

Archival Good Works for Theologians

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IN addressing a group of librarians, an archivist may feel that his remarks should be guarded and discreet. In the history of the world I am not sure which occupation is the more venerable, that of librarian or that of archivist; but in the United States the latter is the younger by half a century. Some of our early librarians had served in the capacity of archivists and helped establish the new profession. Where there is no archivist, the librarian still feels his responsibility for records. Proof of this is his concern today about the records of theological schools, where archivists are still seldom to be found.

In addressing a group of theological librarians, the professional archivist must regard himself very much as the layman in terms of the subject matter of your records. Yet the archivist as historian approaches the records of a divinity school not with a narrow concern for their use in administrative and internal operations, but rather with the hope of finding evidence of the school's impact on other institutions in the past and on the issues of the present. A dynamic society never lacks controversy. A dynamic theological seminary is perennially involved in religious and educational controversy. In one generation it may be between Old Lights and New Lights, in the next between slaveowner and abolitionist, at another time over the relation between church and state. Yet how many seminaries have archives worthy of the name to shed light on the past and thus illuminate the present? How many are engaged in selecting and preserving current records for future use? The specific answers to these questions ought to be determined, for they would undoubtedly suggest what needs to be done.

I shall direct my remarks, therefore, to an analysis of the problems inherent in the field of theological and religious records. I shall try to explain how the records of seminaries ought to be correlated

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with the larger bodies of religious source material. In asking why we have not been more dutiful and steadfast in acknowledging an archival obligation and translating duty into good works, I find some justification for trespassing in the open spaces of homiletics, fortified by a text from the Old Testament and another from the New.

In the thirty-first chapter of Deuteronomy the following verses reiterate a previous statement in the same chapter:

And it came to pass, when Moses had made an end of writing the words of this law in a book, until they were finished, That Moses commanded the Levites, which bare the ark of the covenant of the Lord, saying,

Take this book of the law, and put it in the side of the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God, that it may be there for a witness against thee.¹

And in the third chapter of the Epistle of Paul to Titus:

This is a faithful saying, and these things I will that thou affirm constantly, that they which have believed in God might be careful to maintain good works. These things are good and profitable unto men. But avoid foolish questions, and genealogies, and contentions, and strivings about the law; for they are unprofitable and vain.²

As you know, much of the Book of Deuteronomy is devoted to the Hebraic law: the fundamentals of morality in the Ten Commandments and a kind of codification of the laws governing religious observance, crime, and punishment — the “statutes and judgments, which ye shall observe to do in the land, which the Lord God of thy fathers giveth thee to possess it.”³ When these laws were actually written down is uncertain; but in the story of Moses their preservation was the responsibility of a particular tribe, the Levites, who were to keep them in the Holy of Holies. We may regard this ancient recording of the law as symbolic of the foundation of our own civilization, with its government of laws, not of men, shaped by law and modifying the law. Indeed, the laws, duly recorded, may be taken as symbolic of all other basic records that stem from or contribute to them. In the present homily, how shall we apply the text and the principle to theological schools?

“What is to be considered as material for American *religious* history?” asked Professor Allison when he began his *Inventory of Unpublished Material for American Religious History*, compiled 50 years ago.⁴ Source materials pertaining to religious history are

¹ Deuteronomy 31:24-26; see also verses 9-11.

² Titus 3:8-9.

³ Deuteronomy 12:1.

⁴ William H. Allison, *Inventory of Unpublished Material for American Religious History in Protestant Church Archives and Other Repositories*, p. iv-v (Washington, 1910).

difficult to delimit except by a definition so circumscribed as to fall short of its very objective. The religious manifestations in most people's lives are not so separate and distinct that they can be isolated for examination, nor would such detached data yield reliable conclusions. Certainly the manuscript records of individuals are seldom accumulated in well labeled bundles, for men do not live by classification schemes concocted by librarians or archivists. Certain religious records, however, do lend themselves to separate treatment by denomination and thus by related institution, whether Catholic or Protestant. In fact, we are so accustomed to thinking of Christianity in terms of various sects that most depositories of religious materials have been established under their auspices, each concentrating on its particular brand of Christian doctrine and organized activity.

However much some scholars may complain about the wide dispersal of these sources for their research, we should not be surprised to find this condition prevailing in a country predominantly Protestant; for fragmentation, not unification, is inherent in Protestantism. The spirit of religious liberty and individual freedom not only appears repeatedly within the records but is reflected in their wide dispersion in the custody of countless autonomous organizations.

One distinct class of these diverse religious sources consists of the records of theological schools. I am referring to those materials that archivists clearly define as the official records, printed as well as manuscript. They are created during the daily administration and operation of the school — policy-making, financial, pedagogical, social, even extracurricular; and, under an enlightened policy, they are refined as archives for permanent preservation and use. The basic archival problems of the theological seminary are no different from those of any other institution of higher learning. The archives, if they were established, would serve both administrative and research purposes. But this "if" has long prevailed in the area of college and university records. Only a limited number of archival establishments worthy of the name have appeared in institutions of higher learning during the past 20 years of nurture by the Society of American Archivists.⁵ Yet many of these same institutions have collected and preserved historical materials of great research value, and some theological schools have contributed notably to this

⁵ The Society's Committee on Institutional Archives reported in 1944: "Rarely is there evidence of a systematic policy with reference to the transfer of records [of an educational institution] from administrative offices to the archives." *American Archivist*, 8:81 (Jan. 1945).

cultural achievement. What is the explanation for the oversight or neglect of archives?

The pioneer American historians and collectors saw the past in the heroic individual. The man was sufficient measure of the institution. The records most cherished, therefore, were personal papers, while selected individual documents were valued chiefly for the signatures they bore. The records of institutions, political or theological or educational, were preserved piecemeal for their personal associations rather than for their integrity and organic unity embodying institutional life and growth. The official records were not converted into archives; survival *in toto* or in fragments was usually accidental; preservation was seldom planned. Among the discarded volumes, old account books were seldom recognized for their historical value. The treasurer's accounts of Harvard College, 1669-93, for example, were found in the stables of the Hancock house in Boston, when the stables were destroyed.⁶ Minister-historian Lucius R. Paige of Cambridge discovered in the library of a deceased neighbor the quarter-bill books of eighteenth-century Steward Thomas Chesholm of Harvard, "a priceless record of college life and economy."⁷ In the early 1930's, after the librarian of the University of Virginia began to investigate its early records, letters of Thomas Jefferson concerning the university came to light in the bursar's office. This discovery, and the indifference to records it implied, strengthened the movement for organizing the university's archives.⁸ But college records are not easily assembled and converted into archives. Normally scattered throughout the campus, they reflect in their very decentralization the local autonomy that is customarily defended against administrative directives. Sometimes archival programs can be initiated only in crisis!

The old question, "What's wrong with American education?" — now rampant on a new field of satellites — has evoked an abundance of prolix and inconclusive answers. Insofar as the answers are based on ignorance of the past, one may presume that the source materials of educational institutions, the records of trustees, faculty, and students, have not been effectively utilized. In the field of higher education, as suggested above, only a few colleges and seminaries have organized archives and made their records serviceable. It is a para-

⁶ Justin Winsor, "The Present Condition of the Archives of Harvard College," in American Antiquarian Society, *Proceedings*, n. s., 9:111 (1893-94).

⁷ Samuel Eliot Morison, "Chesholm's Steward's Book," in Colonial Society of Massachusetts, *Publications*, 31:9 (1935).

⁸ See W. Edwin Hemphill, "A Bibliography of the Unprinted Official Records of the University of Virginia," in *Sixth Annual Report of the Archivist, University of Virginia Library for the Year 1935-36*, p. 9-10 (University, Va., 1936).

doxical situation that in a number of cases the preparation of a university history had *preceded* the assembling of records for the inception of an archival program. This cart-before-the-horse sequence has proved at least that the records were useful; and the historian, carrying on his research under most disadvantageous conditions, has brought to light valuable evidence to witness the need for an archival office.

Thus, instead of the old saying, "No archives, no history," the new aphorism runs: "No historian, no archives." Professor Cheyney's *History of the University of Pennsylvania*, for example, revealed records widely scattered and indifferently cared for. His labors suggested the desirability of a university archives, and the archives was established forthwith at the close of World War II.⁹ Professors Curti and Carstensen strengthened the case for an archival department at the University of Wisconsin, which could have eased their labor on the two-volume *History*;¹⁰ the archives were eventually organized in the new university library building. But among the many histories of colleges and universities published during the past quarter-century, often occasioned by centennial celebrations, few bibliographical references to official records appear and fewer still to anything in the nature of archives. The term is still strange and ill defined, if not unknown, on most campuses.¹¹

Although historians have contributed to the development of college and university archives, the history of education is a special field that, by and large, the professional historian has neglected. And where he has failed to tread, the educationist has rushed in, usually without adequate historical background, perspective, or the discipline of historical study for his sociological approach. If the crisis in education is assessed historically, we shall have to understand what education meant to past generations, as ideal and actuality, in theory and practice. Only when it is seen in its proper context can the past be of valid use to the present. To fill this gap the Fund

⁹ Edward P. Cheyney, *History of the University of Pennsylvania, 1740-1940*, p. vii-ix (Philadelphia, 1940).

¹⁰ Merle Curti and Vernon Carstensen, *The University of Wisconsin, 1848-1925; a History*, 2: 597-601 (Madison, 1949). "The University's records . . . are abundant, though as yet uncanceled. Many are still uncared for." See also the conditions described in Samuel G. Heffebower, *The History of Gettysburg College, 1832-1932*, p. v-vi (Gettysburg, Pa., 1932).

¹¹ There are important exceptions among the older colleges and universities, but very little has been published about the content of the archives. Note the inventory of the Harvard University Archives, to 1800, in Samuel Eliot Morison, *Harvard College in the Seventeenth Century*, 2: 662-681 (Cambridge, 1936); and Cornell University, Collection of Regional History and the University Archives, *Report of the Curator and Archivist, 1950-1954*, p. 17-32 ([Ithaca? 1955?]).

for the Advancement of Education has recently called upon historians to provide the essential information on the history of American education.¹²

The care of records generally in institutions of higher learning leaves much to be desired. Among such institutions, theological schools are no exception. A brief survey of the evolution of seminaries and the historical function of their libraries will help to explain why this is so. The theological seminary did not come into existence in America until the end of the eighteenth century. The primary purpose of the colonial college was to train men for the Christian ministry, whether Anglicans at King's College or Congregationalists at Yale or Presbyterians at the College of New Jersey. The professional school was still in the future. Besides, many a young man got his instruction in tutorial fashion from a theologian of repute who chanced to be minister of the local church,¹³ just as the young apprentice in the legal profession read law with a well established lawyer in the local community.

The theological seminary came into its own during the first half of the nineteenth century as a vigorous expression of evangelical Protestantism. It flourished in an atmosphere of denominational independence; it engaged in many a controversy on the right wing and on the left concerning doctrinal beliefs as well as freedom of thought. The eighteenth century had its Great Awakening and its deism; the nineteenth century had its gospel message and its transcendentalism. As the Rev. Dr. John Holt Rice, distinguished Presbyterian of Virginia, put it in 1829: "The evangelical men are disputing, some for *old* orthodoxy, and some for *new* metaphysics."¹⁴ During the first quarter of the century, the leading denominations founded institutions for theological training and scholarship that have continued to our own day. Among them, Andover led the way in 1808. Union in Richmond, Virginia, and Princeton Theological, both Presbyterian, date from 1812. General (Episcopal) in New York and the Episcopal Seminary in Alexandria, Virginia, appeared in 1817 and 1823 respectively; Colgate (Baptist) at Rochester, New York, in 1817; and the Lutheran Seminary at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, in 1826.

Some of the colonial colleges had received public support as affiliates of the Established Church; but the new seminaries, de-

¹² Paul H. Buck and others, *The Role of Education in American History* ([New York], Fund for the Advancement of Education, [1957]. 16 p.)

¹³ George L. Prentiss, *The Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York; Historical and Biographical Sketches of its First Fifty Years*, p. 4 (New York, 1889).

¹⁴ Quoted in Prentiss, *Union Theological Seminary*, p. 7.

pendent on private funds, bespoke the spirit of the Revolution in the separation of church and state. In harmony with the prevailing temper of independence and evangelical piety the seminaries were influential in advancing America's democratic faith and the "mission of America" in an age of progress.¹⁵ They multiplied steadily until by the mid-1880's there were some 140, including those of the Roman Catholic faith. As one writer pointed out at this time, "Not only ministers of the Gospel in the strictest sense, . . . but editors of the religious press, college presidents and professors, secretaries of ecclesiastical boards and other associations for advancing the kingdom of God on earth, are mostly graduates of these institutions."¹⁶

As the increase of seminaries developed hand-in-hand with the expansion of the churches that supported them, some churchmen began to inquire into the past of their denominations in order to trace their origins and to measure the contemporary progress of the Gospel. During the second quarter of the nineteenth century the American people gave spontaneous expression to their nationalism as they witnessed the phenomenal growth of the Republic and the material betterment of the common man. Their feeling was confirmed by the first generation of historians, who wrote the early history of the Colonies and the Revolution with undisguised pride and patriotic bias. Theologians were spurred by the same spirit of historical inquiry and documentation; indeed this generation of churchmen made some notable contributions toward assembling the sources of religious history and began to utilize seminary libraries as depositories for collections of church records.

This historical movement was well personified by the Rev. Francis Lister Hawks, who projected a great documentary collection on the Anglican Church of colonial America to pave the way for later historical writers. Hawks pointed out that the ecclesiastical history of the United States was "as yet an almost untrodden field." He helped to rectify this condition by writing a history of the Episcopal Church in Virginia and a second volume on Maryland.¹⁷ In 1836 he was in England making transcripts of records of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel and other records pertaining to the church in America; 17 folio volumes of these transcripts were ulti-

¹⁵ Ralph H. Gabriel, *The Course of American Democratic Thought; an Intellectual History Since 1815*, ch. 2 (New York, 1940).

¹⁶ Prentiss, *Union Theological Seminary*, p. 3-4.

¹⁷ Francis L. Hawks, *A Narrative of Events Connected With the Rise and Progress of the Protestant Episcopal Church in Virginia*, p. viii (New York, 1835). The volume on Maryland was published in 1839.

mately deposited in the Church Missions House in New York City.¹⁸ As historiographer of the church, Hawks was one of the founders of the Protestant Episcopal Historical Society in New York City in 1850.¹⁹

The Presbyterians, to cite another example, were moved by a similar spirit of historical inquiry. Ebenezer Hazard, pioneer archival collector and editor, began, with the blessing of the church authorities, to assemble materials for a history, but it was not completed.²⁰ In 1839-40, the Rev. Charles Hodge, alumnus and professor of Princeton Theological Seminary, published a heavily documented two-volume *Constitutional History of the Presbyterian Church in the United States* down to 1788, based upon available official records. He called for a comprehensive history of the Presbyterian Church throughout the United States, to be prepared perhaps as a cooperative work organized by States or regions, and without delay. "Much has already been lost," he lamented, "which the men of the last generation might have preserved."²¹ Hodge's labors and pleas doubtless help to explain the publication in 1841 of the minutes of the synods of Philadelphia and New York for the period 1706-88, authorized by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church.²² These were also the early years of ministry of another Princeton theologian, the Rev. William B. Sprague, who served the Second Presbyterian Church of Albany for 40 years. An avid collector of manuscripts and imprints, he gave the Princeton Seminary a valuable set of nearly a thousand pamphlets to enrich its library.²³

During the nineteenth century, certain seminary libraries became centers for the historical collections of their denominations, varying from official minute books of the highest administrative bodies in

¹⁸ Allison, *Inventory*, p. 98-99; Edgar L. Pennington, "Manuscript Sources of Our Church History," in *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church*, 1:19-21 (1932). Hawks's contemporary, Prof. William R. Whittingham at General Theological Seminary in the late 1830's, became a great collector of church materials. Bishop of Maryland for almost 40 years, he willed his collection to the diocese and thereby gave scholarly prestige to its library. See William F. Brand, *Life of William Rollinson Whittingham, Fourth Bishop of Maryland*, vol. 1, ch. 8 (2d ed., New York, 1886), and Whittingham's will, *ibid.*, 2:369-370.

¹⁹ *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church*, 1:3-4 (1932).

²⁰ Hawks, *Narrative of Events*, p. xi, note.

²¹ Charles Hodge, *The Constitutional History of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America*, 1:iv-v (Philadelphia, 1839-40).

²² *Records of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* (Philadelphia, [1841?]). The first leaf of the earliest records was missing. The Methodists also thought enough of their early *Minutes of the Annual Conferences*, 1773-1828, originally issued as pamphlets, to assemble them in one volume (New York, 1840).

²³ Hodge, *Constitutional History of Presbyterian Church*, 2:vi; H. E. S[tarr], "Sprague, William Buell," in *Dictionary of American Biography*, 17:476-477.

the ecclesiastical organization to records of local churches. These national, regional, and local archives, though seldom designated as such, received, usually from relatives and descendants, the correspondence of clergymen and laymen who had played influential roles in the life of their church. Thus, almost imperceptibly at first, seminaries acquired research materials; by steady accretion their holdings became notable, attracting scholars and stimulating further research. Before the twentieth century, however, since these repositories did little or nothing to publicize their holdings, many a scholar overlooked them. Nevertheless the seminary was a vehicle for religious history in providing facilities, convenient and to some degree quite accidental, for preserving source materials of its particular denomination.

The Allison *Inventory*, published in 1910, which provided the first guide to manuscript materials for American religious history, had some serious limitations. It was confined to Protestant Christianity; the data from areas south of Maryland and Kentucky and west of the Mississippi River were derived only from questionnaires circulated by mail; and, among the institutions represented, the amount of detailed information available varied widely.²⁴ Nevertheless this *Inventory* has been of lasting value. Nothing comparable has appeared since, except a limited number of inventories of church archives, by denomination, State by State, compiled by the Historical Records Survey under the Work Projects Administration 20 years ago.²⁵

Among the institutions covered by Allison are 17 theological seminaries, either listed directly with their manuscript holdings or mentioned in connection with other denominational records. In no instance, however, are the official records of a seminary itself listed in any detail. Instead, one finds, for example, that the Auburn Theological Seminary had the minute books of a few presbyteries of the neighboring New York State area and a few "biographical sketches of a local nature," or that the record books of the board of trustees and of two local societies of Lane Theological Seminary were in the custody of its library; but most of the 17 seminaries made no mention of their own records or archives. Only Andover supplied more than the most meager information of this kind; here the records were "kept in the office of the treasurer of the seminary." Fortunately the Harvard University Archives were already well established and included "various records of the Divinity School."²⁶

²⁴ Allison, *Inventory*, p. iii-v.

²⁵ Work Projects Administration, *Check List of Historical Records Survey Publications*, p. 49-56 (rev. ed., Washington, 1943).

²⁶ Allison, *Inventory*, p. 22-25, 65, 94, 143.

If theologians have neglected the records of their own seminaries, the foregoing survey may help to explain how and why such records have been absorbed in the wealth of other historical religious materials close at hand. But it is high time that the seminaries take stock of the records within their own bailiwicks before the forces of man and nature further dissipate and destroy them. It is high time that theologians in centers of learning give thought to archival good works in their midst, which "are good and profitable unto men." Here is an almost unexploited field for historical research: not merely on the histories of theological schools, but on innumerable other subjects in American civilization to which seminary life and thought have contributed and of which they have left some evidence in the records. But these records must first be organized before they can be effectively used.

Such an archival project must take into consideration three basic principles. First, that current records of today become, by proper evaluation and reduction in bulk, the archives of tomorrow. This is accomplished through the techniques of record management: the setting of standards for paper and ink used in creating the records; the coordination of recordkeeping among the various offices that create and file records; the designation of record groups in accordance with administrative organization and functions; the establishment of uniform practices in classification, filing, and servicing; the operation of a unified system of retention and disposal for records of temporary value; and the maintenance of an orderly procedure for the transfer of noncurrent records to the archives.

The second basic principle has already been implied in one of the foregoing points; that is, that the records should be maintained as they were originally filed, to serve the administrative functions for which they were created and to assure their most effective use for historical research. This is the *respect des fonds* that every knowledgeable archivist insists upon when he takes over from the record manager. It emphasizes the role of administrative history throughout the life-history of records.

The third basic principle concerns the dual service of an archives. The records of a seminary, like those of any other institution, are created primarily for administrative purposes. Even after the non-current records of enduring value have been segregated for maintenance as archives, they will still have administrative use — the main reason for establishing an archives. (Note that records qualify as archives not primarily because they are old but because they have continuing value.) A secondary use of the archives is for

research, chiefly historical research in its broad connotation. The older the records, the less they will be consulted for administrative matters and the more for historical investigation. Yet the cultural functions of colleges and universities and theological seminaries are so diverse that firsthand information about their distant past, preserved (not buried!) in the archives, may have a significant bearing on current problems; and those problems may involve institutional policy — theological or political or ethical. Thus the administrator as well as the scholar has good reason for advocating the establishment and maintenance of a seminary's archives.

A recent "Appeal for Archives in Institutions of Higher Learning," by the Rev. Henry E. Browne, then archivist of the Catholic University of America, is a forthright statement of the case. "... it should become increasingly evident," he wrote, "to the administrators of American Catholic colleges and universities that a well-ordered and functioning archives is not a luxury but an obligation they owe to the past, the present, and the future."²⁷ This statement may serve as the Catholic counterpart to my own references to Protestant institutions, and I suspect that conditions are not different in Jewish colleges and seminaries.²⁸ Many churches have established historical collections in conjunction with their national or regional headquarters, where the national archives of the denomination are preserved. Most of these are well known to scholars and are often cited in historical works. But theological seminaries, with few exceptions, have yet to find their archivists and put them to work.

The current crisis in education ought to stimulate archival activity at the nerve-centers of education, the institutions of higher learning. When Paul, or whoever may have written the pastoral letter to Titus, admonished against "foolish questions, and genealogies, and contentions, and strivings about the law," he held to the vain hope that such issues could be avoided among Christians. Since they are an inevitable part of man's religious striving, however, they are interwoven in the records and add zest to the archivist's labors as he helps to make the past more meaningful to the present and as he contributes to the solution of our contemporary problems. Let archival good works be performed *by* theologians as well as *for* them.

²⁷ *American Archivist*, 16:226 (July 1953).

²⁸ The American Jewish Archives was established at Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati, in 1947, but the quarterly magazine of the Archives has given no indication that the records of the college are embraced in its archival program. See *American Jewish Archives*, vol. 1, no. 1, p. 2-5, 23-26 (June 1948), *et seq.* A recent issue carries an A. J. A. advertisement: "WANTED [among other kinds of historical material] Jewish organizational minute books and transaction records: fraternal, cultural, social, and philanthropic." *Ibid.*, 10:120 (Oct. 1958).