

Documenting Religious Organizations: Theory and Practice

Author Note

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Abstract

In creating an appraisal policy to support the documentation of a church, synagogue or other religious movement, an archives must decide whether to gloss over the religious aspect of its mission and seek to document itself as an organization which happens to be religious, or to attempt to engage the messy question of belief to document the faith group itself. This paper will examine the problems and possibilities of appraisal in religious archives. I will first discuss the development of the last forty years of appraisal theory regarding religious archives, and then examine how that literature has been applied at the Archives of the Episcopal Church, a religious repository in Austin, Texas. Finally, I will discuss how a repository could combine the implications of both the literature and its application at the two repositories to create or update an appraisal policy that would support the full and faithful documentation of a religious group, using the newly-established archives of the Austin's Congregation Agudas Achim as an example.

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Introduction

A religious archives finds itself in a quandary from the outset: in creating an archival appraisal policy to support the documentation of a church, synagogue or other religious movement, should the archives gloss over the religious aspect of its mission and document itself as an organization which happens to be religious, or should it engage the messy question of belief to document the faith group itself? While it is certainly easier to treat a church or synagogue as an organization from the perspective of documentation, a church or any other religious institution is only as good as its believers; for a religious archives to ignore the importance of religious belief and the practices those beliefs engender seems to ignore a significant portion of what makes a church different from any other organized social group.

This paper aims to generate appraisal policy recommendations for the newly-established archives of the North Austin synagogue Congregation Agudas Achim based on the literature on appraisal in religious archives and current practice of other Austin religious repositories. Accordingly, I will first discuss the development of appraisal theory regarding religious archives and then examine how that literature has been applied at the Archives of the Episcopal Church (AEC). Finally, I will discuss the implications of the literature and its application at the AEC and what the Congregation Agudas Achim history committee may learn from both in the creation of its own appraisal policy.

Evolving Approaches to Religious Archives

Childhood

Religious archives first emerged in the archival consciousness in the 1960s, when they were treated like organizational archives which happened to be religious rather than as some special, more transcendent type of archives. Two articles, one discussing Catholic chancery

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archives and one discussing the archives of the Mennonite Church, exemplify this attitude. The former, published in 1965 by priest and archivist Francis Weber, takes a reductive approach to documenting diocesan activities; Weber states that “organizational procedure is rather uniform in American curiae,” and that all Catholic chancery archives will therefore generally be comprised of the same sorts of records (Weber, 1965, 255). After listing the exhaustive set of series required for his own diocese, the Diocese of Los Angeles, Weber instructs chancery archivists from smaller dioceses to subtract or conflate series according to their own needs. The kinds of series cited by Weber revolved around the formal Catholic hierarchy, and include series for men and women religious, priests and chaplains, diocesan, American and European seminaries, ordination, cemetery files, parishes in and outside the city, education, and Catholic societies.

Melvin Gingerich’s article (1966) on appraisal for religious archives with reference to the Mennonite church also argues for an organizational view of religious bodies. He appends the Mennonite appraisal policy, and its discussion of church officers’ responsibilities to the records they create makes the treatment of the church as an incorporated organization explicit:

“A person holding an office in an agency of the church acts as a servant of the church, not as a private individual...[although m]any of the officers...of our incorporated boards maintain their offices...in their own homes. Does this accident of the location of records change the nature of the records, so that they become the private records of the individual rather than the records of the corporate group?” (519-520)

There is little intimation that church officers are engaged in holy work; if anything, this appraisal policy seeks to reduce church service to the level of an ordinary bureaucracy so that the church may legally retain the records it creates, and once again, the cited series of records of be retained are all products of official processes: meeting minutes, all non-routine communications, bylaws

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and constitutions. Interestingly, although Gingerich also discusses the desirability of accessioning church leaders' personal papers in the body of his article, personal papers appear nowhere in the actual appraisal guidelines as a record type worthy of collection.

Adolescence

As the number of religious archives grew throughout the 1970s (O'Toole 1980), new approaches to religious history—no doubt influenced by changing historiographical agenda in secular history—began to percolate into the archival consciousness. In a 1977 review of Catholic historiographical practices, William Halsey identifies a sea change in Catholic historical writing from an emphasis on the Catholic Church and its institutions to an interest in Catholicism's broader social and cultural impact, which he argues is not supported by the archival resources held in contemporary Catholic repositories. Halsey describes a body of records that speak to the formal hierarchy, the Church and its ordained elite, but that ignore the middle and bottom layers: the ordinary Catholic clergy, administrators, and educators crucial to the Catholic experience, as well as the mass of Catholics themselves, those “who were unable or without sufficient leisure to articulate their feelings in a literary fashion” (28). His criticism strongly implies that documenting only the Church's formal activities was not sufficient to document *Catholicism*, and that the lack of records from ordinary clergy and Catholics in Catholic archives denote a serious gap in Catholic history, an analysis which may be extended to any faith movement.

Halsey goes on to say that “both historians and archivists must be more ingenious when it comes to dealing with the majority of American Catholics” (29); one version of this ingenuity was hinted at by Sister Felicitas Powers in a 1980 article published in *Catholic Library World*. While Powers' overall emphasis is on the organizational nature of religious archives, she also

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sees a place for the documentation of belief, and to that end, recommends the collection of the personal papers of an order's founder or foundress; although a founder's papers are a far cry from those of ordinary Catholics, the terms in which Sr. Powers speaks of those papers, as a way to document "animating spirit," show an effort to archivally capture the less tangible aspects of religious belief (38).

Adulthood

It was not until the mid 1980s, however, that religious archives found their theoretical prophet in James O'Toole, who was the first to seriously grapple with the meaning and thoughtful documentation of religious archives; the decade from 1984-1995, bookended by his two key articles on the subject, may be seen as the pinnacle of religious archival theory. At the time serving as the archivist of the Archdiocese of Boston, O'Toole first took up his theme of the meaning of religious archives in his 1984 article "What's Different About Religious Archives?" There he proposes four factors that set religious archives apart. First, he argues, religious archives appeal to external belief to validate both their mission and their recordkeeping practices; he gives the example of baptism, the records of which speak not only to the practice of baptism itself but also to the age at which a particular church sees baptism as necessary, a significant doctrinal point in several strains of Protestantism. Second, religious archives have as part of their mission the documentation of the intangible—in other words, that a necessary part of religion which must therefore inform its archives is the belief in some other world, which in context is no less real for being wholly spiritual. This presents obvious challenges to documentation which are not faced to the same degree, if at all, by secular archives. Third, religious archives are blossoming at a time (in 1984) when religious faith and the interest in scholarly religious history is declining, meaning that religious archives must perforce work

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harder to justify themselves as necessary institutions from the perspective of their parent organizations—who will look at these records if membership in the church and religious scholarship is declining?—and from the perspective of funding, which varies directly with formal membership in a religious organization. Finally, O’Toole argues that American religious archives face a unique challenge in carving out a space in the public discourse because of the strong American tradition of the privacy of faith set against the tradition of a public, secular “religion of civility,” an unseeing pluralism which does not admit of any one faith taking precedence (O’Toole 1984, 98). Institutionally, archives are conceived as public and impartial, places where all of history may be found rather than only some of it, or all of it from a particular perspective (Buckley 2007, Schmuland 1999), and setting aside the glaring inaccuracies of such perceptions, in O’Toole’s analysis, an archives which self-identifies with a particular faith becomes a stick in the eye of public pluralism.

While aspects of O’Toole’s analysis seem somewhat dated today—his assertion that religion is unwelcome in the public discourse, for example, seems increasingly untrue in the wake of the Moral Majority and the Tea Party caucus—his article represents the first serious attempt on the part of an archivist to engage with the difficulties of religious archives, namely, whether or not they are in fact different than archives of the secular stamp. What O’Toole does not do is make any recommendations in terms of appraisal. An archives manual published the same year, Evelyn Ling’s *Archives in the Church or Synagogue Library* (1984), does engage this question, and the list of records types she suggests as worthy of preservation is a far more varied assemblage than those promoted in the 1960s. In addition to the typical official records, correspondence and church or synagogue publications, Ling advocates for collecting oral histories, particularly from older members of the congregation, photographs and paintings of

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significant events in congregational life, memorabilia, and congregant correspondence, all of which are unofficial records and none of which were even mentioned by the likes of Gingerich and Weber.

Just why those sorts of records—oral histories and memorabilia—have particular significance for religious archives is discussed by O’Toole in his second great contribution to the theory of religious archives, the idea of symbolic value (1993). Symbolic value is a third layer of meaning for archival records, in addition to the informational and evidential values laid out by Theodore Schellenberg in 1956, which O’Toole defines loosely as “the *impractical* reasons for the creation of records,” records for which meaning is “derive[d] less from what appears in its surface text and more from its symbolic standing-in for something else” (O’Toole 1993, 238). Although both secular and religious examples of symbolic records are described, the emphasis throughout his article is on the deeply symbolic values invested in religious records and recordkeeping practices. An old Torah scroll cover, for example, attests to the practice of *hiddur mitzvah*, whereby the Jews are commanded to make their religious objects beautiful to look at so as to inspire. *Hiddur mitzvah* has its origins in a phrase from the song sung by the Israelites after crossing the Sea of Reeds¹ and is thus linked to one of the defining experiences of the Jewish people. A Torah scroll cover embroidered with a family name signifies that family’s participation in *hiddur mitzvah* and in the life of the congregation in a far more visceral way than a returned pledge cards from the annual High Holidays campaign. O’Toole also argues that although many of the records in religious archives *also* have evidential value, their symbolic value is no less important. To draw on the baptism example cited above, baptismal records contain all three types of value: informationally, they attest to the names and dates of births in a

¹ The phrase in question is “zeh Eli v’anvehu,” “This is my God and I shall glorify Him,” Exodus 15:2.

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parish; evidentially, to the practice of baptism within a church; and symbolically, to the church's position on infant versus adult baptism.

While O'Toole's symbolic value is a powerful tool for analyzing the holdings of religious archives of all stripes, and presents compelling reasons to retain records and artifacts that might ordinarily be discarded, another significant motivation for religious recordkeeping is presented by Tim Macquiban (1995). Writing as a Methodist minister and historian who served as the archivist of Wesley College in Bristol, Macquiban defends archival records and religious archives in particular as valuable because they testify to the workings of God in history. He conceives of keeping archives as a logical extension of the Biblical record of revelation; although the significance of events to which the archives testify may not be immediately clear, with time and the correct perspective, the patterns will emerge, and for this reason, archives are crucial to the historical process. While it should be noted that his view is deeply rooted in Christian theology and is thus less universally applicable as a theoretical construct than O'Toole's analysis—which can apply equally well to secular records—Macquiban's perspective remains a valuable one in the discussion of documenting intangible value. He also shows an appreciation for the power of symbolic value in archives; his archives contain not only the kinds of records typical of archives—minutes, correspondence, and so on—but also Methodist relics such as the sermons and hymns of the Wesley family and locks of John Wesley's hair. These items' value is chiefly symbolic, and their symbolic power is what makes them cherished artifacts at Wesley College, named for Methodism's founding family. The presence of these artifacts also makes the archives the seat of historical Methodism, of the faith group inspired by a great preacher rather than the organization which sprung up around his message.

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These three articles spanning the decade from 1984 to 1995—O’Toole’s writings on what makes religious archives different and records’ symbolic value, and Macquiban’s musings on a theology of religious archives—represent religious archives’ theoretical pinnacle. The impact of this kind of thinking can be seen in a 1994 article proposing a documentation strategy for Conservative Judaism (Wertheimer, Bernhardt and Miller). For most of the twentieth century, the Conservative movement was the largest Jewish denomination in terms of affiliated congregations in the United States (Jacobs n.d.); with this impetus for creating a documentation strategy, Jack Wertheimer and two colleagues from the Ratner Center for the Study of Conservative Judaism, in consultation with Helen Samuels, described a strategy which, although it was anchored around the documentation of the Conservative movement’s institutions—the Jewish Theological Seminary, the United Synagogue for Conservative Judaism, and the network of Jewish day schools and summer camps—was ultimately more concerned with under documented areas speaking to belief. These areas included “the role of Conservative rabbi beyond the synagogue, as... in interfaith work, the civil rights struggle, [and] chaplaincy in the military...[and t]he changing role of women in religious life” (Wertheimer, Bernhardt and Miller 1994, 378-379). Although the Wertheimer-Samuels strategy was never implemented,² its outline is striking in its identification of these slippery categories of Jewish practice as both necessary and desirable categories for which to seek documentation, in addition to the obvious formal sources of Conservative Jewish records.

Middle age

Having reached its theoretical heights in the early 1990s, the subfield of religious archivy settled into a comfortable middle age in the second half of the decade, which saw the publication

² After establishing a center for the study of Conservative Judaism and conducting an initial survey of congregations and individuals to discover unknown sources of documentation, the project appears to have disintegrated, perhaps due to lack of funding.

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of a literature review on religious archivy (Patkus 1997), a pair of articles from the Catholic Archives of Texas arguing for advocacy by historians for religious archives and their resources (Prezynska 1996, Preszynska 1998), and most recently, a reflective piece on professionalism and engagement in the broader archives field by Robert Presutti (2010); it is safe to say that once a discipline has reached the stage of professional existential angst, it has truly arrived.

From the overwhelming emphasis on the documentation of religious groups as simple organizations in the 1960s, the literature on religious archives has evolved to show an ever greater awareness of the role of the individual in religious communities, and to engage in the question of what it means to document institutions based on belief expressed in practices that are often neither wholly rational nor easy to document. Consequently, religious archives that are established today have a far wider range of resources on which to draw in terms of creating a thoughtful mission and appraisal policy than archives established in the first half of the twentieth century. But how might this body of literature and its now-sophisticated understandings of religious documentation translate to a working appraisal policy for the archives of Congregation Agudas Achim? The proposed documentation strategy for the Conservative movement provides half of the answer; the evolution of the appraisal policy of the Archives of the Episcopal Church provides the second half. These stories combined are a rich source of guidance for the CAA archives.

The Archives of the Episcopal Church

The Archives of the Episcopal Church (AEC) provides an interesting functional example of changing appraisal attitudes in religious archives. Created by laymen in 1953 as part of the Church History Society, the AEC was initially housed in the chapel basement of the Episcopal Divinity School in Philadelphia before being transferred to the library of Austin's Episcopal

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Seminary of the Southwest in 1956, where they have remained since (Winfrey 1961). Their initial appraisal strategy as described by Dorman Winfrey in 1961 was wholly based on the organizational view of the church, whose mission was to collect, preserve and maintain “records and historical documents connected with the life and development of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America, and to foster as far as possible the investigation of its history and the development of interest in all relevant research” (431).

To this end, the archives was chiefly responsible for collecting the records of the different levels of the Episcopal hierarchy, from the General Convention and its subcommittees to the records of the various dioceses and missionary districts across the US, as well as journals from unofficial and voluntary Church institutions and periodicals affiliated with the same. “[B]iographical and bibliographical materials on the clergy and leaders” of the Episcopal Church are listed as a category of medium importance for collecting, but as next to last in importance in terms of the archives’ major holdings, which in 1961 consisted of the records of the General Convention, diocesan journals, missionaries’ reports, journals and records, parish histories, bishops’ and clergymen’s letters, diaries, correspondence and sermons, and collections of Church of England and American Episcopal prayer books (431). These are collections which center in large part on the Church hierarchy; the personal papers come from men—only men—who are a part of the formal hierarchy rather than from the laity.

The appraisal policy in use at the AEC today is quite different and explicitly embraces a vision of a church which extends far beyond a formal hierarchy. Today,

“The Archives’ acquisitions strategy is to document both the formal and informal areas of Church life in order to gain a more complete historical record. It actively acquires records produced in the course of official business by the General Convention and the national

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Church's corporate bodies. These official records are strengthened by documentation on individual members, including the private papers of individuals, who are exemplars of leadership, witness, or profound ministry. Other sources are enlisted to enrich the official transcript and include such forms as audio recordings, pictorial representations, circulated statements, electronic communications, artifacts and memorabilia” (Holdings and acquisitions 2003).

In addition to its responsibilities for collecting the official records of the General Convocation and its subordinate bodies and the records of the host Episcopal Seminary of the Southwest, the archives has an avowed and explicit commitment to collect records reflecting less tangible aspects of Church life. Examples of these sorts of records include the papers of “individual Episcopalians whose contributions to the church represent models of ministry, examples of extraordinary witness, or whose life work offers an enduring contribution to the Church’s teaching,” as well as records which document “the role of minorities, women and other groups who have historically found their voice[s] on the margins of Church life” (Holdings and acquisitions 2003). Accordingly, although they are far outnumbered by the papers of ordained church leaders, a handful of laymen’s personal fonds are listed in the holdings; additionally, the entirety of the Episcopal Women’s History Project’s oral history collection, about 60 recordings and transcripts, is from lay women (Episcopal Women’s History Project 2012). The church also collects “photographs, works of art, artifacts, [and] memorabilia [which] expand the Archives’ capacity to teach through exhibit and publication” (Holdings and acquisitions 2003). The desire to document belief is echoed by the AEC’s policy on records not collected; among the records the archives does not accept are “the secular records of notable Episcopalians who have not had a visible role in Church life” (Holdings and acquisitions 2003). The emphasis is on individuals

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who have contributed to the Church and whose lives testify to an avowedly religious, belief-based way of living.

Another piece of the acquisitions policy which can be seen as emphasizing belief is the interest in artifacts with exhibition value. The formal invocation of exhibition value is an interesting one; archives do not typically acknowledge accessioning collections or artifacts purely for exhibition purposes, even if such value can be a recognized component part of records' overall value (Intrinsic value 1982), but in a religious setting, it is rather apropos. Organized religion, particularly in the Catholic and High Church Protestant traditions, is dependent in large part on the spectacle of worship. It is not only the transubstantiation of the host but the spectacle of taking Communion which gives the ritual its power. While an archival exhibit is a poor second to an Easter Mass at Canterbury, the archives is catering to an acknowledged human desire and need for artifacts, where they may have a particularly powerful impact if they are both religiously and historically significant.

The archives' holdings have grown and broadened in line with its expanded acquisitions policy and are made up of not only paper records but also a large digital collection consisting of the Episcopal Constitutions and Canons, the Acts of Convention, Resolves of Council and Reports to Convention, oral histories in audio and transcribed format, photographs, artifacts and memorabilia. The collections listed on the archives' website also present a far more diverse view of the Church than the view from 1966, which shows that the appraisal policy listed has in fact been implemented. Holdings of significance include the Afro-Anglican archives, which document "the conflicted story of [the Church's] participation in and rejection of racial division and prejudice" through Episcopal programs and the personal papers of significant African-American Church leaders (The Afro-Anglican archives of the Episcopal Church 2008); the

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Native American collections, which are comprised of mission records primarily from Hawaii and Alaska and some missionaries' personal papers of missionaries (Holdings relevant to American Indians and Native Americans, n.d.); and the records of the Mission to Japan, which spans nearly one hundred years (1859-1953) and includes records from the Board of Missions, missionary personnel files, blueprints of Church institutions in Japan, Church publications, and photographs and negatives of individuals, congregations and institutions (Episcopal mission to Japan 2003). The current holdings of the AEC document a church with a wide reach and varied mission, and whose impact is probably far greater than even the documentation held would suggest.

Recommendations for Congregation Agudas Achim

The history committee of Congregation Agudas Achim (CAA) should combine the approaches of the documentation strategy for Conservative Judaism with those of the Archives of the Episcopal Church in determining what to include in its own appraisal policy.

From the documentation strategy, the synagogue may take methodological guidance. In terms of actual records collection, the Ratner Center started by gathering the low-hanging fruit: the records of the Jewish Theological Seminary and other formal arms of the Conservative movement, records that were both important to retain and relatively easy to find and accession (Wertheimer, Bernhardt and Miller 1994). Documentation of less tangible aspects of the movement such as changing women's roles or the role of the rabbinate outside the synagogue were identified as areas of prime interest but were not immediately attacked. It would thus behoove the synagogue to first put its house in order by accessioning, arranging, and describing the formal records to which it already has access, such as the records from the board of directors' meetings, the Sisterhood, the weekly synagogue bulletins, and so on, before it seeks records documenting less tangible aspects of Jewish life and practice. This does not mean that the

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congregation's formal records in hand must be completely processed before the synagogue begins to seek out other documentation, but that it would be preferable to have a processing program for accessible records well established before the synagogue begins soliciting congregants' papers.

The AEC appraisal policy also has much to offer, particularly in terms of records types to seek and not to seek. The synagogue should mirror the AEC's focus on collecting the papers of influential congregants and also ensure that they receive as full documentation as possible of their rabbinate. The impact of particular religious leaders on the tenor of a congregation cannot be overstated, and CAA's current head rabbi, Neil Blumofe, is a well-known and well-loved figure in the Jewish community as well as the wider Austin community (Best dulcet tone 2011, SX schedule 2012). Assistant rabbi Rachel Kobrin has been no less important as a guiding influence, and has in her brief tenure introduced several new programs, including a monthly Saturday morning minyan with a special focus on song, and a monthly Friday night service in South Austin.

The synagogue should also make a special effort to retain artifacts which speak to the religious life of the congregation. Examples currently held by the synagogue include old Torah scroll covers, a tablecloth from the 1970s embroidered with names of congregants by the CAA Sisterhood as a fundraising venture, and a mock Torah scroll signed by the members of a new Reform congregation to whom CAA lent a kosher Torah scroll. Again, although these are not records traditionally archival, their symbolic value in terms of religious practice militates that they be retained.

Similarly, CAA would do well to echo the AEC's refusal to take the secular papers of Jews who are not active in the life of the congregation; if the synagogue archives wish to

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document Jewish religious life, the papers of a non-observant Jewish businessman will do little to enhance the collection. One exception should be made for papers technically secular detailing Israel advocacy and activism that may or may not be religiously motivated, but that also document a fundamental part of both American Jewish life and the priorities of CAA. Nor should the synagogue accept the records of other Austin Jewish organizations not affiliated with the congregation, such as local day schools and the Austin Jewish Community Center, as these records definitely fall beyond the scope of the congregation itself.

Conclusions

Religious archival theory has evolved and developed significantly since the 1960s from a curiosity in the archival literature to a true subdiscipline with its own, albeit it small, body of literature of theory and best practice. New repositories now have a wealth of thoughtful and specialized literature on which to draw as a guide in formulating the founding policies that are crucial for a functioning and sustainable repository; the new archives of Congregation Agudas Achim is no exception. By modeling the appraisal policy of the Archives of the Episcopal Church, as well as taking methodological guidance from the proposed documentation strategy for Conservative Judaism, there is no reason to think that the CAA archives, with the proper institutional support, will not be a successful endeavor.

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Biographical sketch

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