

Toward a Greater Discourse: Issues in Religious Archives

by Robert Presutti

ABSTRACT: The topic of religious archives, a catalyst of much discussion in archival literature, has not received much attention within the discourse of the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) in recent years. This essay provides a survey analysis of three pertinent issues with the intention of generating a wider discussion of religious archives within ATLA. These issues include the role of graduate archival education, the effects of religious faith on both the archival record and the individual archivist, and the idea of a theology of archives. An extended review of the contributions of James O'Toole to the discussion of religious archives is utilized.

INTRODUCTION

I had the opportunity to attend my first American Theological Library Association (ATLA) conference last year in Saint Louis. I looked forward to meeting with other archivists who worked in the field to discuss theory and practice, and, of course, to share war stories of difficulties overcome. As I registered at the check-in desk, I was greeted by a colleague from one of the larger university divinity school libraries that also has a well-developed archival program. I was eager to meet his library's archivist for the first time. Unfortunately, I was told that this archivist did not attend ATLA conferences because he, or she, was "not theological."

I found this explanation puzzling. "Not theological." What did that mean? Did the archivist have no formal theological education? Did he hold no theological belief? Did either of those points matter? Going about the business of registering and then meeting with the rest of my colleagues from Emory, I didn't stop to ask any follow-up questions for clarification. However, the meaning of those words would remain as a question in the back of my mind for the entire conference. As I rode the conversational waves through plenary meetings, seminars, and buffets, it became increasingly clear that archival theory was not currently a point of discussion within ATLA and that I was one of only a few archivists in attendance. Moreover, it seemed I was one of the only archivists who hadn't attended seminary, or had a theological background of some sort, or even identified with a denomination. By this measure, I was also "not theological."

I left the conference with more questions than answers. What was happening here? Why does it seem that theological librarianship and the archival community are so disconnected? Are religious archives fundamentally distinct from other archives? With the intention of generating a wider discussion of religious archives within ATLA, this essay examines several key questions. These include the tension between discussions of praxis versus theory, the presence and effects of external belief within religious archives, and the legitimacy of a theology of archives.

THE TENSION BETWEEN PRAXIS AND THEORY

The 1970s and 1980s saw a rapid increase in the number of religious archives throughout the United States. Religious archivists during this period typically had no formal archival training, either through academic coursework or through apprenticeships at established repositories. Most often these earlier religious archivists began their

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duties after working in other roles within their religious institutions or denominations.¹ The vast majority of religious archivists during this period were completely detached from the wider professional archival community, often choosing to associate solely with other religious archivists. A 1985 membership survey of the Archivists of Religious Institutions confirmed that only 33 percent of their members also belonged to the Society of American Archivists (SAA), the leading national professional organization for archivists in the United States.² However, even during this period, increasing numbers of professionally trained lay archivists began joining the field, such as was apparent within Catholic diocesan archives.³

Richard Cox, professor of Archival Studies at the University of Pittsburgh, notes that one's point-of-entry into archival work in the early 1970s "was limited to patching together graduate degrees in history and library science, multi-week training institutes, one or two courses, and some sort of fieldwork or practicum."⁴ This is simply no longer the case. Archival education has developed to the stage where one cannot gain an adequate understanding of archival theory and practice through a hodgepodge of workshops and self-study. Today, completion of a master's program in Archival Studies is clearly the foundational qualification recognized by the profession. Further, Archival Studies now represents a distinct academic discipline. Full graduate archival programs, in both master's and doctoral studies, exist in numerous major research universities comprising of several full-time faculty members. These include programs at the University of Texas at Austin, University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, University of Pittsburgh, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, University of California at Los Angeles, and University of Wisconsin at Madison. Several leading Canadian research universities also offer full graduate programs, including the University of British Columbia, McGill University, and the University of Toronto. The expansion and depth of the Archival Studies discipline within major research universities, and the accessibility of such programs in North America, place the graduate degree in Archival Studies at the core of what it now means to be considered a professional archivist. This certainly does not dismiss the excellent work of archivists who have not completed a graduate degree in archives. New archivists just coming from graduate archival programs and those who are early in their professional careers owe a multitude of recognition to the legions of professionally mature archivists, of all training backgrounds, who have dedicated themselves to the archival endeavor. Rather, the centrality of graduate archival education considers the direction in which the field has moved as a whole and why it was beneficial.

The Academy of Certified Archivists (ACA) was founded at the 1989 annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists with the mission of providing a standardized certification process for archivists. The original vision of the archival certification process was for it to serve as a tandem qualification along with a formal archival education. Unfortunately since 1989, as Richard Cox notes, "There has been little that the Academy has contributed to strengthening graduate archival education. In fact, the Academy has continued to be seen as an alternative to the higher education of archivists, suggesting that the core of archival work is practice-based."⁵ The ACA certification has grown in popularity among some within the religious archives community, as it has elsewhere, as being equivalent to completion of a graduate archival program. In fact, the current ACA certification requirements do

¹ Peter J. Wosh and Elizabeth Yakel, "Smaller Archives and Professional Development: Some New York Stories," *American Archivist* 55, no. 3 (Summer 1992): 476.

² *Ibid.*, 477.

³ James M. O'Toole, "Reference Services in Catholic Diocesan Archives," *The Reference Librarian* 5, no. 13 (1986): 150.

⁴ Richard J. Cox, "The Society of American Archivists and Graduate Education: Meeting at the Crossroads," *American Archivist* 63, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2000): 370.

⁵ Richard J. Cox, "Certification and Its Implications for the American Archival Profession: Changing Views, 1989 and 1996," <http://www.sis.pitt.edu/~rcox/pp1.htm>.

not require any academic archival coursework,⁶ actively undermining the long development of formal archival education. Certification, if combined with a graduate archival program, can have its place in improving quality within the profession. However, certification granted only on experience represents a severely outdated model that threatens to shift the field into stagnation.

The rise of archival research and theory within Archival Studies programs in the late 1990s, termed “archivistics,” is what defines modern archival education. The quality of research being undertaken in graduate archival programs leaves no question that the current ACA certification standards are antiquated. Anne J. Gilliland-Swetland provides a good survey of archival research in her article “Archival Research: A ‘New’ Issue for Graduate Education.” Gilliland-Swetland argues,

Through their graduate education experience, archival students, both master’s and doctoral, should be able to formulate their own way of looking at the world of archives and archival issues, and obtain a set of leadership skills, research tools, and a vocabulary to query, understand and advance the profession and discipline.⁷

Even roughly ten years earlier, in 1988, it was already being recognized within SAA that “The work of an archivist represents that of a profession, not a craft or applied vocation. Theory is not only just as important as practice, but guides and determines that practice.”⁸ Perhaps what is most pertinent is for religious archivists not to view their archival identity as secondary to a primary identity as a religious scholar. The necessary education for modern archivists can no longer be approached as merely a tack-on of functionary training onto another “serious” academic discipline or identity. Being a modern archivist represents a unique identity and encompasses a distinct role. The foundation of this uniqueness is found within archival research and theory. Gilliland-Swetland identifies specific research methods that are frequently taught in graduate archival programs. These include historiography, survey research, case studies, and diplomatics, “the body of techniques, theories and principles for analyzing the form, function, and genesis of documents, with a particular view to establishing authenticity.”⁹

Archival education has moved well beyond basic manuals of practice, and yet there is little discussion of current archival education or archival research and theory within ATLA. In order to engage in contemporary discussions of archives, recognition of archival theory is necessary. Failing to incorporate this acknowledgement antiquates archival discussions within the association. I view this primarily as the fault of professionally educated religious archivists who fail to engage their peers within the organization, or do not involve themselves with ATLA at all, not a shortcoming of ATLA itself. Archivists have a primary responsibility to serve and respect the context in which they perform their duties. As archivists, SAA represents our national professional community. But it is just as important, if not more important, that we fully engage with our locality within ATLA. Recalibrating to where the national discussion on archives is currently, archivists within ATLA have the opportunity to push the discussion within the association beyond practice to a meta-discussion concerning the state of contemporary archival education, the implications of ACA certification, and archival research on religious archives. It can then be identified which topics are currently being examined and where more research is needed.

⁶ Academy of Certified Archivists, “Handbook for Archival Certification.” (Albany, NY: 2009): 9-10.

⁷ Anne J. Gilliland-Swetland, “Archival Research: A ‘New’ Issue for Graduate Education,” *American Archivist* 63, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2000): 259.

⁸ Luciana Duranti, “The Society of American Archivists and Graduate Archival Education: A Sneak Preview of Future Directions,” *American Archivist* 63 (Fall/Winter 2000): 239.

⁹ Gilliland-Swetland, 267.

THE TENSION OF EXTERNAL BELIEF

One of the first, and most thorough, discussions of the theory of religious archives was by James O'Toole.¹⁰ Former archivist for the Catholic Archdiocese of Boston, O'Toole currently serves as professor of American religious history at Boston College. Throughout his career, he has examined several considerations that make religious archives distinctive and is an iconic figure in the archival community. In his 1984 article "What's Different about Religious Archives,"¹¹ O'Toole argues that the foremost uniqueness of religious archives is the presence of religious faith itself and its fundamental effect on the generation, motivation, and control of the archival record. He writes,

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.

O'Toole recognizes that other kinds of archives are guided by general principles that derive from external beliefs. For example, university archives may exist at least partly to exhort the belief in the value of a liberal arts education. However, he maintains that only in religious archives is there a direct connection between belief and the record-keeping process. For O'Toole, baptismal records of the main Christian churches are the direct recorded result of what those churches believe about the sacrament of baptism. He notes other examples of this belief-based generation cycle including the books of remembrance, documentation of family temple ordinances, and the genealogical data present within the Latter-Day Saints tradition. He also notes that the "vigorous anti-institutional bias" held by some evangelical groups, "committed to a radical reliance on God's providing of whatever is needed in any given circumstance . . . generates a predisposition against the creation of records in the first place."

O'Toole contends that religious faith affects the individual religious archivist as well, suggesting that "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." He identifies either choice as potentially problematic. While the archivist who is a member of the parent religious body must make a special effort to maintain objectivity, an archivist who is not a member of the parent body "may not fully grasp the coherence of its beliefs and the ways in which they influence the creation or content of the records."

Further, O'Toole finds uniqueness in the unquestionable nature of religious faith. He maintains, "Other archivists do not face such 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." Surprisingly, O'Toole seems to give a free pass to the certain "faiths" found in secular institutions. Writing well before the advent of post-structuralism, O'Toole provides higher criticism of religious belief while failing to identify the certain unquestioned beliefs present within the state and business. One can surely work without conflict in a state archive as either a Republican or Democrat; both identities are part of the American two-party system that is tied to the federal state itself. Just as the religious archive requires the archivist to define himself in relation to religious belief, working for a state archives requires a definition in relation to the goals and power of the

¹⁰ I would like to thank Richard Cox for providing his students the opportunity to hear James O'Toole speak at a 2007 summer archives colloquium hosted by the University of Pittsburgh, School of Information Sciences.

¹¹ James M. O'Toole, "What's Different about Religious Archives?" *The Midwestern Archivist* 9, no. 2 (1984): 94-95.

state. Further, working for a business archives requires an individual archivist to define himself in relation to the goals, ethics, and power of the parent company, and to the economic ideology of business itself. Religious beliefs do affect individual archivists, but so do the presence of other belief structures in secular archives.

Randall C. Jimerson highlighted the advent of the postmodernist perspective in the American archival discourse in his Presidential Address at the 2005 SAA Annual Meeting, noting that in the late-nineteenth-century positivist era, archives were idealized as a laboratory for objective “scientific history” in the spirit of Leopold von Ranke.¹² Yet, religious organizations were never positivist to begin with, and, as O’Toole would agree, their archives were generated by a belief in the metaphysical. Writing on reference services in Catholic Diocesan archives, O’Toole identifies another difference of religious archives, in that they seek to document the intangible to a much deeper and greater degree to other, secular archives.¹³ He writes, “In a diocesan archives, the archivist must be ready to preserve, organize, and make available records that would perhaps not be judged particularly valuable in another setting.” Religious archives attempt to document supernatural aspects of their beliefs, such as the idea of a spirit, and aid researchers in the process of discovering this documentation. O’Toole cautions,

This requires a certain amount of natural sympathy on the part of the archivist, or at least a willingness to accept such inquiries as legitimate. It also involves the archivist in an interesting and exciting quest, an inquiry to which there may be no final or fully satisfactory answers.

It is easy to imagine that religious archives, which at least partly attempt to document supernatural beliefs, would attract those interested in the idea of the supernatural aspects of religion. Ironically, however, this is no longer usually the case. An interesting aside to the dynamic of documenting the intangible is highlighted in an article written by Robert C. Ray. He traces the recent trend within archival literature that points toward evidence that religious archives have risen to profoundly affect scholarship in areas having little to do with religiosity.¹⁴ Ray explains,

Some surprising presuppositions about the value of religious archives now appear to be taken for granted. One might expect primarily religious research to be occurring in religious archives and to find primarily religious topics in the literature, but this is not the case. Actually, much in the literature appears to suggest that the possibilities for religious archives depend on their usefulness for secular historical research.¹⁵

In any case, as Jimerson notes in his discussion, archives are not neutral or objective, archivists cannot avoid casting their own imprint on the archival record, and, as the late Claude Levi Strauss identified, written documents are clearly linked to power.¹⁶

Where does this leave the individual religious archivist in terms of his beliefs in relation to the beliefs structured within his parent institution? Stephen Prothero, professor of Religion at Boston University, offers some challenging advice to religious studies scholars that could be appropriate for religious archivists as well. In Prothero’s article,

¹² Randall C. Jimerson, “Embracing the Power of Archives,” *American Archivist* 69, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2006): 21-22.

¹³ O’Toole, “Reference Services in Catholic Diocesan Archives,” 157-158.

¹⁴ Robert C. Ray, “No One Has Ever Seen God: The Use of Religious Archives for Nonreligious Purposes,” *Journal of Religious & Theological Information* 7 (2009): 149-150.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 150.

¹⁶ Jimerson, 23.

“Belief Unbracketed,”¹⁷ he describes the “erotics of Religious Studies” as the dynamic that pressures Religious Studies scholars to “bracket,” or suspend their own judgments on the beliefs and practices of those they study. Prothero rather believes such scholars should “move beyond bracketing to moral inquiry,” asking, “What is the danger of divulging to our readers what we really think (however confused or provisional)? Does criticizing our subjects really do them grave harm? Are Religious Studies scholars really so powerful? Our readers so impressionable? Our subjects so weak?” This begs the similar questions, “Are religious archivists so powerful? Are our subjects so weak?” I suppose this would depend on the individual religious archivist and the specific subject. However, as Prothero suggests, if archivists in the post-positivist era “tear down the barriers between ourselves and our subjects” and “the barrier against our own judgments,” it could lead to a healthy tearing down of the barriers that guards our own unquestioned convictions.

The presence of external belief affects both the archival record and the individual archivist. In the case of religious archives, this belief is religious faith itself. The discussion of the effects of religious belief on archives and archivists is long overdue within ATLA. The presence of religious faith is at the core of what makes religious archives unique and can have consequences on archival practice. Religious archives are different from other types of archives because they are generated from a metaphysical understanding. While other types of archives were once held to a scientific positivist ideal, the advent of postmodern thought has closed the gap between the external beliefs that affect religious archives and other, secular archives. Religious archivists must engage with the idea of documenting the intangible as well as the question of whether prescribing to the religious faith being documented is necessary, favorable, or causes conflict.

A THEOLOGY OF ARCHIVES?

As archival theory has developed, some Christian religious archivists began to discuss the possibility of developing moral inquiry into the archival discipline through a “theology of archives.” As with other discussions related to religious archives, James O’Toole provided a thorough contribution in his article “Archives and Historical Accountability: Toward a Moral Theology of Archives.”¹⁸ O’Toole took up a metaphor used by Frank Burke, former president of the Society of American Archivists, that the profession has “a great many parish priests, but very few theologians.” In other words, the majority of archivists, across all sectors, are too busy with their day-to-day responsibilities of administering their repositories to take pause and engage some of the field’s theoretical discussions being steered by full-time educators in graduate archival programs. O’Toole’s suggestion is to develop an “archival theology” to facilitate a language for archivists to express their belief in the professional archival mission. However, he notes the social risks of developing and promoting the idea of theology in the archives field, as some might object that an archival philosophy would prove more appropriate. He writes,

Philosophy has a more neutral ring to it that is appealing on a number of levels. Philosophy... grounds itself on the application of reason and logic . . . and it has no need to make reference to any ultimate of divine reality, the existence of which many people doubt.

Yet O’Toole still finds the idea of an archival theology more suitable and challenging. He contends, “Theology is always connected to particular practices because it actually grows from those activities” and goes on to define archival theology as “the study of archival ideas and practices, based largely on the participation of archivists in

¹⁷ Stephen Prothero, “Belief Unbracketed: A Case for the Religion Scholar to Reveal More of Where He or She Is Coming From,” *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 32, no. 2 (Winter/Spring 2004), <http://www.hds.harvard.edu/news/bulletin/articles/prothero.html>.

¹⁸ James O’Toole, “Archives and Historical Accountability: Toward a Moral Theology of Archives,” *Archivaria* 58 (Fall 2004): 3-19.

their field and their reflections on their work.” This echoes, as many have noted, that theology is something one does. O’Toole identifies several partitions within the larger discipline of theology that also apply to archives: philosophical theology, symbolic theology, and applied theology. The philosophical division of an archival theology would include all of the broad ideals concerning archival work, most significantly why archival work is important. The symbolic division would include “symbolic notions designed to express archival beliefs,” such as the ideas of provenance, fonds, original order, description, and representation. Finally, it is in the area of an applied archival theology where O’Toole believes an archival morality can be developed, and where he most distinctly breaks with the goals of an archival philosophy.

An example of an applied philosophy of archives can already be found within existing archival ethics codes. While O’Toole believes these codes are necessary, he argues that they are precisely drawn, situational principles that are not adequately broad enough to highlight long-term values or morals. Glenn Dingwall echoes this, stating, “Ethics codes provide useful starting points on which to base moral reasoning that relates to specific dilemmas that occur on the job.”¹⁹ O’Toole’s archival theology, much like traditional theology, attempts to facilitate personal understanding and develop the moral mission to the archival enterprise. Ultimately for O’Toole, an archival theology should support the moral mission of “long-term accountability through the use of records.” He writes,

There is no shortage of cases to illustrate the need for and the processes of historical accountability. They might be grouped into two broad categories: the horrors of totalitarian societies in the twentieth century and the parallel violation of human rights in democratic societies. In each of these, records and archives may play an important role in exacting accountability in the present, most notably by providing the evidence to convict individuals and groups of particular crimes.

While O’Toole’s theology is based primarily within the idea of a type of morality, another archivist envisions a theology of archives that places archival work within traditional Christian theology. In Tim Macquiban’s article “Historical Texts or Religious Relics: Towards a Theology of Religious Archives,”²⁰ he describes a theology derived from his own internal belief as a faithful Christian. Macquiban understands the records life cycle as Trinitarian, constituting of “creation, incarnation and inspiration, or revelation.” He describes the creation and appraisal of records as only possible through the “God-given” gifts of writing and the faculty of reasoning respectively, and contends that revelation of God can be made through the study of written records.

There currently exist three suggested dynamics to formalize archival ethics. Traditionally, the field had first sought the development of applied philosophical ethics codes, as similar to other professions. However, it is argued that ethics codes present a limitation in that they are situation-specific. O’Toole’s idea of a moral theology attempts to develop a language and a morality that is transcendent, and Macquiban attempts to place archival work itself into the context and values of traditional Trinitarian Christian theology. However, ultimately the idea of an archival theology may not be agreeable amongst many archivists who perceive the archival mission as stemming from the social sciences and rationalist historical-critical methodology.

CONCLUSION

A discussion of the place, function, and ethos of archival work within ATLA is long overdue. While the rise of Archival Studies research and theory in graduate archival programs occurred over ten years ago, any discussion of

¹⁹ Glenn Dingwall, “Trusting Archivists: The Role of Archival Ethics Codes in Establishing Public Faith,” *American Archivist* 67, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2004): 30.

²⁰ Tim Macquiban, “Historical Texts or Religious Relics: Towards a Theology of Religious Archives,” *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 16, no. 2 (1995): 148-149.

archives within the association since then has stagnantly focused on issues of practice only. Archivists of ATLA member associations have both an opportunity and an obligation to engage the local community they serve, especially archivists who do not come from theological backgrounds. An exploration within the association of what it means to be a professional archivist has yet to take place. An extensive discussion concerning the effects of external belief on both the archival record and the individual archivist is also overdue. Hopefully, “theological” and “non-theological” archivists alike will soon move toward a greater discourse. I now view it my personal responsibility to coax my entire cohort of fellow “non-theological” colleagues into action as well.

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