WHAT'S DIFFERENT ABOUT RELIGIOUS ARCHIVES?

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Anyone who has recently attended the meetings of national or regional archival associations or who has followed the professional literature is aware that the last decade has seen a marked change in the nature of the archival profession. Not only have more and more people become archivists, but they have come to their work from a wider variety of backgrounds and with an increasing level of formal professional education and training. Even more significant, they find themselves working in a wider variety of archives, as institutions and organizations have established archival programs where none had previously existed.

Perhaps nowhere is this expansion of the profession more apparent than in the area of religious archives. The most recent general survey of archivists in the United States found that 13 percent of the respondents identified themselves as archivists of religious groups. The number is remarkably close to the 17 percent of the respondents who identified themselves as working for private, non-religious organizations such as historical societies and libraries, one of the traditionally strong sectors of the archival world. Since 1973, while the percentage of archivists working for academic institutions, another numerical mainstay of the profession, has remained roughly constant, the number of religious archivists has doubled.[1] What is more, the change has been qualitative as well as quantitative. Whereas religious archives programs in the past tended to be found mostly among the mainline Protestant denominations, religious archivists are now coming increasingly from Roman Catholic, Jewish, and evangelical groups.

For all this growth and diversification, however, religious archivists have not succeeded in defining themselves adequately in relation to the rest of the profession. Perhaps because they and their institutions are relative newcomers, they have not yet exercised in professional circles an influence commensurate with their increasing numbers. This hesitancy results at least in part from a lack of models of large and successful religious archives programs. It also derives from uncertainty over the nature of what religious archivists

do and why they do it. They have yet to find and articulate adequate answers to some very basic questions. Is there anything distinctive about religious archives? Are there things that religious archivists do that other archivists do not? Do they possess a different set of concerns, procedures, or assumptions from their professional colleagues? Does the care of religious records make different demands on them? Or do they simply do what all other archivists (public, private, academic, business) do, but with different kinds of records?

Little consideration has been given to such questions in the professional literature relating to religious archives. The entries in the standard bibliography by Frank B. Evans show only a handful of discussions of general topics, with the bulk of the entries consisting of books and articles that describe the programs and holdings of particular denominations. This same denominational approach may be seen in the updated bibliography recently prepared by the SAA Religious Archives Section.[2] When religious archivists have written about their work, they have concentrated on the peculiarities of their own individual operations. It remains to be seen what, if anything, is different about religious archives.

The best starting point in such an inquiry may be an attempt to identify what is *not* different about religious archives. The actual practice of religious archivists is instructive here, since it is clear that they adhere to the same basic principles and techniques of archival work as the rest of the profession. In the acceptance of provenance and *respect des fonds:* as the foundation for organizing their collections, for example, religious archivists follow—and, equally important, generally acknowledge that they should follow—the standards common elsewhere in the profession. In identifying record groups and series within their collections and in performing such specific functions as appraisal, accessioning, arrangement and description, providing reference service, and all the rest of the recognizable functions of an archives program, religious archivists are no different from other archivists. Though the subject content of the records and the precise administrative or personal circumstances which produced them may be different, the ways in which religious archivists organize the records in their care and make them available for study are no different from those employed by other archivists.

The basic manual for religious archives, published in 1980, is written on the assumption that they are not fundamentally different from other repositories. Prepared by the leading practitioner of religious archives work in this country, August R. Suelflow's *Religious Archives: An Introduction* provides an overview that builds on earlier volumes describing the structure and functions of any archives. Suelflow outlines such "basic requirements" as budget, staff, and facilities—as familiar in other archives as in religious

archives—and says that "each religious archives must make its own translation" of these general norms in the light of its own situation.[3] It is clearly a case of translation only, however, not of making up an entirely new language.

All of this is simply to say that religious archives share fully in what has been called "the one world of archives." The phrase, coined in the 1940s by Solon J. Buck, was revived in the 1980s by John A. Fleckner and William L. Joyce, chairmen of the program committee for the 1981 SAA annual meeting, who took it for the theme of that meeting. Although the different kinds of archivists represent "a diversity of affiliations and interests," Fleckner and Joyce said, they are nonetheless "linked through common regard for responsible stewardship of the documentary record." Despite differences in the nature of the institutions they serve, archivists of all kinds share fundamental assumptions about the importance of the preservation of archival records, as well as similar methods for accomplishing that goal. Thus, they need to "collaborate to develop their understanding of that portion of the universe of documentation that they are called upon to manage."[4]

This vision of the one world of archives allows for the making of a number of comparisons among archival repositories, and it highlights the similarities of religious and other kinds of archives. Religious archives have much in common with repositories of public records, for example, beginning with the several kinds of vital records maintained by organized religion. Most denominations create and keep records of their members at such crucial moments in their lives as birth or baptism, adoption, marriage, divorce, and death. These are directly comparable to, and can generally serve as legal substitutes for, the records of these events maintained by states, counties, and towns. Even otherwise private collections of religious records can therefore have a semipublic character. In the same way, religious archives have much in common with repositories of private manuscripts, preserving the papers of notable individuals whether clerical or lay, families, and church-related groups.

Religious archives most closely resemble other institutional or organizational archives. Like the archives of schools and colleges, they preserve a wide range of records from religiously-affiliated educational efforts at every level, from administrative records to student transcripts to the papers of faculty members. Like business archives, they preserve financial, personnel, legal, and broadly administrative records of the institutions within their jurisdiction. Since many of these exist to accomplish broad social service purposes, religious archives frequently resemble archives that attempt to document similar efforts by public authorities and non-denominational private groups. Finally, like archives affiliated with muse-

ums, many religious archives preserve artifacts associated with their group's history and engage in a variety of continuing education and outreach programs.

In short, there are a great many aspects of religious archives that are familiar to and recognizable in any other kind of archives. So what, then, is different about religious archives? Four factors seem worthy of discussion. Two of these derive from the nature of religious experience and consequently from the records which document that experience. Two others derive from the role religious institutions play in society and the particular tensions that role creates.

The first major difference among religious archives is that, to a greater degree than other kinds of archival repositories, they necessarily have constant reference to an external set of beliefs, ideologies, and values—that is, to religious faith itself. Religious activity of whatever nature is governed by religious faith, and the records of such activity held in religious archives will all have been generated in circumstances motivated or controlled by it. What is more, these beliefs are not merely a cluster of general propositions or predispositions, but rather a set of detailed, positive assertions about the nature of humanity and the universe. In religious organizations, these beliefs are not merely accepted as being correct; they are taken in a more or less absolute sense as *the* truth and thus a matter of considerable urgency. As articles of faith they may not be demonstrable as true by any objective, empirical method, but such an inability to "prove" them makes them no less true in the believer's eyes.

Other kinds of archives may be guided by general principles that derive from external beliefs. Repositories of public records may be founded at least in part on the idea that such records allow the people to hold officials accountable for their actions. This justification is somewhat tenuous in normal circumstances, however, and is in any case applicable only in democratic systems where accountability is prized. Similarly university archives may derive their activities from an overall sympathy with the goals of liberal education.

In none of these other kinds of archives, however, is there a direct connection between specific tenets of belief and the record-keeping process as a whole, as there is in religious archives. The particular kind of information included in the baptismal records of most of the Christian churches, for example, is a result of what those churches believe about baptism. The belief of Latter-Day Saints in the immortality of the family as a unit leads directly to the creation of such particular types of records as books of remembrance and documents connected with the performance of family temple ordinances, not to mention vast compilations of genealogical data.[5] Some evangelical groups, committed to a radical reliance on God's providing of

whatever is needed in any given circumstance, maintain a vigorous anti-institutional bias that includes a predisposition against the creation of records in the first place.[6] In such cases as these, religious beliefs (which are, after all, essentially nonarchival) have immediate implications for archival practice. Religious archivists, who, like all other archivists, are interested in the context in which records are produced, must therefore take account of the overtly religious context of their records and the ways in which it is different from that of other records.

These external beliefs may also create certain tensions for the individual religious archivist which are not important for other kinds of archivists. The religious archivist must somehow define himself in relation to the beliefs of his organization, whether by subscribing to them or by making a "separate peace" with them. Either choice has its own potential problems. The archivist who is a member of the religious body for which he works may have to make a special effort to maintain objectivity, not yielding to subtle or unconscious temptations to launder or distort records that present the organization in a less than favorable light. The archivist who is not a member of the religious body for which he works may not fully grasp the coherence of its beliefs and the ways in which they influence the creation or content of the records. Although the demands of institutional loyalty may present similar problems, other archivists do not face such strong dilemmas: one may work for a state archives equally well as a Republican or a Democrat; one may work for a business archives with or without any particular management theory or opinions on fiscal or monetary policy. Such external systems of belief, central as they are to religious experience, make more insistent demands on religious archivists than on other kinds of archivists.

Related to this problem posed by external, non-archival beliefs is a second major difference among religious archives, and that is that their goal is to document something which is very intangible, often fleeting, and perhaps in the end undocumentable. Other kinds of archives may deal with intangibles as well—the nature and quality of teaching in a university, for example—but these are not so all-pervasive as those found in religious archives. Religious groups start from the presumption that the material world of the senses is not the only (not even the most important) one, but that there is an immaterial, spiritual reality as well. Alone among archival repositories, therefore, religious archives face the dilemma of trying to preserve the evidence of that other reality, even though it does not leave behind such tangible traces as records and documents. This problem has been considered extensively by Robert Shuster, archivist of the Billy Graham Center, which is attempting in particular to

document the intense enthusiasm characteristic of religious revivals. "What are the connecting links between the enthusiasm that motivates and the documents that record?" Shuster asks. "Can enthusiasm itself be documented, or only its effects?"[7] By paying attention to records in a variety of forms, including especially still photographs, aural and video recordings, and perhaps even certain kinds of objects and artifacts, the religious archives may approach the adequate documentation of the spiritual. Since documentary records are generally better at transmitting thoughts than feelings, however, there is the everpresent possibility that something will be "lost in the translation."

The interplay between spiritual phenomena and archival documentation has recently absorbed the attention of a number of archivists for religious orders of men and women in the Catholic tradition, which have been engaged in rewriting their fundamental rule and constitutions. One goal of this effort has been to rediscover and apply to a modern setting the original spirit, vision, or "charism" of the group's founder. Archivists have often been involved in this process, searching those records that have survived for this spiritual evidence, sometimes with greater or lesser success.[8] As Shuster has suggested, such evidence is extraordinarily difficult to acquire and preserve. Religious archives may not have succeeded in capturing such an ephemeral thing as spirituality, and they may never do so; but to an extent greater than other kinds of archives they are required to try.

These differences among religious archives derive from the very nature of religious phenomena, but there are other differences that derive from the role which religion has come to play in modern life. The first of these is the hard demographic fact of a lessening of religious belief and practice in society at large. Whether one looks on this trend as good,bad, or neutral, in an increasingly secular and unreligious age the religious archives is part of an institution (i.e., organized religion) that is plainly on the decline. Every statistical measure of the subject confirms this decline. Regular church attendance today stands at roughly 40 percent of the population, a figure that has shown a steady decline from nearly 50 percent as recently as the 1950s, with an even higher rate before that. Formal church membership has shown a similarly steady decline in the same period.[9] There are certainly still many places and groups of people in which religious sentiment and practice remain strong, most notably among evangelicals, for example. (This is a trend that presents its own challenges to religious archives programs because of the fragmented, diffuse nature of such expressions of religious life.) Still, a decline across the board in the established churches and groups cannot be denied. Religious archivists, therefore, find them-

selves caring for the records of institutions which, for ever larger numbers of people, simply do not any longer provide the answers to life's basic questions.

This decline of religious belief and practice presents some problems for the religious archives which are not present in other archives. Most directly, it renders somewhat problematic one of the traditional justifications for the establishment and expansion of archival programs in institutional settings: namely, the administrative usefulness of the archives to the parent body. If religion continues its decline, will the archives not be reduced to a kind of quaint cultural artifact, showing the way things once were but are no more? How can the administrative usefulness of archives be argued in such a situation? More seriously, as the economic base of religious organizations shrinks with declining membership, will there not be increased competition for scarce funds, with the archives losing out to activities, such as social welfare programs for the benefit of the poor, that are deemed a more central part of those organizations' mission? Will there not be an increased tendency on the part of religious administrators to deposit their records with outside repositories, perhaps unconnected altogether with the religious group? Will the administrators of small evangelical groups be interested in the maintenance of records at all, either for current or historical purposes? Will they support any programs not directly connected to the crusading mission of the group? To be sure, all archives in the present day face pressures of uncertain or inadequate institutional financial support. In religious organizations, however, most of which acknowledge and accept a higher degree of direct social responsibility than, say, businesses or colleges, there will be an even stronger sense of the choice between "people or papers" in straitened financial conditions.

Nor can religious archives necessarily look to the historian to make up the difference in justifying maintenance or expansion of archival efforts. In a recent survey of trends in historiography, presented as his presidential address to the Organization of American Historians, Carl N. Degler noted the declining interest in the study of religious history. With the exception of studies of Puritanism—which, it should be noted, are becoming more social and demographic in approach, and less overtly religious, than in the past—historians are not as interested as they once were in religion, despite the "long historical involvement of Americans with religion."[10] This is a serious problem for religious archives because it casts further doubt on whether the material they are at such pains to preserve will ever be adequately used. Coupled with the strain on resources that results from a declining membership, this declining research interest could have a disastrous effect on religious archives,

which will be hard-pressed to answer the blunt question, "why bother?" Genealogical use of religious archives may continue to grow as it has in the last decade, but of itself this will be insufficient to support archival efforts for very long. More than other kinds of archives, then, religious archives face "the challenge of change" brought on by the decline of religion and interest in religion. It is therefore especially necessary for them to plan seriously for the future of archives in a very different world, a world in which they are at risk of becoming irrelevant.[11]

A more imporant difference among religious archives deriving from cultural factors is peculiar to the American religious experience. Historians have long noted the special significance in this country of the thoroughgoing nature of religious toleration. This outlook, embodied in the First Amendment to the Constitution, declares all churches, denominations, sects, and other religious bodies to be absolutely equal, with the state rigorously neutral. In order to fill the apparent emotional gap left by this absence of an officially-sanctioned body of religious belief, however, a form of "civil religion" has grown up, a religion in which political and civic virtues as well as national symbols are substituted for overtly religious dogmas and practices. Thus, the American flag replaces the cross as a unifying emblem, for instance, and the calendar revolves around such national festivals as the Fourth of July rather than the events of the church year. The "American Way of Life" becomes in effect the state religion. To be sure, a certain degree of religiosity is a part of that way of life, but it is a religiosity stripped of any particular theological content. "Our government makes no sense," said Dwight Eisenhower in an often-quoted speech, "unless it is founded in a deeply religious faith—and I don't care what it is." The traditional demands of religion, including a commitment to the singular correctness of one's own dogmas, are muted, replaced by an overriding commitment to toleration.[12]

Civil religion itself is therefore transformed into a "religion of civility" by means of a process that has been described by John Murray Cuddihy, a sociologist of religion. In his controversial but insightful book, *No Offense,* Cuddihy has sought to sketch the outlines of "this complex code [that] instructs us in the ways of being religiously inoffensive, of giving 'no offense,' of being *religiously* sensitive to religious differences." Toleration demands to be practiced in an especially scrupulous way, and the result is a nearly complete privatization of religion. President Eisenhower's "I don't care what it is" attitude toward religious choice expresses this view: whatever religious opinions one holds are one's own business. Traditional religions have been "made to promise that, when they sallied forth into public places, their bearing and their carriage—

their public behavior—would express a decent respect for the plural opinions of Americans. . . . They would not wear the old time religion on their sleeves." Thus, Cuddihy concludes, in America "religious identities as such must not be pushy, elbowing themselves into contexts where they do not belong."[13]

Religious archives are different from other archives because they are based on denominational identities that have "elbowed themselves into" an area where they seem not to belong—professional archival work. Given the understanding of religion as a private matter, restricted to a limited sphere of personal activity, the association of an archives with a particular religious group is at best somewhat anomalous and at worst potentially suspicious. For a professional archives to be overtly associated with a single religious persuasion seems to run counter to the American approach to religion as described by Cuddihy: it makes public what ought to be private and it restricts what ought to be open. To be identified as a Catholic archives, a Lutheran archives, or a Jewish archives appears as a serious logical problem. To make such an identification is to violate the rules of the religion of civility by apparently refusing to "express a decent respect for the plural opinions of Americans." Religious factors have been allowed to intrude on archives, a non-religious subject.

This anomaly creates tensions for the religious archives that are not present for other archives. Where do the archives' final loyalties lie: with the beliefs of the religious group or with the canons of professional practice? Are the objectivity or other professional standards of the religious archives program compromised by this mixed status? Are appraisal decisions, priorities and methods of arrangement and description, or policies governing access adversely affected by the intrusion of religious factors? The answers to these questions are not easy and, in fact, they require an entirely separate analysis.[14] At the very least, religious archivists should examine their own activities to ensure that such extremes are avoided.

An attempt to answer the question, "what's different about religious archives?" therefore yields four significant considerations: the influence on the archives of external, non-archival beliefs; the inherent difficulties of the mandate to document the intangible; the impact of the decline of organized religion; and the difficulties created by an apparent incompatibility of archives work and religious belief. None of these differences is great enough to separate religious archives entirely from the rest of the profession, and indeed the similarities between religious and other archives still argue for the essential unity of the profession. Religious archivists—and other archivists, too—need to be aware of these differences, however, if they are to understand fully, in Fleckner and Joyce's phrase, "that

portion of the universe of documentation that they are called upon to manage." Only then will all archivists be able to begin a complete analysis of how well they are accomplishing their main task: the documentation of society as a whole, in all its variety and richness.

FOOTNOTES

1. David Bearman, "1982 Survey of the Archival Profession," *American Archivist* 46 (Spring 1983): 237. Bearman notes that there has been a similar expansion, in percentage terms, of the number of archivists working for profitmaking business institutions. Such archivists accounted for 5 percent of the 1982 survey's respondents.
2. Frank B. Evans, ed., *Modern Archives and Manuscripts: A Select Bibliography* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1975), pp. 157-160; Sister Mary Ellen Gleason, ed., *Religious Archives in the United States and Canada: A Bibliography, 1958-1981* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1984).
3. August R. Suelflow, *Religious Archives: An Introduction* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1980), pp. 8-9, 12-18.
4. "The One World of Archives," *45th Annual Meeting Program Book*, p. 3.
5. The effects on the archival and genealogical programs of religious beliefs and their development and change over time was discussed fully by Ronald G. Watt, "History and Genealogy: Uncertain Alliances at the LDS Church" (unpublished paper: SAA 45th annual meeting, Berkeley, California, 1981). On a recent effort at making the huge genealogical holdings of the Mormons more accessible, see Elizabeth L. Nichols, "The International Genealogical Index," *New England Historical and Genealogical Register* 137 (July 1983): 193-217.
6. At the 1981 SAA annual meeting in Berkeley, California, Virginia Randolph of Pepperdine University presented a fascinating paper entitled "Does the Left Hand Know the Right? The Archives of Autonomous Religious Groups." Her paper described the serious problem of being an archivist for small religious organizations such as the missionary Churches of Christ, many of whose leaders and members simply do not believe in record-keeping on the grounds that it tends to doubt the intention or ability of God to look after the practical needs of his people. In particular, she reported, some groups interpret the injunction from the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:3—"When you give alms, let not your left hand know what your right hand is doing") as a proscription against the keeping of membership or financial contribution records.
7. Robert Shuster, "Documenting the Spirit," *American Archivist* 45 (Spring 1982): 135.
8. The role of archives in the constitution-writing process of several orders is discussed in the *Catholic Archives Newsletter* issues of January and July 1982.
9. On church attendance, see George H. Gallup, ed., *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion, 1972-1977* (Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources, 1978), pp. I:392 and II:622. On formal church membership, see U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1982-1983* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1982), p. 55. The author suspects, but cannot prove, that this decline of religion is even more marked among middle and upper-middle class, relatively well-educated people—the very kinds of people who tend to become archivists and researchers using archives. The implications of this trend, if true, while purely speculative, would make an interesting, though separate, study.
10. Carl N. Degler, "Remaking American History," *Journal of American History* 67 (June 1980): 13-14. Degler traces this decline to "the expanded content of the American past," which makes increasingly difficult the formulation of any unitary theories of a distinct national character. Another exception in addition to Degler's observation about Puritanism may be the study of Catholic history. For examples of recent efforts in this field, see the five reports on archival and historical projects in the special issue of the *U.S. Catholic Historian* 3 (1983):7-75, and James M. O'Toole, "Archives Revival and the Future of Catholic History," ibid., 3 (1983):87-102.

11. Edward Weldon, "Archives and the Challenges of Change," *American Archivist* 46 (Spring 1983):125-134, gives extended consideration to the impact of broad cultural trends on all archives and the need for planning for the future. Religious archivists should examine his discussion for particular implications for their work and future.
12. The two basic texts for understanding American civil religion are Will Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1960), especially pp. 1-98, and Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," in William G. McLoughlin and Robert N. Bellah, eds., *Religion in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), pp. 3-23. The Eisenhower quote is in Herberg, p. 84.
13. John Murray Cuddihy, *No Offense: Civil Religion and Protestant Taste* (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), pp. 2, 103, 13.
14. Such an analysis must include a consideration of the very terminology which the archival profession, as well as other professions, uses—beginning with the word "profession" itself. In its original meaning, that word related specifically to religious beliefs that were "professed," but it has since broadened to include non-religious meanings as well. Beyond that, we speak of the "canons" or "tenets" of professional practice, expressions that have at least a metaphorical relationship to religious phenomena. Archival thinkers and writers of all kinds need to devote more attention to an examination of the vocabulary they use to describe what it is that archivists do.