

Archival Virtue: Relationship, Obligation, and the Just Archives

By Scott Cline. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2021.

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Scott Cline's *Archival Virtue: Relationship, Obligation, and the Just Archives* argues that archival work has a fundamentally spiritual and moral center. "The archival endeavor," Cline writes, "is a faith-based profession, not in the religious sense, but rather as an organic, universal faith in the future of the species" (p. 23). Borrowing heavily from moral philosophy and Jewish and Christian theology, Cline asserts that archives possess the possibility for transcendence, transformation, and justice on both an individual and a collective level. He adapts religious terms such as "faith," "covenant," "salvation," and "piety" to describe how the secular, professional, archival world operates on a deeply interpersonal level between archivists, records, users, communities, and creators. These relationships demand a thoughtful, moral approach that traditional professionalism's predominantly legalistic lens does not sufficiently cover. While professional ethical guidelines are useful, Cline argues that it is more important that archivists "at [their] core[s] be moral human beings" (p. 63).

The first section of the book builds a foundation using the concepts of *archival faith* and *archival covenant relationships*. *Archival faith* is "a genuine faith in humanity, a faith that there will be a future and generations to which archives will matter" (p. 23). *Archival covenant relationships* are developed in the course of archival work and are oriented toward justice, reciprocity, obligation, and trust building, especially in cases where the parties are unequal in power (pp. 37–50). Archival covenant relationships emphasize care for "the other" (pp. 69–72), and Cline argues that success in the archival profession should not be measured in "how we feel about ourselves, but how others—the historically marginalized, powerless, and silenced communities—feel about us, whether they believe there is sincere effort in moving towards an archives that values and promotes justice" (p. 72).

The second section expands on this foundation to discuss what Cline calls archival citizenship, an acknowledgment that archives and archivists operate within the context of communities rather than as isolated entities. This understanding of interconnectedness should orient one toward "the other" (pp. 35–36). Archival citizenship strives for a common good, which Cline defines as a society where all lives possess the means necessary for a good life: "the ability to satisfy personal needs, the actuality of forming personal relationships, and [the state of] living in a society where possession of these goods is valued" (p. 114).

The last section on archival spirituality engages the loftiest language. Building upon Vietnamese Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh's concept of "interbeing," in which all things in life are connected to each other, Cline argues passionately that "archives, in great measure, are about death and immortality, hospitality and gift giving, diversity and community, memory and loss; they are about every aspect of life" (p. 152). According to Cline, archival spirituality is "our inexorable desire and search for meaning and purpose in life, our pursuit of authenticity and genuineness, and an openness to encounter with the other that is characterized by empathy, compassion, and love" (p. 145). Archivists are "time travelers" because "we often live in the past, yet we talk in the future tense. . . . We assist the long dead to speak to the as yet unborn" (p. 136). He quips that "archives is humor; it is a practical joke played on finitude" (p. 133), a way to bracket or even transcend mortality: "Yes, we are mortal; we will die. But our work done well will not. We continually dip our hands into immortality by assisting the dead in communicating with the present and future" (p. 134).

These heady descriptions of archival labor may sound impractical or, at best, a nice possibility for self-actualization—but only after the "real," never-ending, everyday tasks of accessioning and processing are finished. However, Cline argues that archival spirituality is an integral part of understanding why archivists do the work they do: "we should not have to ask whether there is a place for spirituality; it is already there" (p. 149). While Cline insists that he is not trying to make archives into a religion, it seems apt to describe the framework he has laid out as a contemplative archival mysticism: an individual-focused, flexible approach toward archival spirituality that emphasizes changing the self through experience with the sublime. Cline is not so much focused on the method to commune with the archival divine as much as the experience itself and the transformation that occurs afterward. Cline's approach toward archival spirituality is "to engage in self-examination—to look inward in order to be able to look outward" (p. 138). Cline does not focus on outlining a set of rules or recommending skill sets, educational curricula, or training guidelines, but rather argues for the transformation of the archivist fundamentally as a person through their communion with the archives (and thus, "the other" and the outside world).

Along with personal transformation, Cline's archival mysticism also challenges current archival practices. Archival spiritualism is set up directly in contrast to vocational awe in information work: the insistence that the archival profession and its members "are inherently good and sacred, and therefore beyond critique."¹ Quoting Hugh Taylor, Cline argues that an archival spirituality "grounded in a reality beyond the fragmented, contingent hustle of our lives may well radicalize us out of previously accepted social norms, and perhaps the norms of our profession" (p. 139), rather than placing those norms on a pedestal.

Citing and responding to previous work by others such as Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor's work on archives through the lens of feminist ethics of care, as well as Jarrett Drake's critiques of the archival profession's racism and defense of an oppressive status quo, Cline argues that these critiques focus not on an archivist's theoretical mastery or technical know-how but on an archivist's emotional capacity to feel empathy, understand the experiences of others, and then transform these moments into concrete action. Cline also challenges the current state of the profession; his archival spirituality does not enshrine modern archivy but instead challenges its current formations and beliefs. However, for some readers, his descriptions of archives' potentiality for spiritual fulfillment or transcendence may feel too close to previous descriptions often used to exploit workers and obscure or deflect criticism, such as appealing to the archivist's sense of moral duty and obligation to history and their communities to justify lower wages and increasing workloads.

While some may disagree with Cline's spiritualization of archival work, he makes a cogent argument that, if we insist that archival work *matters* in any kind of meaningful sense, then "archives is a moral enterprise" (p. 170), which requires thoughtful, serious discussion about what these archival morals are. To insist on the importance of archival work without acknowledging or discussing the ethical responsibilities and consequences of that work is hollow and erodes trust between the archival profession as a whole, individual archivists, and the communities they serve. "The archival endeavor is not morally neutral," Cline asserts, "therefore, we cannot (nor should we want to) avoid a professional discourse that encompasses justice, emotion, truth, and the common good" (p. 149). For Cline, the question is whether archivists will "recognize [archival spirituality's] existence and embrace its message" (p. 149). He argues that "moral language should be integral to an archival discourse that is thoughtful and passionate" (p. 164), and "if we do not associate archival work with broader efforts at making our part of the world manifestly kinder and more just, then the project of archives is a failure" (p. 171).

Cline's framework for archival spiritualism does not translate well into the current paradigms of archival education, which focus on teaching the theoretical basis of archivy and helping students acquire the technical skills necessary for modern archival work. It is difficult in the graduate school environment to develop an academic syllabus that focuses on making a personal transformation, pursuing an authentic self, and nurturing an archival faith in humanity as its learning objectives or expected core competencies. *Archival Virtue* fits best in a course about archival ethics, for obvious reasons, but it may also work well in a course about archival reference and outreach for its discussions about what kinds of relationships archivists can (and should) develop with their patrons, as well as the archives' potential for connecting people to a community and

history greater than their individual selves. Cline's first chapter on archival faith can also act as an aspirational introductory text for students unfamiliar with archivy's more philosophical values, though its focus and discussion of radical self-understanding, intention, and integrity might feel out of place in an otherwise theory- and practice-driven curriculum.

Cline's refusal to shy away from discussions of morality, virtue, and spirituality may be uncomfortable for readers who are familiar with the more legalistic or practice-oriented lens of archival ethics. Although Cline redefines many theological terms toward a more secular orientation, his use of religiously charged vocabulary may feel understandably disconcerting for survivors of religious trauma. Cline also relies primarily on Western conceptions of theology, spirituality, and citizenship, a critique he anticipates and responds to by arguing that "we need to reclaim the language and ideas of Western philosophy, read them with communitarian sensibilities through a duty-based lens, and apply them in pursuit of the moral good" (p. 6). He recommends as well encouraging and inviting archivists to think about archives through other philosophical systems. Cline's argument that all archivists carry with them a faith that humanity will continue into the future is potentially challenged by work from other scholars such as Samantha Winn, who proposes alternative possibilities of an archival spirituality that does not presuppose a belief in humanity's perpetuity but still relies on frameworks of care to inform archival work.² Cline also refers to some of the turbulent economic conditions archivists face today such as the impacts of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic that started in 2019 and led to the creation of the Archival Workers Emergency Fund (pp. 10–11), a grassroots-started fund "established to provide financial assistance for archival workers experiencing acute, unanticipated financial hardship."³ Yet, he does not spend much time discussing the specific material conditions that would allow archivists to more easily pursue a holistic, caring, and empathetic archival agenda. Neither does he elaborate specifically how archival spirituality could help combat powerful economic forces such as shrinking budgets, the overreliance on exploitable labor, and job precarity.

However, Cline welcomes and encourages these kinds of critiques as part of an ongoing conversation he hopes to extend with this book, as he declares that "there is much work still to be done in the area of archival philosophy" (p. 171). He argues that he is not pushing for an archival essentialism but is rather seeking to "spur archivists to care deeply about who they are and why they are archivists, to look beyond the temptation to see themselves as the work they do, to grapple with ideas about their place in the world and their obligations to it" (p. 15). In the future, if an archivist were to write a response to Cline by using Confucian ethics, the philosophical school of agential realism,

or liberation theology to discuss the moral and spiritual force behind archival work, I have the feeling Cline would claim his book is a success.

Cline's contribution to the continuing discussion on archival ethics, social justice in the archives, and critical archival theory from an openly spiritual lens is a unique approach that deserves serious consideration. His description of archival faith and the archives as a spiritual force for change adds new dimensions to these current issues. Cline's religiously inspired rhetoric may be uncomfortable for the secular professional world, but his attempts to re-enchant archival work with an active, spiritual facet is a thoughtful antidote to professional archivy's typically unfeeling, bureaucratic, and abstract worldview. In particular, archivists and scholars interested in exploring the deep spiritual or affective dimensions of archives, recordkeeping, and memory work will find this book useful and generative.

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NOTES

- ¹ Fobazi Ettarh, "Vocational Awe and Librarianship: The Lies We Tell Ourselves," *In the Library with the Lead Pipe* (January 10, 2018), <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2018/vocational-awe>.
- ² Samantha Winn, "Dying Well in the Anthropocene: On the End of Archivists," *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 3, no. 2 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.24242/jclis.v3i1.107>.
- ³ SAA Foundation Board of Directors, "Archival Workers Emergency Fund," Society of American Archivists, December 13, 2021, <https://www2.archivists.org/groups/saa-foundation-board-of-directors/archival-workers-emergency-fund>.