LETTING THE WORLD IN:
ANTICIPATING THE USE OF
RELIGIOUS ARCHIVES FOR THE
STUDY OF NONRELIGIOUS SUBJECTS

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ABSTRACT: Like researchers who overlook religious archives when writing secular history or exploring other nonreligious topics, religious archivists often neglect to consider these same researchers when describing their collections and planning their outreach. Archivists at the Billy Graham Center Archives (Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois) go beyond serving those researchers who come to use their materials to study religious topics and reach out to those studying nonreligious subjects.

Black nationalism? Women’s history? The Temperance Movement? The Boxer Rebellion? Organizational communication? If it is really possible to say that one subject is “religious” while another is “nonreligious,” such topics would doubtless be classified as “nonreligious.” But are these subjects even important to religious archivists? They seem light years away from the hearts of the collecting policies found in most religious archives. When asked to identify the strengths of their particular collections, religious archivists might not even mention such topics, even though further probing could undoubtedly uncover dozens of them. These subjects simply fall outside many religious archivists’ self-perceived framework of their responsibilities or the needs of their patrons.

Even admitting that religious archives have some material on topics that will interest secular researchers, are religious archivists really responsible to this broader constituency which may have little interest in religious values and convictions? What consideration should religious archivists give this group as records are appraised and described? Should these archivists develop their outreach programs to encourage greater use of their records by secular researchers? The answers to these questions get at the very nature of archivists’ responsibilities and shape how they do their work in a religious context.

To initiate consideration of these issues, it will be assumed that religious archives often have materials valuable to the researcher with a nonreligious topic. That an archives may have materials which document topics outside its stated collecting policy is not a characteristic peculiar to religious archives. College and university archives may document political movements; business archives may record social trends within a community; and both types of in-
stitutions may provide material to someone researching a religious topic. Nor is seeing the value of using a religious archives to study a nonreligious topic a new idea. J. Franklin Jameson in his 1907 presidential address to the American Historical Association urged his fellow historians to follow the example of those who learned much on the medieval period by consulting the available religious records from that time.

Less obvious, but hardly less interesting, is the contribution which the lives of the medieval saints make, indirectly and without intention, to our knowledge of social history. Their authors wrote for purposes of edification and devotion. Often [these] clerical prepossessions so beclouded their minds that we cannot trust their testimony in the very matters about which they are most concerned to persuade us. Often, on the other hand, they furnish invaluable testimony about matters respecting which they had no thought of conveying information to any reader. They may falsify the portraits which occupy the foregrounds of their pictures, distort and make unreal the attitudes and actions which their minds are set on delineating; but the background is rendered with photographic fidelity, because depicted automatically and unconsciously . . . . Thus from the hagiographers we often derive fragments of evidence in social history which we should seek in vain in the professed chronicles.¹

Not only will secular researchers benefit from the study of records in religious archives, but such records may actually broaden the scope of their study. David Haury’s article in The Midwestern Archivist suggests seven general areas of secular study, such as economic and business history, in which religious archives offer documentation.² Emphasizing Jameson’s and Haury’s cases, the experience at the Billy Graham Center Archives underscores what they have said. Although the Graham Center’s collecting policy focuses on documenting the missionary and evangelistic activity of nondenominational Protestants from this continent, a survey of the subjects studied by visiting researchers illustrates that they not only want to study the China Inland Mission or the philosophy of ministry of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, but such nonreligious subjects as Chinese society during and after World War II; ethnomusicology; colonial America; women’s role in the temperance movement; Chinese reactions to the Nationalist/Communist struggle; the Italian/Ethiopian war; religious and cultural changes in Vietnam; chronic malnutrition in Tanzania; and country studies on India, Peru, Japan, Tibet, and South Africa.

At the Graham Center, religious research topics account for 80% of all topics studied. However, this ratio is not a universal one. In a recent interview, Fred Heuser of the Presbyterian Historical Society indicated a distinctly different point of view, saying:

... in our institution more people are doing non-religious kinds of research than traditional religious subjects. For example, most of the people who use our facilities are academicians, college profs writing articles and books, PhD students, and the like . . . . social historians who are interested in 3rd world cultures, women’s historians, people who are doing diplomatic history. These are just some of the kinds of people who are using missionary records, official missionary records as well as personal papers. On the contrary, we’re getting very few people . . . . from the seminaries doing research. It seems almost unbelievable but most of the people who
are using our facilities are non-religious scholars... using religious records for non-religious purposes.  

Subjects mentioned during interviews with other religious archivists confirmed that the Graham Center and the Presbyterian Historical Society are not alone in providing the secular scholar with valuable resources. An archivist from the Catholic diocese of Detroit pointed to the study of the city’s architecture and 1967 race riots. A Lutheran archivist referred to work that had been done studying the ethnic patterns of Chicago settlement. A Presbyterian archivist added McCarthyism and the denomination’s influence on Eskimo death rituals to the growing list. Several archivists mentioned the current proliferation of work on women’s history. Heuser was one who commented:

One topic that’s really big here has been women’s history, and since missionary literature has been an explosive topic the last couple years we’ve had a lot of women historians, women’s studies people coming in and looking at women in this role. They’re really not concerned with what the denomination was doing. They’re concerned about what middle-class American women were doing in the 1880’s and 1890’s somewhere in Persia.

Finally, each of the religious archivists interviewed also pointed to an area of heavy nonreligious use that will be familiar to archivists everywhere: genealogy.

The subjects just listed reflect only a portion of those which religious records document. Should they be considered superfluous aspects of religious collections or seen to highlight the diversity and freshness that characterize all archival collections?

Given the fact that religious archives have diverse and rich collections that might be of interest to persons researching secular topics, this raises an important issue for religious archivists: should they give first priority to serving the needs of those investigating religious topics, or should all researchers be treated alike? To what lengths should they go to accommodate those researchers? Should they aggressively facilitate research in nonreligious areas and encourage this kind of use along with the more traditional work done in religious archives? Or should they concentrate on researchers who are interested in topics such as the development of missionary methods or the evangelistic methods of local churches?

For religious archivists the former must be the course of action. Obviously not everyone will come to a religious archives eager about the eternal truths with which its records deal. These patrons may share a few of the religious archivists’ values and convictions. It may seem that religious archivists adopting this posture will be forced to compromise their spiritual convictions. Or they may feel, as one archivist articulated, “It’s almost disappointing that genealogists who use our archives have no idea of their religious heritage.” But while religious archivists may hold deeply felt spiritual convictions and want to share not only the documents of which they are stewards but also their own perspective of them, the point when making the materials available is not to win converts. But neither is it to make these religious collections more palatable for everyone. Jim O’Toole articulated the dilemma of the religious archivist by asking, “Where do the archives’ final loyalties lie? With the beliefs of the reli-
gious group or with the canon of professional practice?" Without neglecting their responsibilities to their primary constituency, religious archivists must practice professionalism. They must practice what they preach to new initiates in the world of primary source research and "allow the records to speak for themselves." Religious archivists are the stewards of all that the records document, not just their religious components. Their task, like all other archivists', therefore, is to maximize the availability of their collections to whoever can benefit from them.

If they accept this as their task, religious archivists then need to explore its implications for archival practice, especially in the areas of appraisal, processing, and outreach.

When appraising records that might be added to their collections, should religious archivists include the needs of researchers outside their immediate constituencies in their considerations? The records of Chicago's Moody Memorial Church, recently acquired by the Graham Center Archives, provide an example of this issue in that they contained a small amount of material on the 1893 Columbian Exposition, in which the church had been involved. While appraising the entire body of church records, it appeared at first glance that the materials documented little of the church's actual involvement in the exposition. Should those items have been excluded from the collection because they would be of only marginal interest to the student of the church's history or of urban ministry? Or should they have been retained for the value they might have to the student of Chicago history at the end of the 19th century? When appraising records, religious archivists, like all archivists, need to consider all researchers, not simply those working within the general framework of their collecting policies.

The Graham Center's preliminary decision was to retain the items because they were an integral part of the church's records and did in part document the church's contribution to the exposition. In light of the center's concentration on collecting materials related to missionary and evangelism efforts in and from North America, the interests of the researcher on Chicago history were given little consideration. Why not give the items to the Chicago Historical Society, where they would be more likely to be used and requested? Clearly, the records could not be included if they had no relation to the church's involvement in the exposition, and in that case would more appropriately be passed on to another institution. However, that the records might be of greater interest and use to a student of Chicago history than a student of the church's life was not sufficient reason to exclude them from the collection. The Graham Center Archives' decision did not compromise its collecting policy. It did, however, require the staff to reflect on how those and other records might be useful to researchers who did not share an interest in missions and evangelism. In addition, the decision to retain the materials obligates the center to inform institutions which are more likely to receive inquiries about the exposition of this material, both to maximize the use of these items and to encourage professional cooperation rather than competition.

A commitment to meet the needs of secular researchers also has implications for processing. As a collection is described, the archivist is defining the framework within which researchers will work with those materials. Therefore, subject headings should offer an honest and complete assessment of what is
available. The primary subject headings of religious collections will be those related to religion. But processors should also ensure that researchers know about other topics documented in such collections. For example, the records of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association illustrate not only its evangelistic activity but its operational procedures. Because of this, processors of the collection have an obligation to both the student of evangelism and the student of organizational culture: they must include such entries as organizational communication and bureaucracy, along with “evangelistic work” and “Graham, Billy”. The Graham Center has accomplished this by identifying subjects with the aid of Library of Congress Subject Headings, which includes topics like black nationalism; culture conflict; industry, social aspects of; mass media in religion; public health; refugees; social action; and women’s rights.

In doing this, the Graham Center’s staff has been able to critically examine collections for many of their varied uses. The subject headings listed above, while pointing out the diverse nature of the Graham Center collection, also more accurately portray its true scope. They give researchers with nonreligious topics an equal opportunity to identify the collections relevant for their study. At the same time, the nonreligious subject headings encourage researchers with religious topics not only to study missions from the institutional perspective but also to explore the interrelationships between those religious aspects of missionary work and sociological and cultural ones.

But when assigning subject headings to meet the needs of their dual audience, religious archivists need to exercise caution in three areas. First, processors should consider both the layperson and doctoral candidate when describing a collection. When identifying subject headings, they must guard against offering access only to those areas where documentation will support thesis or dissertation level research. Some subject areas may only be tapped for projects with a more limited scope, such as term papers by high school students. That fact does not eliminate the archivist’s responsibility to consider those “lesser” needs. Experience at the Graham Center actually indicates that some high school students are as “serious” as their college or graduate level counterparts, if not as polished in their research skills.

The second caution archivists should exercise is to avoid creating subject entries for every imaginable topic, even in cases where a topic is covered thoroughly. For example, in an oral history interview for the Graham Center Archives, a retired missionary thoroughly described his big game hunting experiences in Nigeria. The processor nonetheless declined to create a new entry for “Big game hunting” because it was felt that the subject heading would not be an access point that would be used. Religious archivists, like all archivists, need to develop a balance between offering no access to subjects and providing subject access to every conceivable topic. They are greatly aided in this by Haury’s identification of the general areas of study in which researchers of nonreligious topics might be interested. 

By using Haury’s conceptual framework, religious archivists can watch for material documenting those general subject areas and make sure to provide the researcher the subject headings to get to them.

A final caution is in order when selecting and using subject headings. Although choosing topical entries for a collection is a subjective process, religious archivists need to ensure that subject entries are used uniformly. In
order to keep entries from proliferating at the whim of each processor, the Graham Center staff regularly reviews the list of subjects that have been used, as well as all proposed additions to its thesaurus of subject headings. By doing so, staff members have discovered subject entries which each processor used differently or some not at all, resulting in many entries reflecting only a portion rather than all of the center’s holdings. Imagine the value of the entry, “Evangelistic sermons,” if collections on Billy Graham’s ministry are not included under this heading. If a subject entry is to be of any use to a researcher, it must refer to all pertinent material in the entire collection or not be used at all.

The third area affected by a determination to serve researchers with nonreligious topics is outreach. If religious archivists commit themselves to making material accessible to the researcher of a nonreligious topic, and if they go to the work of processing a collection to enable that, they must then follow through with a coordinated outreach effort. When it received the Moody Church records, the Graham Center sent out a news release, not only to the religious publications which would have a natural interest in this collection, but also to area newspapers, the Chicago press, historical societies, and archival publications. The release pointed to the relevance of the material not only for the study of Moody Church and urban evangelism but also for the study of Chicago history.

In another aspect of its outreach program, the Graham Center contacts such groups as the Conference on Latin American History, the African Studies Association, the Society for Cinema Studies, and the Speech Communication Association in order to ensure that they are aware of another resource relevant to their field of expertise and to encourage their use of the Graham Center collections. While Billy Graham’s TV shows in the 1950s are not central in the history of television broadcasting, they are still a part of that history and the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences needs to be aware that the center has many of Graham’s programs available for use.

The component of the Graham Center’s outreach program staff members work hardest at is encouraging the use of the archives’ holdings by undergraduate and graduate classes. These efforts are obviously greatly assisted by the archives’ being affiliated with a college community, but the archives’ aim is to reach out especially to those faculty who have no idea what pertinent material exists for a course they will be teaching, as well as to those who have never considered using the archives because they assume that its collections only document missions and evangelism.

The archives staff encourages professors to expose their students to research with primary sources and suggests materials that would tie directly into their courses. It is no surprise that classes in missions history or American church history are easily convinced to come to the archives for orientation and work projects. But other courses, which may seem like most unlikely candidates, have also tapped into the archives holdings—courses such as social psychology, biculturalism, public relations, African and Asian history, and educational research methods. In all but one of these cases, the professor brought the class to the archives for orientation, an exercise with actual documents, and a follow-up assignment designed by the archives staff. This kind of involvement by faculty and students was largely a response to an initiative of the archives staff, and in some cases only after several years of annual persistence. But as Graham
Center Archives director Bob Shuster wrote in a paper describing the staff’s outreach program to undergraduate students, “The foundation stone of all our efforts with the students is our interchange with faculty.” In each of these instances, the staff sought to encourage potential researchers who would not naturally walk through the archives reading room door to consider the value that Graham Center holdings might have for their various areas of interest.

In a similar project, the Graham Center staff worked with an accelerated world history class from a local public high school. An archivist first went to the class to present an overview on the archives’ holdings and archival research. The class then came to the center for orientation on archival procedures. During the remainder of the semester, students used suggested materials from the center’s holdings to complete a major project which required them to compare the information from one center collection with data from another source, such as an international newspaper. Their enthusiasm exceeded that of college and graduate school patrons. The teacher was not interested in Protestant non-denominational missions and evangelism, but rather in encouraging students to use primary sources and introduce them to the skills needed to do that. These students used the papers and records of missionaries whose calling was to evangelize the non-Christian, but who also intimately observed the common life of the people, the political events of their day, and the social change around them. These records provided a different perspective of events than did common textbooks, the newspapers of the period, and secular histories, and were indispensible resources for papers on topics such as the Sino-Japanese War and the Boer War.

This article suggests that it is not enough to serve those who come to religious archives to conduct research on religious topics. Religious archivists must also reach out to those studying nonreligious subjects. This will involve more work, but the benefits to researchers call the religious archivist to take up that work. Religious archivists must be honest about the relevance of their materials and recognize that not all collections will be pertinent to all areas of nonreligious study. As one colleague pointed out, “In [many] instances, a lot of the non-religious subjects could be looked into better in other places.” Jameson also recognized the limitations of religious records’ value for all subjects related to American history when he said:

It would be wrong to exaggerate the interest of these little lives of long-forgotten worthies, or the amount of which they can yield to the student of American social history or national psychology. In most of them are long arid stretches.

But does that mean that religious archivists should refrain from exerting themselves in this task of broadening the usability of their collections? Jameson hints at the answer when he continues:

If one ventures to insist a little upon their utility to the younger investigator, it is from a sense of real danger which besets the latter’s pathway, the danger of confining himself to the constitutional and political history of America, now so easy to study, and from a consequent desire to urge upon him the claims which American religious history may make upon one who wishes a full understanding of the American character and spirit.
Collections found in religious archives, like those in all archives, are unique. But collections found in religious archives offer a distinctive perspective. The main contribution of religious archivists to their constituencies and society is in preserving these materials. But they extend that contribution by offering laypersons and scholars a broader base from which to understand their experience or field of interest. Most archivists would not be found guilty of keeping the world out of their facilities or collections; they will be judged more faithful stewards if they, like the servant in Jesus' parable, "go out to the roads and country lanes" to invite all who would come to feast at the archival banquet. 

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NOTES

6. Heuser, telephone interview.
7. Ibid.
8. Wittman, telephone interview.
12. Yakel, telephone interview.
14. Ibid.