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Richard J. Cox
University of Pittsburgh

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REVIEWS, CRITIQUES, AND ANNOTATIONS

Review Essay

Evangelical Religious Institutions Consider Their Archival Needs: A Review of the 1988 Evangelical Archives Conference Proceedings

Richard J. Cox

Denominations and religious orders in the United States have a strong tradition of interest in their history and the preservation of their records. The Episcopal church has had diocesan historiographers and archivists since the mid-nineteenth century.¹ The Catholic church has undergone a significant rebirth of interest in and efforts on behalf of managing its institutional archival

¹ The career of Rev. Ethan Allen is typical of these individuals; see Richard J. Cox, "The Origins of American Religious Archives: Ethan Allen, Pioneer Church Historian and Archivist of Maryland," *Journal of the Canadian Church Historical Society* 29 (October 1987): 48-63.

records.² Besides the endeavors of such individual denominations, the religious archivist has been a ubiquitous feature on the American archival scene throughout the twentieth century, in both number of repositories and individuals employed as archivists.³

The tradition of American religious archives does not mean, however, that there are no serious problems and challenges facing these repositories and their archivists. Despite the Episcopal church's archival tradition, for example, Mark Duffy recently wrote that the "church, at least at the parish and diocesan level, has not begun to address the problems posed by modern-day methods of recordkeeping."⁴ Duffy noted that one of the major causes of this is the church's preoccupation with "present and future concerns," although James O'Toole, one of the leading students of religious

² James M. O'Toole, "Catholic Diocesan Archives: A Renaissance in Progress," *American Archivist* 43 (Summer 1980): 284-93, and "Archives Revival and the Future of Catholic History," *U. S. Catholic Historian* 3 (1983): 87-102; Peter J. Wosh, "Keeping the Faith? Bishops, Historians, and Catholic Diocesan Archivists, 1790-1980," *Midwestern Archivist* 9 (1984): 14-26.

³ For earlier surveys of religious archives, see William Warren Sweet, "Church Archives in the United States," *American Archivist* 14 (October 1951): 323-31, and Mabel E. Deutrich, "American Church Archives: An Overview," *American Archivist* 24 (October 1961): 387-402. For analyses of archival institutions and the profession that place religious repositories into this context, see David Bearman, "1982 Survey of the Archival Profession," *American Archivist* 46 (Spring 1983): 233-41, and Paul Conway, "Perspectives on Archival Resources: The 1985 Census of Archival Institutions," *American Archivist* 50 (Spring 1987): 174-91.

⁴ Mark J. Duffy, "The Archival Bridge: History, Administration, and the Building of Church Tradition," *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church* 55 (December 1986): 281.

archives, stated that "most of the problems facing [Catholic] diocesan archivists are similar to those facing the archival profession as a whole: archivists must broaden their base of support by solidifying their professional standards and activities."⁵ Whatever the cause, religious archivists and their institutions face serious difficulties as they near the end of this century.

Such stresses are exacerbated because documenting the church as an institution, difficult enough it would seem, has meant documenting religion and society. O'Toole has rightly said that religious archives have as a mission to document something "very intangible, often fleeting, and perhaps in the end undocumentable."⁶ The responsibility of religious archives to be mindful of the church as an institution that has had a pervasive role in society makes the lack of resources and other problems besetting these guardians of this portion of documentary heritage loom even larger.⁷

If religious archivists and their institutions find such problems difficult, the evangelical portion of this community faces even greater problems. In general, evangelical Christian institutions tend to be more oriented to the present and the future. They have little appreciation for their heritage and, consequently, have done little to identify and preserve their historical records. Their organizations tend to be more constantly in flux, less organized,

⁵ "Catholic," 293.

⁶ James M. O'Toole, "What's Different About Religious Archives?" *Midwestern Archivist* 9 (1984): 91-101, and Robert Shuster, "Documenting the Spirit," *American Archivist* 45 (Spring 1982): 135-41.

⁷ For a case study that reveals the complexities of documenting the work of the spirit, see James M. O'Toole, "Things of the Spirit: Documenting Religion in New England," *American Archivist* 50 (Fall 1987): 500-17.

and less hierarchical than the mainstream denominations and religious orders.

Looking at evangelical religious archivists and their institutions as part of the modern archival community brings even more daunting challenges, issues, and questions into focus. The past decade has certainly revealed that the American archival profession is not a static occupation. It has been a time of intense self-analysis (statewide assessment and reporting projects and national planning efforts), deliberate action (advocacy on behalf of the National Archives's administrative independence and individual certification), and changing standards and practices (the adoption of the USMARC Archives and Manuscripts Control format, to name only one).⁸

All of these trends and concerns are reflected and, to some extent, addressed in the recently published proceedings of the Evangelical Archives Conference.⁹ This conference, held in July 1988, was an "effort to work out ways to better preserve and use the records of the institutions of the evangelical movement in

⁸ The literature on these and related topics is extensive, but a perusal of the *American Archivist* during these years will provide an excellent view of the archival profession in the 1980s. For general summaries of recent changes and future directions, see Larry J. Hackman, "A Perspective on American Archives," *Public Historian* 8 (Summer 1986): 10-28, and "Toward the Year 2000," *ibid.*, 92-98.

⁹ *A Heritage At Risk: The Proceedings of the Evangelical Archives Conference July 13-15, 1988* (Wheaton, Illinois: Billy Graham Center, Wheaton College, [1988], iii + 47 pp. Copies of the *Proceedings* are available free of charge from the Evangelical Documentation Projects Committee, P.O. Box 661, Glen Ellyn, Illinois 60318, if a self-addressed stamped (\$.85) envelope (6" x 9") is sent.

America."¹⁰ *Evangelical* was defined in its "broadest sense," referring to "conservative Protestants committed to the need for personal salvation through Jesus Christ, the authority of the Bible, and preaching the Christian gospel."¹¹ The conference attracted an "unusual assortment of people" including "executives of evangelical Protestant agencies, archivists, researchers, librarians, ministers, and teachers."¹² A grant from the Lilly Foundation to Wheaton College's Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals supported the meeting; the staff of the Archives of the Billy Graham Center, headed by Robert Shuster, planned and carried out the conference.

The conference proceedings reflect the structure of the conference. Four smaller groups of meeting participants conferred on minimum standards for programs, cooperation among archival institutions and between archives and their users, a national plan for collecting records of the evangelical movement, and means to gain greater support for and understanding of religious archives. The format was an effort to address the problem of too few repositories collecting evangelical records despite a great quantity and diversity of relevant documentation. The published proceedings primarily consist of the reports of these four working groups. They reflect recent trends and issues in the archival profession and provide a convenient way of commenting on the

¹⁰ *Proceedings*, i.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, ii.

¹² *Ibid.*, 1.

conference and its larger implications for religious archives¹³ and the modern archival community.

The report on guidelines and minimum standards for religious archival institutions is very strong. This section carefully describes the requirements for policies and procedures (such as mission statement and collecting policy), staffing for basic archival functions (such as appraisal and acquisition, preservation management, and advocacy and outreach), essential programmatic functions (inter-institutional cooperation, program planning, and authority), facilities, holdings administration, and user services. Finally, the section provides a few points for starting religious archival programs.

There are at least three reasons for the strength of this section. First, it reflects the proper perspective for managing religious archives. It notes that "starting an archives is simply a first step in a long journey to preserve important historical records." The section also concludes that "by focusing attention on some of the commonly accepted archival standards, and the support necessary to meet these standards, these guidelines can measure their own ability to establish and maintain an in-house program."¹⁴ Second, the recommended guidelines and minimum standards were drafted in the conviction that religious archival programs possess problems and concerns common to the archival profession. Third, the guidelines and standards obviously draw upon much of the excellent work done in this area in recent years,

¹³ For the purpose of this review the author considers the evangelical movement to represent broadly the concerns and problems facing religious archivists in general. There are some differences; for example, many parts of the evangelical movement fall outside mainstream denominational structures and governance, making them more difficult to document and to win resources to preserve their historical records.

¹⁴ *Proceedings*, 3.

especially by the Society of American Archivists's Task Force on Institutional Evaluation.¹⁵

There are some minor weaknesses in this area that the conference planners need to consider as they carry on their work. The comments on arrangement and description make no reference at all to the availability of the USMARC Archives and Manuscripts Control format, which is rapidly emerging as a standard and which certainly has numerous implications for the profession and its institutions. The description of advocacy and outreach really restricts itself to outreach. Advocacy is a more deliberate effort to win support for the archives from a parent organization, government, constituencies, or the general public on behalf of some specific issue or activity; it is more than just exhibitions and publications. Records management is described as being "extremely important to an archival program because it can help to insure that no permanently valuable records are inadvertently destroyed."¹⁶ There are, in fact, other important reasons for records management that have little or nothing to do with archives, such as the economy and efficiency of an institution's management and its use of information in that management. Records management is itself a profession undergoing change, moving to somewhere between the Management of Information Systems (MIS) and Information

¹⁵ Task Force on Institutional Evaluation, *Evaluation of Archival Institutions: Services, Principles, and Guide to Self-Study* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, [1982]; and Conway, "Perspectives on Archival Resources."

¹⁶ *Proceedings*, 8.

Resource Management (IRM).¹⁷ Under staffing, the needs for archivists are articulated: "All archives require, at the minimum, a person trained in basic archival procedures and techniques to direct the overall program and carry out the archival and program functions enumerated above."¹⁸ This concept neglects the need for preservation/conservation skills which most archivists probably do not have, even though the report stated that "preservation management" is a necessary function.¹⁹ Finally, in advice for starting an archives, there is no discussion that "prior to opening

¹⁷ There is a need for a holistic approach to information management. Richard M. Kesner recently wrote that "librarians, archivists, documentalists, data processing (DP) personnel, and records managers need to bring their skills as analysts and service-oriented professionals to this redefined body of tasks. In so doing, they must also become more aware of current information technologies and of their parent institution's internal dynamics--political and otherwise. They must become, in short, true information managers with a catholic view of their duties and what is required of them in the workplace." *Information Systems: A Strategic Approach to Planning and Implementation* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1988), 11.

¹⁸ *Proceedings*, 9.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 7. Archivists are aware of the need for preservation, but they lack adequate education and training in conservation treatment and preservation management. There is, at the present, only one graduate education program in the United States, at Columbia University, educating individuals to work in library and archives preservation. SAA's recent initiatives in short-term preservation management training are now being evaluated for their effectiveness.

the archives" some assistance from consultants might be extremely helpful; adequate planning requires suitable archival expertise.²⁰

The discussion of communication networks and cooperation is the briefest of the four parts of the proceedings. Its focus is the "problems of cooperation among archival institutions engaged in the collection and preservation of evangelical records, as well as cooperation and communication between archivists and users of such materials." The individuals preparing this report concluded that "there were simply too few archives of any kind that were actively collecting" evangelical records.²¹ They recommended identifying areas not being collected, preparing a directory of archives in nondenominational Evangelism, using existing communication networks or creating new ones, creating or using existing "subject research and discipline history centers in areas that include American religion,"²² expanding microfilming of evangelical records, and seeking "grant funding to support any or all of these activities."²³ A set of recommendations was also made regarding users. These included making better efforts to work with scholars, including asking researchers to assist in appraisal, and promoting the use of archives by other researchers such as "church administrators and pastors" and high school and college students.

The weaknesses in this part of the proceedings are somewhat more pronounced than in the first section, even though making cooperation a major emphasis is exemplary and too often

²⁰ Read Virginia Stewart, "Transactions in Archival Consulting," *Midwestern Archivist* 10 (1985): 107-15.

²¹ *Proceedings*, 17.

²² *Ibid.*, 18.

²³ *Ibid.*, 19.

neglected by archivists. There is again no mention of participation in shared descriptive networks like the Research Libraries Information Network (RLIN). Admittedly, use of such utilities by many of the small and underfunded evangelical bodies is difficult to conceive, but it is still worth some consideration. Cooperative advocacy to make changes in the various activities mentioned is not considered at all. There is little indication of ways that expertise among evangelical and religious archivists and the larger archival community can be shared. The use of regional preservation centers, the possibilities of jointly hiring trained archivists, and the consideration of linking administratively certain kinds of religious archives programs are all other topics not mentioned that could be listed as possible avenues of exploration. Of course, the lack of homogeneity of the evangelical community and its disinterest in giving up its records to non-evangelical archival programs are serious obstacles to be overcome.

The documentation portion of the proceedings, designed "to investigate the gaps in the universe of information regarding documentation of the evangelical movement and to recommend a plan of action,"²⁴ is the strongest and most provocative result of the conference. The individuals discussing this topic placed their attention on developing a "strategy of documentation for the movement" since "it was not feasible for the 'gaps' in the documentation to be discussed until an overall framework was conceived."²⁵ Assembling such a framework was clearly seen as being only a beginning of more important efforts to follow. Seven "activities or expressions" of the evangelical movement were identified: denominations/fellowships/communities, education, human services, media, mission/ministries, political/social action groups, and professional organizations. Definitions of each of the

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

areas were developed, along with efforts to ascertain the current status of their documentation, obstacles to their documentation, and mechanisms for documenting. "Three overarching deterrents" were also considered: a "lack of clear historical consciousness," "limited resources," and the "elusive nature of significant aspects of the activities of the evangelical movement."²⁶

This section was generally the most defined of the four major areas of the conference, in part because it was able to draw on recent thinking on documenting society.²⁷ There seemed to be little confusion, as there often is, between archival appraisal techniques--surveying and sampling, for example--within the broader goal of documenting society or a major component of that society. Moreover, the conference participants were aware of the need to formulate first the right questions about Evangelicalism before suggesting actions to survey and collect or to encourage the establishment of institutional archives in the religious community.

The final part of the report concerns developing greater archival awareness and understanding within the evangelical community. Here the participants addressed two areas, the "intrinsic importance of archives" and "developing the support for the concept and importance of archives within the evangelical community."²⁸ Here the report is very familiar and not very original (at least for archivists), listing a variety of ways to develop support, ranging from informing administrators about the

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 22-23.

²⁷ See especially, Helen W. Samuels, "Who Controls the Past," *American Archivist* 49 (Spring 1986): 109-24, and Larry J. Hackman and Joan Warnow-Blewett, "The Documentation Strategy Process: A Model and A Case Study," *American Archivist* 50 (Spring 1987): 12-47.

²⁸ *Proceedings*, 34.

value of archival materials to collecting data on individual churches, so that anniversaries and other important dates and events can be commemorated in ways that celebrate the importance of archives.

This last section is the least developed of the four. The statements about what this working group discussed seem to indicate that it got bogged down in slightly extraneous issues. Defining Evangelism was a major point of discussion, when in fact the remainder of the proceedings suggests that a fine working definition was available. Surprisingly, the report noted that defining archives "provided a challenge."²⁹ This difficulty might have been the result of the peculiar nature of religious archives, although the definition finally agreed upon seems rather straightforward and one long accepted and used by the archival profession. More likely, the difficulty with definition may have been the result of this particular working group consisting mostly of nonarchivists. The conference was, after all, also trying to educate nonarchival members of the evangelical community about the need and desirability of preserving its historical records. If the conference and its published proceedings ultimately make a positive impact on evangelical religious leaders to care for their archival materials, then this criticism will prove to be unfounded.

These distractions obviously prevented the individuals from tackling their assignment in any substantive manner. Ways of marketing the importance of archives noted in these pages are marginal: "Archives," the report stated, "enable those who study its records to learn from the past and, it is hoped, avoid repeating past failures. A proper understanding of the present results can be used to plan for the future."³⁰ As archivists know, such

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 35.

statements are easier to write than they are to substantiate.³¹ More specific reasons could have been developed, considering there are some excellent models that at least lay the groundwork.³² The use of the word *intrinsic* is also extremely confusing since it has an accepted, more specific archival meaning.³³ Overall, the list of proposed activities needed much more fleshing out than occurred during the conference; it is particularly uneven when contrasted to the detail in the documentation section of the proceedings.

Despite the minor problems (and they are rather minor) with the proceedings, this publication and the conference represent a remarkable beginning for renewing interest in evangelical religious archives. The effort is worthy of replication in a number of other areas in the archival community, especially considering the archivist's mission to document society. The work of the Joint Committee on the Archives of Science and Technology and the Evangelical Archives Conference, assuming that both establish ongoing bodies, are important models for the kinds of issues and activities that need to be taken on by the archival profession if it hopes to document fully modern society. Along with efforts to

³¹ See, for example, Bruce W. Dearstyne, "What is the Use of Archives? A Challenge for the Profession," *American Archivist* 50 (Winter 1987): 76-87.

³² See, for example, "Historical Records and Social Needs," in *Toward A Useable Past: Historical Records in the Empire State* (Albany: New York State Historical Records Advisory Board, 1984), 19-24.

³³ "The term 'intrinsic value' has long been used by archivists to describe historical materials that should be retained in their original form rather than as copies." In *Intrinsic Value in Archival Material*, Staff Information Paper 21 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Service, 1982), 1.

understand the complexities of documenting science and technology and religion, the profession requires similar work in areas such as the arts, agriculture, education, business, and recreation. Although there is some work going on in these fields, major national efforts are needed to help the profession meet its broad societal mission and to assist the work of archivists in geographical regions and in their institutions.

This publication is an indicator of an emerging professional maturity in the religious archives community. It serves notice that although needs are great, so is the potential. One only hopes that the follow-up national meeting called for at the 1988 conference³⁴ will take place and the fine work that was started, continued.

Richard J. Cox is lecturer in Archives and Records Management in the School of Library and Information Science at the University of Pittsburgh. The author is indebted to three participants in the Evangelical Archives Conference--Tim Ericson, Jim O'Toole, and Helen Samuels--who made comments on an initial draft of this review.

³⁴ *Proceedings*, 45.