of the *imago dei* and the ANE concept of image. Throughout the ANE, humanity held a low status in the creational order, serving as slaves to the gods. Image language applied to royalty alone, not to the common people. In Genesis, God bestows the *imago dei* on all humanity, conferring "enormous dignity on human beings" while also upending the traditional ANE social order in an intentional critique of the ideology of the day (McConville 2016, 20). To grant such royal power meant more than a mere delegation of function but also denoted the intrinsic value of the representative, as the delegation implied some kind of likeness between the human and the divine, for "only one who is like God can represent him" (McConville 2016, 22). The dignity conveyed by the functional view of the *imago dei* aligns with the notion of human dignity across Scripture. Genesis 9:6 warns that because humans are made in God's image, to destroy or damage a person is an affront to God, while James 3:9 declares that to curse one made in the image of God is to curse God (Hoekema 1986, 16, 19–20; Kilner 2015, 116–17). In conjunction with Genesis 1:26–27, these passages convey humanity's status as *imago dei* "as the basis for treating all human persons with dignity" (Cortez 2010, 16).

This conception of dignity imparted by the *imago dei* is bound together with power and responsibility to reflect that image to the world. According to the Mesopotamian understanding of image,

the representative is not a replica of the god so much as an extension of its presence, thus combining in the image an intrinsic likeness to the god with its function in the world (McConville 2016, 23; Herring 2013, 218). In making humanity in his image, God made us his covenantal partners, committing "himself to a kind of power-sharing with the human creature" (McConville 2016, 25). This power-sharing gives us immense responsibility, for "God has chosen to be involved with his creation in a way that rests much on this human creature" (McConville 2016, 26). Such power has the potential for abuse, and humans have abused it greatly throughout history, but the *imago dei* is not a license to dominate and destruct.[2] Tyranny, injustice, and exploitation do not properly reflect God's presence in the world. Old Testament scholar Christopher J. H. Wright argues that the ideal of royal rule in the Old Testament includes humble service and compassionate justice, "such that those who are being oppressed are delivered, those who are weak and vulnerable have their voices heard and their case attended to" (2004, 123). In the New Testament, Jesus Christ is the ultimate example of humble kingship—the humility and self-sacrifice he demonstrates are critical for understanding how to reflect God's image to the world.

As the incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ is the full revelation of God in creation and, thus, the best model for what it means to reflect God's image. While the Old Testament states humans are made in God's image, the New Testament declares Christ is God's image, the standard toward which those who are in Christ are to grow (Kilner 2015, 53; Cortez 2010, 17). 2 Corinthians 4:4 and Colossians 1:15 assert that Christ is the image of God, and Hebrews 1:3 affirms he is "the exact imprint of God's very being" (NRSV). Other New Testament passages say that from the beginning, God intended humanity to become conformed over time to the image of Christ (Rom. 8:29; 2 Cor. 3:18; Eph. 4:24); thus, "conforming to the model of Christ's being and doing is tantamount to conforming to Christ's image" (Kilner 2015, 53). We are not exact likenesses of God as Christ is; rather, "creation in God's image is God's expressed intention that people evidence the special connection they have with God through a meaningful reflection of God" (Kilner 2015, 79). By conforming to the image of Christ, we fulfill God's intention for who we are to be in the world.

This overview of the *imago dei* covers what it means to be made in the image of God, but only in a general sense. To begin exploring how this applies to the language used to describe immigration in LCSH, I look next at how God's character is revealed in Scripture in relation to migration.

IMAGO DEI AND MIGRATION

Throughout Scripture, God shows special care for outsiders and immigrants, so to reflect the image of God in the world requires Christians to do the same. Christopher Wright notes God's command to care for the foreigner in Deuteronomy 10:18–19: "That is the nature of YHWH simply as the God he is … but it is also the character of God that the Israelites have come to know and are called to emulate because they had experienced it in their own history" (2021, 94). This connects with theologian Gemma Tulud Cruz's theology of the stranger. She points out that "being a stranger is a primary condition of the people of God (Exod. 23:9; Deut. 24:18) and migration is woven into this 'stranger condition'" (Cruz 2014, 27). In Genesis 12:1–2, God calls Abraham to leave his homeland for a new country. Jacob migrates three separate times: once to evade the possibility of death (Gen. 27:32–44), then to escape labor exploitation (Gen. 31:1–22; 37:1), and again to flee famine (Gen. 41:53–57; 42:1-2; 43:1; 45:6; 47:4). Joseph was forced to migrate to Egypt (Gen. 37:28), and the book of Exodus describes the Israelites' migration out of Egypt in the foundational event that grounds God's command to care for the foreigner (Groody 2022, 74–90). Protection of immigrants is built into Old Testament law (Exod. 22:21; Lev. 19:33–34; 24:22; Num. 15:15–16; 35:15; Deut. 10:17–19; 14:28–29; 16:14; 24:14, 17–21; 26:12–15), with curses invoked for those who fail to adhere (Deut. 27:19). The prophetic literature

draws this out further, reminding the Israelites of the command to care for the immigrant (Jer. 22:3) and warning them that their failure to do so brings God's judgment upon them (Ezek. 22:7; Mal. 3:5).

God's care for the migrant is not limited to the Old Testament but appears also in the New Testament through Christ's care for and solidarity with migrants and strangers. In Matthew 25:31–46, Jesus promises eschatological blessing for those who provide for the needy and welcome the stranger and eschatological damnation for those who do not, equating himself with the needy and the stranger. Cruz notes Christian obligation to care for the stranger "because Jesus himself, by His incarnation and by being an itinerant preacher, took on the conditions of a stranger" (2014, 27). Daniel Groody, a theologian and expert on theologies of migration, delves into this connection between the incarnation and migration, writing that "the Incarnation can be seen as God's 'great migration' into the broken and sinful territory of human beings, which creates legal, political and religious controversy…. On the journey into otherness and vulnerability Jesus enters into total identification with those who are abandoned and alienated" (2017, 70).

Theologians and biblical scholars who study migration often point out the connection between the dignity of the *imago dei* and the humanity of immigrants. Old Testament scholar and ethicist M. Daniel Carroll R. argues that "the creation of all persons in the image of God must be the most basic conviction for Christians as they approach the challenges of immigration today. Immigration should not be argued in the abstract, because it is fundamentally about immigrants. Immigrants are humans, and as such they are made in God's image…. Because immigrants are made in the divine image, they have an essential value" (2013, 47–48). Groody argues for the need to look past the labels and statistics to see migrants as human beings: "People are central to theological reflection on migration because we are human beings created in God's image and likeness. Looking at migration from a theological perspective roots our reflection in the search to understand what it means to be human before God and what it means to move toward union with God and communion with one another" (2022, 25).

IMAGO DEI AND THE LANGUAGE OF LCSH

To acknowledge the dignity of human beings made in the image of God, we must also acknowledge their dignity in our language about them, whether in conversation or library metadata. Language wields incredible power. As theologian Norman Wirzba acknowledges, "How the world is named and narrated … is of the greatest theoretical and practical importance because *the way we name and narrate the world determines how we are going to live within it*" (2015, 18).[3] Considering the ubiquity of LCSH in library metadata, its way of naming and narrating the world is, therefore, also of great importance.

As a vocabulary, LCSH consists of language that not only reflects the views of those who create the terms but also has the power to form the views of those who use them. Language reflects a way of seeing the world, and different languages not only reflect but also shape different views of the world, demonstrating a sense-making power that can either reflect God's image or corrupt into injustice. Drawing on the idea of constitutive rhetoric, James Beitler describes how "the language we use not only *references* but also *shapes* reality" (2019, 136).[4] According to Beitler, language can shape reality in seven areas: "significance, activities, identities, relationships, politics, connections, sign systems, and knowledge," thus encompassing all aspects of our lives (2019, 138). Beitler finds this idea consistent with biblical and theological concepts of the *imago dei:*

> God creates through his Word, and the Genesis account suggests that, as image bearers of the creating God, humans have been granted the ability to use language to create from what he has made. That said, the ways we use language to constitute ourselves, others, and our communities may be more or less consistent

with Scripture and church doctrine. Therefore, our goal as Christian witnesses should involve ... *critiquing* constitutive rhetorics that are inconsistent with Scripture and church doctrine and creating and cultivating constitutive rhetorics that advance the gospel of Jesus Christ. (2019, 138).[5]

Theologian Roberto Goizueta describes the formative power of language as "not merely a superficial reflection of our culture and worldview; it helps construct and shape that culture and worldview. Language is not simply an instrument for communicating human experience; it is, to some extent, that experience itself. Language forms and defines us as much as we form and define it" (1995, 12). Moving from communal experience to individual identity formation, he writes that "language is not incidental to the individual person's self-understanding and worldview; it shapes and informs these.... Language gives birth to self-understanding" (Goizueta 1995, 53).

The language we use, even in seemingly innocuous ways, tells powerful stories. Similarly, philosopher James K. A. Smith writes about how rituals also form identity, defining them as:

...compressed, repeated, performed narratives that, over time, conscript us into the story they "tell" by showing, by performing. Such orienting narratives are not explicitly "told" in a "once-upon-a-time" discursive mode—as if the body politic invites us to passively sit at the proverbial librarian's feet for "story time" while she walks us through a picture-book narration. No, these stories are more like dramas that are enacted and performed. The stories of a body politic become inscribed in our body through that "pedagogy of insignificance" ... all the mundane little micropractices that nonetheless "carry" a big Story. And insofar as we are immersed bodily in these microperformances, we are, over time, incorporated into a Story that then becomes the script that we implicitly act out. The Story becomes the background narrative and aesthetic orientation that habitually shapes how we constitute our world. We don't memorize the Story as told to us; we imbibe the Story as we perform it in a million little gestures (2013, 109–10).

The language in LCSH, in conjunction with the repeated rituals of assigning terms and using them to find information, creates identity-forming narratives, for good or otherwise. With the repetition of dehumanizing narratives, over time, "equally valued image bearers ... come to believe they have no capacity whatsoever. Their unique contributions as image bearers, the individual dignity they each bear as an irreplaceable refraction of the true Image, are lost to the world" (Crouch 2013, 72).

Using the term "Illegal aliens" in library metadata creates a pejorative narrative that obscures the *imago dei* of immigrants. J. Silvio Cho surveys the history of the term "alien" as used in the United States to describe humans, determining that "'alien' ultimately became constructed as a being who was essentially different and inferior, who was ultimately inassimilable, and who was even dangerous—directly threatening due to opposed loyalties or by carrying such qualities that could 'corrupt' the host society" (2016, 18–19). The concept of the illegal alien entered LCSH in 1980 according to the principle of literary warrant, meaning "it was needed to describe the topics being covered in published literature, and it employed the terminology used in the literature and in reference sources" (Library of Congress, Policy and Standards Division 2016, 2; Cho 2016, 19–20). The term "illegal alien" is going out of common use, so literary warrant is no longer a sufficient justification to keep it (Cho 2016, 25, 32). Critics of the "illegal" characterization of immigrants cite the term as inaccurate since lacking proper documentation is not a criminal matter but a civil issue, and also point out that it unnecessarily politicizes people by "reducing a person to his or her immigration infraction, as is rarely done with other types of rule-breaking," with an effect that "is criminalizing, marginalizing, and even dehumanizing" (Cho 2016, 22–23). Christopher Magezi, a theologian specializing in migration, claims derogatory language perpetuates discrimination against migrants and allows "native communities, institutions, organizations, and the governments of migrant-hosting nations to avoid effectively addressing migrants' challenges and needs" (2021, 1). He argues that "the church should develop theological thinking that challenges people to primarily perceive each other as of equal status before they stereotype or designate labels that result in negative perceptions of migrants" (Magezi

2021, 1). Groody also condemns the term "illegal alien," writing that "the word alien is dehumanizing and obfuscates the *imago dei* in those who are forcibly uprooted" (2009, 645). He views language such as "alien" as an intentional dehumanization tool used for "typecasting migrants as threats to be avoided, excluded, or deported," while those migrants, "deep down, want to move beyond such labels to a space in which they can be seen first and foremost as human beings" (Groody 2017, 63). Carroll R. prefers the term "undocumented immigrants" over "illegal aliens" because "*Illegal* can carry a pejorative connotation, suggesting by definition that the person is guilty of some act, has few scruples, and is prone to civil disobedience.... At the same time, the common label alien can evoke the sense of someone unchangeably foreign and other, without hope of reconciliation or mediation. *Illegal aliens*, therefore, is unhelpfully prejudicial. *Undocumented immigrants* is a more just label and better represents the present reality" (2013, xxviii–xxix).

Many in the library profession advocated for the term "Undocumented immigrants" to replace "Illegal aliens" in LCSH, but the Library of Congress chose to replace "Illegal aliens" with a combination of "Noncitizens" and "Illegal immigration" instead. While some libraries have changed local bibliographic records to reflect the new language in LCSH, others argue that while the new language is a step in the right direction, its retention of the word "illegal" prevents the change from being a satisfactory solution (ARLIS/NA 2022). Some libraries have chosen to use the term "Undocumented immigrants," regardless of the Library of Congress's stance, changing their catalog or discovery layer display to reflect that local decision (McGee 2022). This choice to use "Undocumented immigrants," though unsanctioned by the Library of Congress, more closely aligns with the Christian responsibility to uphold the dignity of all human beings. It creates and cultivates constitutive rhetoric that upholds a narrative of image-bearing dignity in those who migrate without documentation.

PRACTICAL STEPS

It is not enough to determine that a particular descriptive term, such as "Illegal aliens," is dehumanizing and needs to be replaced with a different term. Not only do librarians need to take practical steps to change terminology in library metadata and public displays, but work is also needed to identify problematic terminology across the library metadata. Both are complex undertakings that often come with financial costs many libraries cannot afford.

The tension between universal and local solutions adds to the complexity of the problem, and librarians need to be aware of this dynamic before jumping in to change language. Universal solutions, such as officially changing LCSH terminology, help with standardization and interoperability, creating much-needed efficiencies when so many libraries are understaffed and underfunded. However, Hope Olson, a scholar of information organization, points out that while such homogenous solutions are "the easiest and cheapest route for libraries to take … the result of efficiency and economy is a procrustean one-size-fits-all system" (2011, 237). Craig Gay, a scholar of Christianity and culture, draws on Jacques Ellul to note that standardization for the sake of efficiency often leads to dehumanization. He argues that Christians "should be suspicious of homogeneity, of standardization, of one-size-fits-all solutions, of repetition, of selfsameness and uniformity," for this sameness suggests the goodness of "diversity and particularity have been—and are being—reduced for the sake of commercial and/or mechanical efficiencies" (Gay 2018, 173). Libraries serve diverse communities with diverse ways of using language, so a one-size-fits-all solution does not fit all. While some change can and should occur at the national level, such as in LCSH, thoughtful change is most critical at the local level. As Olson puts it, "Local professionals must take responsibility for service to their users" (2011, 234).

A widely accepted shift in language would be appropriate to change at the national level by submitting proposals for new or changed LCSH to the Subject Authority Cooperative Program, or SACO (Library of Congress n.d.). To contribute, libraries must either be individual SACO members or participate in a SACO funnel. Individual members are required to contribute proposals for 12 new or changed subjects per year, so smaller libraries likely prefer working with a funnel to share the workload (Library of Congress n.d.). Atla sponsors a SACO funnel, but participation is limited to individual Atla members (Atla n.d.). Librarians unable to afford an individual Atla membership may be able to participate in a regional funnel, but very few of those exist (Library of Congress n.d.). As an alternative, the Cataloging Lab offers collaborative space to propose additions or changes to LCSH (Cataloging Lab n.d.). However, further costs come with changes at the national level. Adjustments to LCSH require libraries to update their local metadata accordingly if they are to maintain consistency, and not all libraries have the resources for that level of maintenance. Additionally, language use can vary by community, so forcing a national-level LCSH change that is not broadly applicable suppresses language diversity.

In cases where changes to LCSH are not feasible or desirable, some libraries and library groups are turning to alternative controlled vocabularies, using them in addition to or in place of LCSH. One example is the Saskatchewan Indigenous Subject Headings project, which gathered input from Indigenous Peoples in Saskatchewan to create subject headings that more accurately and respectfully describe library materials about topics of interest in Saskatchewan (Multitype Library Board 2023). Ngā Upoko Tukutuku, or Māori Subject Headings, was developed to provide "a structured path to a Māori world view within library and archival cataloging and description" (National Library of New Zealand 2023). This vocabulary is available for use in OCLC bibliographic records (OCLC 2021). The creation of more such alternative vocabularies could provide a middle ground between the one-size-fits-all approach of LCSH and more expensive solutions implemented at individual libraries, but collaboration across libraries with similar interests would be necessary.

Some discovery layers allow libraries to suppress selected access points from public display. Libraries using OCLC's WorldCat Discovery interface can remap subject headings by uploading a spreadsheet of desired changes to their OCLC Service Configuration profile (OCLC 2023). ExLibris's Primo VE has a DEI Exclude List that allows libraries to hide subject words and phrases from facets, brief results, and full displays (ExLibris 2021). VuFind users can implement Villanova University's solution of mapping MARC record indexing rules and creating some custom coding (Katz 2020). Cataloging vendors can also help with the practical work. Backstage Library Works collaborates with libraries to create or customize authority records and update corresponding bibliographic records, while Marcive formerly offered services to fix problematic access points before it closed in 2024 (Backstage Library Works 2022; Riley and Chapa 2022).

Membership in a consortium affects local solutions if a shared catalog is involved, as decisions made at a consortial level affect multiple libraries. The Orbis Cascade Alliance's Cataloging Standing Group outlined the pros and cons of various solutions and recommended the replacement of "Illegal aliens" using normalization rules to suppress display in the Primo discovery layer (2019; 2020). As of this writing, the Consortium of Academic and Research Libraries in Illinois (CARLI) Technical Services Committee has tested various solutions using Alma and Primo VE but recommends further input from outside the committee before implementing a solution (2023, 12–14). Libraries that are part of a consortium will need to navigate consortial policies and practices before implementing solutions.

Changing language deemed to be problematic is only part of the work needed to promote human flourishing in library metadata; it is still necessary to identify language that needs to be changed, and it is here that Christian reflection on the problem adds a unique voice to the conversation. The

mainstream cataloging community has already poured much effort into this area, using a variety of theoretical frameworks to justify their conclusions.[6] There is potential for some overlap between the mainstream conversation and Christian engagement. Both might come to some of the same conclusions but from different theoretical foundations. Both may use some of the same language of justice but in different ways. At other times, both may come to different conclusions—even among themselves—and need to implement different solutions to promote human flourishing in ways that best serve the needs of their local institutions and communities.

Christian librarians need to engage the scholarly conversation through research and publication, discussion groups at conferences, or conversations on professional listservs, to name a few options. Some of the latter two may have occurred, but scholarly publications from a Christian perspective are conspicuously absent. While theological reflection on information organization is not for every librarian, more should engage in this, but barriers to this work exist. Many Christian librarians are knowledgeable about cataloging theory and practice but lack theological training to engage the scholarly conversation in this way. Other barriers include lack of time and institutional support, as many work at understaffed institutions or do not have publication requirements for their roles.

For any of this work to happen, library administration needs to give catalog and metadata librarians the necessary resources, which cost money through staff time or outsourcing technical aspects of the work. Library directors need to think through the mission of the library and the broader institution to determine where to invest scarce resources. While efficiency-creating standards help with information sharing, uncritical adherence to them creates structural barriers to allowing diversity in catalog descriptions, for "by its very nature, diversity in a system is inefficient and is, therefore, more costly. To value diversity within any system represents a tradeoff with the cost savings facilitated by uniformity, efficiency, and scale" (Jahnke, Tanaka, and Palazzolo 2022, 167). Deprofessionalization of cataloging work as a cost-saving measure causes resources in this area to be moved internally to other areas or even moved outside of the library. A 2022 survey of academic library directors demonstrated trends to increase staffing in areas such as outreach, instruction, and information literacy while decreasing positions in cataloging and metadata. Seventeen percent of respondents were considering the outsourcing of cataloging and metadata, while 10 percent were already doing so (Hulbert 2023, 24–25). In some cases, increasing emphases on outsourcing cataloging means libraries remove professional cataloging positions or replace them with less expensive library staff positions. This can result in a reduction in expertise and professional development opportunities available for those who do cataloging work, while also creating greater barriers to scholarly publication in academic journals or public engagement at library conferences where conversations about cataloging ethics take place. These trends make Christian cataloging and metadata librarians less equipped to promote human flourishing in library metadata. The need to save money must be balanced with an image-bearing responsibility to seek the flourishing of others.

Professional associations serving Christian libraries could help alleviate the costs of engagement for local institutions. Because public Christian reflection has not been sustained in this area, many Christian librarians are unequipped for biblical and theological reflection on library metadata practices, and due to ongoing staffing reductions, many do not have the professional development resources to build the capacity for engagement. Library associations could sponsor the development of theological education tailored to spur reflection on how "to discern, articulate, and commend visions of flourishing life in light of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ" (Volf and Croasmun 2019, 11) in library metadata. They could provide support and collaborative space for librarians from Christian institutions to develop local vocabularies when LCSH is insufficient. They could help connect librarians and subject specialist faculty from Christian institutions to collaborate on projects, or

facilitate conversations between public services and cataloging librarians to discuss the theological implications of language used throughout library work. As Atla has done, they could negotiate with metadata vendors for discounts to make outsourcing technical tasks more affordable (Backstage Library Works n.d.).

Given the complexities of language and variations across communities, the language in metadata or catalog displays will never be perfect, but users can be informed about their imperfections. Librarians involved in reference or information literacy instruction could teach library users to think critically about terms they come across during their research, whether in LCSH or other standardized vocabularies they encounter. Even when a term cannot be changed locally in the catalog or globally in an update to a standardized vocabulary, helping users understand the potential effects of language could prevent them from using terms unthinkingly and help them better understand the power of language in the information-seeking process.

CONCLUSION

Library metadata is rich with storytelling language about people made in the image of God. What stories are told with metadata and discovery layer displays? Do they promote human flourishing or obscure the dignity inherent in all humans? Identifying problematic language in library metadata is a complex task with no easy solutions, and there will be many disagreements on the matter, but that must not stop us from addressing it. As followers of Christ made in the image of God, Christian librarians are called to reflect God's presence to a world permeated with injustice. While we are only imperfect images, we must seek God's justice, "even if [we] are fully aware that [we] grasp it only imperfectly and practice it inadequately, and even if [we] seek correction and enrichment from others with whom we disagree but cannot presume to be totally wrong" (Volf 2019, 206). While maybe only grasping imperfectly the nuances of language used in library metadata and thereby disagreeing with one another on the nature of the problem or the best solution, Christian librarians must follow their responsibility as bearers of God's image to seek the flourishing of fellow image bearers.

The library profession is at a point where it must examine anew the efficiencies of its metadata standardizations and measure them against the standards of core values. For Christian librarians, this should include placing greater value on human beings than on productivity and efficiency—all good things, but not equally good. To aim for efficiency without consideration of the intangible toll language may take on humans made in God's image is to have disordered priorities. To value humans over efficiency costs time and money, luxuries many libraries do not have, and that is why we must collaborate to find creative solutions for spreading out those costs, as this article and its author are not sufficient for tackling such a widespread problem. Thus, I return to the questions asked at the beginning of this essay: How might Christian theology help librarians promote ways in which LCSH can contribute to such a flourishing life? How might it help librarians discern areas of LCSH that diminish human flourishing so they might recommend ways of improving it? I hope to see many responses to these questions in the future.

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ENDNOTES

1   See Peppiatt (2022, 9–89) for a survey of all three models and common critiques of them.

2   See Kilner (2015, 17–37) for an overview of abuses rising from misinterpretation of the imago Dei.

3   Emphasis original.

4   Emphasis original.

5   Emphasis original.

6   For the latest in the mainstream conversation, see Critcatenate, a regular roundup of blog posts, webinars, and published articles on library cataloging and metadata ethics ("Critcatenate" 2025).