

Managing Special Collections in the Field of Religion in University Libraries by Tricia Garvey

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In 1992 I undertook research into special collections of religion in university libraries, as part of my MSc. My aim was to compile a directory of special collections in the field of religion in university libraries, and to look at the way in which they were managed.

My study resulted in a questionnaire being sent to all major universities in Britain who hold special collections in the field of religion. The questionnaire concentrates on the management of such collections; to ascertain the archival material in religion held; conditions of access; facilities offered; and preservation and conservation. I also touched on whether the decline of religious studies within universities has any affect on the collecting of religious materials within university archives.

I also looked in more detail at three university archive religious collections:-

- (i) Brynmor Jones Library - University of Hull
- (ii) Brotherton Library - University of Leeds
- (iii) Borthwick Institute of Historical Research - York University.

This in-depth research involved talking to the archivist and researching the collections in more detail. These three universities were chosen purely because of their geographical location, being only one hour apart from each other.

Religion and Theology

Up until the 1970's the study of religion in British universities was almost exclusively the study of theology. Theological departments in universities usually focussed on Christianity, studying the Bible, Christian doctrine and church history from a committed standpoint.

Religious studies, as a discipline, became popular in universities in the late 1960s, early 70s, and many new Religious Studies Departments were founded in universities.

The term 'religious studies' is usually understood to refer to such subjects as philosophy of religion, the study of world religions or comparative religion and sociology of religion.

In *Turning Points of Religious Studies*, the term 'religious studies' is used to include the multi-disciplinary study of the world's major religions which arose in British universities during the nineteen sixties, but had its roots in the older tradition of the comparative study of religions. In fact, the first ever Religious Studies Department in Britain was not set up until 1967 at Lancaster University.

For the purpose of my study, I use the term 'religion' to include theology and world religions.

Questionnaire

I sent a questionnaire to all major universities in Britain holding special collections of religion. Seventeen universities replied:-

Aberdeen Belfast Bristol Dundee Durham Exeter Glasgow Glasgow Keele Lancaster Leicester London Manchester Nottingham Southampton St. Andrews Stirling Warwick

All seventeen universities hold special collections in the field of religion. Some hold extensive collections, whilst others hold small collections which do not attract much interest.

The questionnaire attempts to do a number of things. Mainly it is an attempt to gather information on special collections of religion held by universities in Great Britain so that a Directory could be made. It shows how the collections are managed, and the facilities available to the user of such collections. Although the questionnaire, is fairly basic, it serves a purpose and succeeds in its objectives.

The problem of the terms religion and theology came to the fore when asking university archivists if their university held such collections. Some gave details of religious collections, but wrote a separate letter to say that they were unsure that this was what was wanted. For example Nottingham University wrote saying that they did not hold special collections specifically relating to the field of religion and then went on to mention Oakham Parish Library and Elston Parish library.

Most of the collections were named and were acquired in a variety of ways: by gift, purchase, or on permanent loan.

Usage

The collections vary as to their amount of usage, some are used very little if at all, and are not widely publicised, also the amount of description given is small. Some collections are used extensively by a wide range of people; students, priests, researchers, anyone in fact who has an interest in the collections. Eleven of the universities do not have their collections used in conjunction with a course held at the university, and those who do, do not use them in conjunction with a religious course. In fact, when I asked the question, I assumed that if the collections were used in conjunction with a course that it would be a religious course, but the universities who did mention a course spoke mainly of history and publishing studies.

Staffing

Most of the university archives in this survey have very few staff looking after them. For example, the University of Dundee do not have any archival staff looking after the archives, but whoever is free on the library staff will deal with retrieval and repair of items whenever it may be required.

Also Keele University Library shelves the special collections in theology alongside the main library theology, and it is dealt with by library staff as necessary.

The findings on low staffing corresponds with the report and discussion document on *The Role and Resources of University Repositories* by the Society of Archivists Standing Conference of National and University Libraries, November, 1989. It reports that almost a quarter of university repositories reported lack of staffing resulting in such things as growing cataloguing backlogs, deterioration in reader services, and reduction in opening hours.

Opening Hours and Conditions of Access

Most of the universities taking part in this survey have reduced archival opening hours compared to their main library, mostly because of the few staff available to run the archives successfully. Many close over the lunch period also.

Archival special collections are usually for reference purposes only, but a few universities will loan its collection if they are non-rare items, and usually for a fee. The conditions of access vary, but all usually ask for some form of identification when someone makes a request to see the special collections.

Most universities prefer an applicant to write or telephone in advance so that the items may be retrieved in advance to ensure that a member of staff is available.

Again when it comes to the loan of items to other libraries or outside readers, the special collections are usually for reference only apart from exceptional circumstances, for instance, when someone asks for a collection for an exhibition, and this is considered at the librarian's discretion. Most universities will loan special collections to other libraries via the British Library, or direct, with restrictions, i.e. using the special collections in the library only, perhaps under supervision; no photocopying of material, depending on age and condition of the items.

Cataloguing and Classification

In this particular area again, the universities taking part in the survey have varied classification and cataloguing procedures. Classification varies depending on the order in which the archivist wants to arrange the collection, for example, if he uses original order, this could be different from any other scheme. For example, St. Andrews, G.H. Forbes collection follows a previously classified shelf list. Some universities use their own classification with a prefix and perhaps a running number sequence, as in the cases of Exeter, Keele, London, Manchester and Southampton libraries. Some use University adaptations of already existing schemes, such as Bliss, Dewey or Library of Congress, as does Lancaster University. In the case of Stirling University library, the Drummond Collection is arranged by date of publication.

The cataloguing of special collections varies according to the amount of detail given, and they can be accessed in a number of ways ranging from author, alphabetical subject, classified index or handlists. Most university archives have a card index and are in the process of adding the special collections index to the OPAC system, a few have computer access only, as in the case of Exeter, Glasgow and Stirling.

Finance for Additions and Preservation of Special Collections

Many of the universities in this survey answered in the negative when asked if they add to their special collections in the religious field. Those who answered 'yes' did not give any further details. Few purchased any further additions and many are added to by donation. The Society of Archivists findings show that 'repositories in universities tend to be part of larger units, and are not on the whole treated as cost centres by their parent body. As a result, few archivists, librarians and administrators in charge of archives and manuscripts have control of their own budgets, or are in a position to give precise figures of the income generated and expenditure incurred by their units.'(p.13).

When questioned about the amount of money spent on repair, maintenance and preservation, most universities could not give me an answer because it was difficult to quantify, mainly because the budget was for the library as a whole.

Directories of Special Collections

A Guide to the Theological Libraries of Great Britain and Ireland was first published in 1985 and recently updated in 1992.

The introduction to the guide is very informative, discussing the range of the guide and comparing the guide with other directories. The main body of the guide examines over 400 theological collections. This guide has actually paved the way for my study, because many university libraries I wrote to sent me a copy of the answers they had provided for the guide, with a few alterations as appropriate.

Alan F. Jesson, editor of the guide, talks about the problems of undertaking such a commitment as compiling directories. The problems arise with changes of personnel, deaths, translations, amalgamations, retirements. By the time Alan Jesson had edited the text, 40 completely new entries had been added, 150 or more were rewritten or amended, and each one was checked against its original question. But Alan Jesson believes that the guide is worthwhile as there is at last a guide to collections and libraries specializing in theology.

'The guide is, of course, imperfect; some librarians did not return the questionnaire. A very few declined to provide any but the barest of information, it was "too difficult". One refused point blank to allow his library to be even named because "it only encourages people who do not read the restrictions to bother us". Some who did co-operate did not return their questionnaire until printing was complete. But at last we have a guide, and I believe, a very usable one.' (*Bulletin of the Association of British Theological and Philosophical Libraries*, p.12, 1986).

British Archives: a Guide to Archive Resources in the United Kingdom 1982, is a guide to the specialist repositories which have proliferated over the past two decades, and embraces all types of repository. Thus, it consolidates information for the historian and the archivist and provides a starting point for the first-time user of archives. The guide is not comprehensive and covers as many places as the writers know of where archives were held and made relatively accessible. Again the writers conclude that:-

The main problem with a reference work of this kind is that its contents are frequently out of date by the time of publication... but if the Guide could be produced quickly, the advantages would outweigh the disadvantages. (Foster, J. & J. Sheppard, *British Archives*, p.v.iii)

The Guide includes: enquiries; open times; access; historical background; acquisitions policy, major collections; non-manuscript material; finding aids; facilities and publications. The arrangement of the guide is alphabetically by town. A list of key words and a general index can be found at the end of the book.

The *Directory of Rare Book and Special Collections* is a comprehensive directory covering public and national libraries, university libraries, colleges and schools, cathedrals and churches, societies and institutes, and a limited number of private houses.

The libraries and institutions are arranged in alphabetical order by region. Each library is given its address, telephone number, hours of opening, conditions of admission, research facilities, and a brief history (where provided) with published references. There is a description of each collection, giving its origin and history, its size, a chronological summary of its contents and subject fields. Details of catalogues and published references have been included whenever available.

The *Aslib Directory* is a directory of over five and a half thousand full entries. The Directory consists of two guides, a subject guide and a corresponding guide in fuller detail. The subject is numbered and there is also an abbreviated form of title to identify the organization. The *Directory* includes organisations which are large, small, commercial, scientific and research, learned and academic, governmental, negotiating, standardizing, qualifying, professional and amateur; producers of data, statistics and abstracts; experts in specialized areas; repositories of vast collections of books and holders of single special collections.

Another guide which is worth a mention is *A Guide to Historical Datafiles Held in Machine-Readable Form*, which provides an inventory of historical datafiles which include religion. A questionnaire was sent to three hundred individuals and two hundred University and Polytechnic departments. The guide covers pre-14th century to the 20th century and covers Britain, Europe, Americas, Asia, Australia and Africa.

Conclusions

In compiling a directory from a questionnaire, I came across similar frustrations to other compilers of directories; such as universities not replying and incomplete answers. In order to create as comprehensive a directory as possible, all universities need to take part in the survey and many did not. Much of the information I collated for the *Directory of Special Collections in the Field of Religion in University Libraries* was not taken from the questionnaire, but from guides which the universities sent to me on their special collections. Although I had not asked for detailed information regarding religious collections in the questionnaire, I had asked for guides or leaflets relating to their special collections in a separate letter attached to the questionnaire. Most universities taking part in this survey did send very good guides relating to their special collections. For those who did not provide a guide I used data from other directories to gain information on special collections.

The range of detail for each religious collection varies enormously from university to university depending on cataloguing policies and age and usage of the special collections. Depending on the importance of the collections the description may be a small or large amount. I found that the level of description in the guides varied from two or three lines, whilst others were written in great detail.

The archives and special collections in university libraries are separate entities from other sections of the university, that is, in this study, the religious collections built up in university archives are not dependant upon religious courses within the university.

University archives have an important function in society, acting as trustees and custodians of the past and present for the benefit of the future. This may be all important for religious collections. If cutbacks in religious studies continue in university departments, archives may be the only places we can research our religious past.

The questionnaire sent to universities in this survey is limited in that it does not ask for detailed information on the special collections in religion, however, it does glean an overview of the management of such collections and shows varying degrees of collection management, policy, conservation, cataloguing and classification and facilities available.

One of the main problems I had in looking at special collections at Leeds and York was the amount of time travelling and the limited amount of time I had to study the collections. It was easier to see the Brynmor Jones Library collection as I work on the premises. Even then, none of the repositories felt that I needed to look at the actual collections themselves as it would serve no purpose, but I was shown how I could find such collections in the catalogues.

The descriptions of the collections of Hull, Leeds and York Universities does show the differences of levels of description for each collection, as some are seen to be more important than others, but it could be argued that better promotion and a fuller description may encourage greater usage.

Another problem I came across whilst looking at special collections in religion is that of 'hidden collections', for example, at the Brynmor Jones Library, the Southeast Asian Collection contains the Harry Parkin religious collection, and I would not have known this had I not stumbled across it. There could be many such hidden collections which are only come across by accident. If a user applied to a university to see if they have any religious collections there could be a problem with the term religion.

In the Society of Archivists report it noted that the most significant product of the seminar *University Repositories; what role do they fulfill and what role should they seek in the future?* held in 1988 at the University of Liverpool, was 'a heightened awareness of the breadth of work being undertaken by staff in university repositories and the sense of the extreme ignorance that existed both among university professionals and the information professions at large, of precisely that work, its functions and its achievements.'(p.5).

It seems that archives, along with religion have been misunderstood in the past, but the National Council on Archives, in collaboration with its constituent bodies (including the Society of Archivists) is spearheading a major exercise in raising the profile of archives and archives services of every type throughout the UK. It will be under the heading 'Voices from the Past', and will consist of a period of three or four months during the summer of 1994, during which events, exhibitions, talks and broadcasts will be held up and down the country. This will be an excellent opportunity to give archives and their contents, such as religious collections, a high profile in the future.

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