

# Articles

## Archives and Historical Accountability: Toward a Moral Theology of Archives

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**RÉSUMÉ** Cet article explore l'idée qu'il existerait une « théologie archivistique ». Après avoir tracé un parallèle entre la discipline universitaire de la théologie d'un côté et la théorie et la pratique archivistique de l'autre, l'auteur porte une attention particulière à la théologie morale des archives, cette section qui examine le comportement moral et éthique. Bien que les codes d'éthique professionnels soient utiles et nécessaires, cet article allègue qu'une vision morale plus large est nécessaire. Il ajoute notamment aux discussions sur l'utilisation des documents d'archives aux fins d'imputabilité, la question de l'imputabilité historique et à long terme des actions humaines.

**ABSTRACT** This essay explores the idea that there is such a thing as “archival theology.” After drawing a parallel between the academic discipline of theology on the one hand and archival theory and practice on the other, it focuses special attention on archival moral theology, that branch of the subject which examines moral and ethical behaviour. While professional codes of ethics are useful and necessary, the essay argues that a broader moral vision is necessary. In particular, it adds to familiar discussions of the use of archival records for accountability, a consideration of a long-term, historical accountability for human actions.

More than twenty years ago, Frank Burke contributed a useful metaphor to the archival profession. He had been asked to speak to the Society of American Archivists (SAA) annual meeting in Cincinnati in 1980 on the subject of the future course of archival theory in the United States. In fact, he said afterwards, he really wanted to talk about something else, and so, exercising the prerogative that all speakers have once they gain control of the microphone, he proceeded to do so. While he did pose some provocative theoretical questions for future study – why are there archival materials in the first place? is there something in human nature that impels us to make and keep records? what is the nature of the “facts” which records contain, and what does that tell us about the nature of historical facts generally? – he quickly came around to what he wanted to talk about instead, which was archival education. Recall where archival education in North America stood in 1980. There were virtually no university-based programs where students could systematically pursue

archival theory and practice in anything that resembled serious graduate study. In the United States, there was a handful of introductory courses but far more in the way of workshops, two-week institutes, apprenticeships, internships, and other hands-on practical opportunities, all conducted by working archivists whose “real” duties were to manage repositories but who also did a little teaching on the side. In Canada, the master’s program at the University of British Columbia, not to mention those elsewhere, was still largely a gleam in the eye of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. Into that vacuum, Burke ventured with a simple idea: what the profession needed most was a corps of full-time archival educators, faculty members who could devote themselves to teaching and researching about archives in a way that other academic faculty did in their own disciplines. The full-time archivist who was also a part-time teacher was no longer good enough. The intervening years have seen sustained progress toward Burke’s goal, and the number of archival educators has indeed grown since then. There is much yet to do, of course: the archival education glass may be half-full or half-empty, depending on one’s perspective, but at the very least, there is more water in it now than there was when he spoke.

Burke’s way of making his case, however, caught my attention at the time and has stayed with me since. The profession, he said, had a great many parish priests but very few theologians. The parish priests were those archivists who actually worked in archival repositories. Their days were spent caring for records, assisting those who wanted to use them, and promoting wider knowledge of their availability. Like the pastor whose life consisted of visiting the sick of the parish, instructing children in the catechism, presiding at weddings and funerals, worrying about the church’s aging furnace and its leaky roof, and writing next week’s sermon, these archivists had a host of immediate, pressing concerns. They seldom had the luxury of being able to stop for very long to reflect on what they were doing and why. They could, indeed they had to, take such highfalutin questions for granted. Wouldn’t it be an important contribution to development of the profession, Burke asked, if we also had some archival theologians, those who did not have the “pastoral” duties of actually administering an archival parish but whose sole job was to study, write, and teach others about the archival faith? Freed from the practical demands of administration, these theologians – the full-time archival educators – could make a contribution by reflecting on the experience of others, by proposing new ways of doing things, by reformulating accepted archival truths, and perhaps even by trying to discern some new ones. The articulation and elaboration of various forms of archival theology would be their work, and the profession as a whole would be the richer for it. The parish priests would not be excluded from this effort, bringing their own pastoral experience to it and engaging in a continuing dialogue with the theologians to help keep them grounded and to avoid the possibility that those who couldn’t “do”

would “teach.” But so much attention had been paid to archival religious practice that it was time to emphasize archival theology a little more.<sup>1</sup>

This analogy is probably not universally attractive. After all, theology often has a bad reputation in the largely secularized society of the twenty-first century West and perhaps especially in the modern university, where many archivists work and where people may be personally less religious than the population as a whole. Isn't theology just so much hot air, a purely speculative exercise that focuses on unimportant (or at least unknowable) things? Just how many angels **can** dance on the head of a pin? Who knows and, in the end, who cares? Isn't theology necessarily divisive, as competing answers to ultimate questions square off against one another and, often, seek to wipe each other out? Finally, since theology's assertions cannot be proven in any scientific sense, isn't it just a waste of time and intellectual energy, a naive clinging to religious impulses one should have outgrown years ago? But the idea of trying to define what an archival theology might look like appealed to me, in hopes of trying to find what Hugh Taylor has called “a reality beyond the fragmented, contingent hustle of our lives.”<sup>2</sup>

One might well object that the better task would be to articulate an encompassing archival philosophy, rather than an archival theology. Philosophy has a more neutral ring to it that is appealing on a number of levels. Philosophy, after all, grounds itself on the application of reason and logic – who is against them? – and it has no need to make reference to any ultimate or divine reality, the existence of which many people doubt. Without intending to discourage any effort toward defining a philosophy of archives, I find the idea of archival theology a more challenging and potentially useful work. Theology is always connected to particular practices because it actually grows from those activities. In that sense, religion always precedes theology: people have certain religious experiences and beliefs first, and then they try to understand and express them by doing theology.<sup>3</sup> This sort of connection between the theoretical and the practical is certainly present in philosophy; one lives a certain way depending on one's allegiance to a particular philosophical outlook, but the link may not be so compelling or insistent. For most people, it is wearing, at the least, to be an existentialist or a Kantian all day every day, whereas many ordinary Christians, Jews, Muslims, and others find it possible to apply their

1 Frank G. Burke, “The Future Course of Archival Theory in the United States,” *American Archivist* 44, no. 1 (Winter 1981), pp. 40–46.

2 Hugh Taylor, “The Archivist, the Letter, and the Spirit,” *Archivaria* 43 (Spring 1997), p. 10. On Taylor's own philosophical and theological interests in archives, see Terry Cook, “Hugh Taylor: Imagining Archives,” in Terry Cook and Gordon Dodds, eds., *Imagining Archives: Essays and Reflections by Hugh Taylor* (Lanham, MD, 2003), pp. 16–27.

3 On this point, see Jaroslav Pelikan's introduction, “Some Definitions,” in *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600)* (Chicago, 1971), pp. 1–10, the first volume of his comprehensive, five-volume history of the development of Christian doctrine.

theological ideas to nearly every aspect of the rest of their lives – through prayer, dietary and sexual practice, public religious observance, private meditation, charitable work, and so on.

Thus, I have come to think that there is such a thing as archival theology and that it offers a useful perspective on what archivists do. Let me try to outline the main components of archival theology and then talk about how one of those components relates to archival practice. My analogies will be drawn mostly from Christian theology, since that is what I know best, but in doing so I do not mean to diminish the theologies of other traditions, especially those other “religions of the book” – surely a phrase for archivists to think about – Judaism and Islam.

### **Archival Theology**

Theology has been defined by John Macquarrie, the prolific Scottish Anglican theologian, as “the study which, through participation in and reflection upon a religious faith, seeks to express the content of this faith in the clearest and most coherent language available.”<sup>4</sup> Theology’s task is to find the words to say what we want to say about some very big issues. The Catholic theologian Richard McBrien, one of my teachers, had a similar definition. Theology, he drilled into us, was the attempt to express in language a presumed perception of the transcendent. Unlike the related discipline that came to be called religious studies, which examines religious phenomena from a detached, almost anthropological distance, theology worked primarily from the inside. Though it applied the usual standards of scholarly discourse, it was done largely by people who were reflecting on their own faith tradition and trying to make it understandable. They had a personal connection to a faith tradition, but they also wanted to comprehend the experiences of that tradition using the full capacities of the minds which, they believed, God had given them. Even if one were not (or were no longer) a part of the faith one studied – a Christian studying Jewish theology, for instance, or a non-observant Catholic theologian – one took the faith experience seriously and tried to explore its many layers of meaning.

Macquarrie further divides the larger enterprise into three different branches of theology: philosophical, symbolic, and applied. The first, philosophical theology, sets forth the fundamental concepts and presumptions of the discipline. It is here that the most basic ideas and questions are explored: the existence and nature of the transcendent, usually called “God”; the nature of humanity; the contact between the divine and the human (“revelation”); sin; grace – all the really big ideas. The internal logic of theological ideas is also

4 John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology* (New York, 1966), p. 1.

considered here, together with both the uses and the possible limits of reason in seeking theological understanding. Mental frameworks and methodological principles (“hermeneutics”), such as how to read sacred texts, also belong to philosophical theology.<sup>5</sup>

Next comes symbolic theology, the exploration of the great symbols and metaphors through which our perceptions of the divine are expressed: God as a unitary or multiple reality, for example; the story of creation and the origins of mankind; the embodiment of God in humans, such as Jesus; speculation about the end of the world we know and what, if anything, lies beyond it. Because, by their very nature, these theological notions are not susceptible to direct observation and demonstration, in the way that chemistry experiments are, symbolic language is always necessary in order to express them. “No one has ever seen God,” the Christian Gospel of Saint John reminds us (John 1:18), and so the language of theology must always be metaphorical, and discourse must proceed by analogy. The conclusions of this sort of exploration of the symbols we use to express larger truths usually come to be expressed by formulating certain propositions as normative, and this symbolic branch of the discipline is thus sometimes called “dogmatic” theology – though as Macquarrie notes, that word is freighted with such pejorative connotations that it is probably better avoided. Still, the impulse to define certain dogmas or doctrinal basics is not entirely misplaced. Just as we want to know what makes one a “real” Liberal or Democrat or Rotarian, so we want to know what ideas one is supposed to accept in order to be a member of this or that church.

Finally in this schema comes applied theology, which explores the connection between theology and religion. How does faith, once defined and accepted, get expressed in the real lives and actions of real people? This branch includes such areas as pastoral theology (how do the institutions and personnel of the church encourage the individual members in their own religious quests?) and, more important for my purposes, moral theology, the multiple acts of the “ordering of our lives in the world.” If I accept the philosophical and symbolic understandings of faith, how am I supposed to act, particularly in those areas of life that are seemingly far removed from transcendent concerns and are rooted instead in the messy business of life? What ethical standards ought I apply in my personal, family, community, economic, and political life? Which actions are right and which are wrong? Should I always do as much as I can get away with, or are there some other standards I ought to apply, even (or maybe especially) when it is hard to do so?

This tripartite schematic for the study of theology has its analogue in archives, and it is for this reason that I am convinced there is such a thing as

<sup>5</sup> Macquarrie’s outline of these subdivisions of the discipline is in *Ibid.*, pp. 35–36; the remainder of his book explores this structure in fuller detail.

archival theology, more or less parallel to Macquarrie's categories. Archival theology is the study of archival ideas and practices, based largely on the participation of archivists in their field and their reflections on that work. Even when someone is no longer an active member of the archival church, it is still possible to take that experience seriously and to probe its meaning. Archival theology tries to express the content and meaning of an archival faith in "the clearest and most coherent language available." In some senses, practicing archivists are natural archival theologians, for they do this all the time, as when they try to explain to family members and neighbours what archives work consists of: the search for coherent language to say what we want to say often isn't easy, is it? But when they attempt it, archivists are doing archival theology.

The several subdivisions of the larger discipline also apply to archives. The philosophical branch of our theology would include the important underlying ideas about archival work: what we do, but more important why we do it and why it is important to do. This leads us to explore the several assumptions and values that we accept as fundamental: that the documentation of human affairs has enduring relevance by providing continuity, even self-continuity; that records constitute the collective memory of individuals and societies and that this memory is essential to those societies and the people in them; that records support and sustain other important societal values. The symbolic theology of archives includes our formulation of accepted dogmas in caring for records: provenance, fonds, original order, description and representation, and so on. These are all, in their way, symbolic notions designed to express our archival beliefs, however imperfectly. No one has ever seen provenance, if I may put it that way, and even novice archivists know that original order is more often a symbolic, idealized type than an actual reality in all those boxes of disorganized, random stuff retrieved from the originator's office or garage. Applied archival theology encompasses all those things archivists do to realize their philosophical and symbolic insights, including acquisition, appraisal, arrangement, establishing fair and equitable use policies, physical preservation, programmatic stability and growth, and so on.

Within the realm of applied theology, it is the moral theology of archives that interests me here. In general, moral theology is that branch of the discipline which concerns itself with the norms that govern (or should govern) human behaviour. Concern for morality shows up early in nearly every theological or religious system. The historian Wayne Meeks has charted how early Christians, for example, elaborated a moral vision distinct from that of other, more powerful groups in the ancient world, a "tectonic shift of cultural values" that shaped all subsequent discussion of such issues, even for those who were not themselves Christians. By both loving and hating the world, accepting and rejecting earlier standards, recognizing new obligations based on a revised understanding of how the word "community" ought to be defined, and thus significantly reformulating their notions of right and wrong, the Chris-

tians of the first two centuries of the Common Era forged a complex moral vision.<sup>6</sup> The same might be said of those who have embraced the archival faith. If we accept the underlying presumptions about the nature and importance of archives, how do we behave in the day-to-day situations in which we find ourselves? What is moral and ethical behaviour in archives? In managing archival collections, do we pursue self-interest only or is there some larger community (public, professional, other) whose legitimate needs ought to affect our behaviour? In particular, is there some future community, consisting of people we have never met and never will, who have some claim on our consideration? Are we in any way “accountable” to them? It has become commonplace for archivists to assert that the proper care of records assists in holding officials and organizations accountable to the public at large in the present, particularly in democratic systems. But does a moral theology of archives have a longer term, historical dimension as well?

The answer to that question is yes, but before trying to elaborate, it is important to draw a distinction between morality and ethics. Among theologians, there used to be some significant denominational distinctions between the two, but the terms are now used essentially synonymously. Moreover, moral theology in the academy today is heavily dependent on ethics as a branch of philosophy, a discipline that proceeds perfectly well without reference to the divine. The work of such well-known and occasionally controversial figures as James Q. Wilson, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Peter Singer has shaped the thinking of moral theologians, whether or not the philosopher in question is favourably disposed toward religious formulations (as MacIntyre is) or not (as in Singer’s case).<sup>7</sup>

For archival theology, the distinction between a broader understanding of morality and a narrower one of ethics is important, since for archivists (as for many other professionals) the term ethics is most often used in connection with specific codes of ethics. Both the American and Canadian archival associations have codes of ethics, and properly so. These outline some broad foundational ideas, but their real purpose is to identify specific behaviours that archivists should either cultivate or avoid. The Canadian code (revised in 1999) begins helpfully with six basic principles, but it then devotes most of its attention to the application of those principles in professional practice. In the U.S., the code (1980, currently being revised) begins somewhat curiously with an argument for the need for an ethical code, as if that were not a given. Then, it jumps right into a list of “guidelines in the principal areas of professional conduct,” providing an extended gloss on each, rather like a medieval flori-

6 Wayne A. Meeks, *The Origins of Christian Morality: The First Two Centuries* (New Haven, 1993), p. 1; see especially chapters 4 and 5.

7 See, for example, Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN, 1981) and James Q. Wilson, *The Moral Sense* (New York, 1993).

legium. The American Historical Association also has a code of ethics, by the way, one that addresses general questions of scholarship, teaching, and public service, though its most detailed discussions are of plagiarism and discriminatory hiring practices; it even sets forth “standards for civility” in academic discourse, standards sometimes honoured more in the breach than otherwise.<sup>8</sup>

Such codes are useful and even necessary embodiments of moral and ethical principles, but they are unavoidably situational, designed to offer guidance in particular instances, some of them quite precisely drawn. Both archival codes, for example, say that archivists who are themselves private collectors of documents – something that may have been more common in the past than it probably now is in either country – should not bid against their employing institution in acquiring holdings. In this way, these codes of ethics are comparable to earlier moral theology manuals and works of casuistry (which applied the case method to moral decision-making), useful in their own way but likely to focus too much on very fine distinctions. It is easy to make fun of overly-precise systems – how much physical labour constitutes a violation of the commandment to keep holy the Sabbath? – though these are in their way sincere efforts to grapple with important moral questions and they are indicative of sophisticated moral systems.<sup>9</sup> For archivists, however, a broader approach to moral questions, one that highlights long-term as well as current values, will provide a better way of approaching our multiple responsibilities and the ways in which we are accountable to society both now and in the future.

### Historical Accountability

Usually when archivists use the term accountability, they are referring to various here-and-now situations: the use of records in the defense of human rights; the role of documents in holding government officials and agencies

8 The archival codes are most readily available at <[www.archivists.ca/about/ethics.aspex](http://www.archivists.ca/about/ethics.aspex)> and <[www.archivists.org/governance/handbook.app\\_ethics.asp](http://www.archivists.org/governance/handbook.app_ethics.asp)>. On the considerations that went into drafting the SAA code, see David E. Horn, “The Development of Ethics in Archival Practice,” *American Archivist* 52, no. 1 (Winter 1989), pp. 64–71. The historical code is at <[www.historians.org/pubs/Free/ProfessionalStandards.htm](http://www.historians.org/pubs/Free/ProfessionalStandards.htm)>. Contemporary dictionaries are not much help in distinguishing between morality and ethics, and H.W. Fowler, *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (New York, 1944), p. 152, suggests precisely the opposite distinction I am drawing here, with ethics representing the larger “science of morals” and morality denoting the “practice of ethics.” One always hesitates to disagree with Fowler, but I believe that subsequent usage, particularly in professional practice, has reversed these meanings.

9 For examples of manuals, long in use in the Catholic tradition in Europe and North America, see Heribert Jone, *Moral Theology*, trans. by Urban Adelman (Westminster, MD, 1956; orig. pub. 1929) and Dominic Prummer, *Handbook of Moral Theology*, trans. by Gerald W. Shelton (New York, 1957; orig. pub. 1949). On the perhaps unjustified reputation of the word *casuistry*, see Albert R. Jonsen and Stephen Toulmin, *The Abuse of Casuistry: A History of Moral Reasoning* (Berkeley, 1988).

accountable (financially and politically) to their people; the authenticity of digital signatures; the accountability of archivists themselves in making acquisition and appraisal decisions. Richard Cox and David Wallace have compiled a useful collection of accountability case studies in their *Archives and the Public Good*, offering such examples as the use of records by truth commissions in post-apartheid South Africa and elsewhere and in attempts to bring Nazi war criminals to justice. Similarly, Karen Benedict's recent manual, *Ethics and the Archival Profession: Introduction and Case Studies*, presents a number of fictional cases in such areas as privacy, protection of the integrity of documents, sharing information about researchers, and other professional issues, cases that are specifically designed for use in teaching, just as moral theology cases were.<sup>10</sup> All these examples focus on accountability in the present or in the very near future. But is there a longer term historical accountability? Do archivists bear any moral responsibility to a more open-ended future, a time when the practical impact of any particular cases will have diminished or disappeared altogether and the actions of those involved will matter only historically? Such accountability is vaguer, perhaps, since we cannot now foresee the exact circumstances that will call for it or the possibly competing cultural values that will be at stake. Yet there is (or ought to be) a kind of historical accountability, an effort to judge as good or bad the particular ways in which we, individually and collectively, have treated each other, and records and archives have their role to play in that process.

I follow Cox and Wallace in viewing accountability in general as a force "binding individuals with each other and with governments, organizations, and society across time and space."<sup>11</sup> Historical accountability works in the longer stretches of time and, however uncertain the outcome may be at any given point, the process is inexorably at work. "We cannot escape history," Abraham Lincoln famously said, recognizing that history will be there long after we are gone: it will get the last – or at least the latest – word. It will assess the rightness or wrongness of human behaviour, with some found guilty and some innocent. We should expect that historical judgments will change over time, however, and they will almost certainly differ from contemporary assessments. Thus, we should be wary of seeking overly exact moral "lessons" in history, for those will change with circumstance and with the different perspective that time alone provides. The abolitionists of Lincoln's own day, for example, were thought at the time to be dangerous radicals, operating

10 Richard J. Cox and David A. Wallace, eds., *Archives and the Public Good: Accountability and Records in Modern Society* (Westport, CT, 2002); Karen Benedict, *Ethics and the Archival Profession: Introduction and Case Studies* (Chicago, 2003). For another important case study, see Verne Harris, "The Archival Sliver: Power, Memory, and Archives in South Africa," *Archival Science* 2, nos. 1–2 (2002), pp. 63–86.

11 Cox and Wallace, "Introduction," *Archives and the Public Good*, p. 4.

on the fringe of acceptable political and social behaviour, but they are viewed now as the real heroes of the antebellum United States. Given that, what can it mean to speak of historical accountability, and how does that notion help us delineate a moral theology of archives?

There is no shortage of cases to illustrate the need for and the processes of historical accountability. They might be grouped into two broad categories: the horrors of totalitarian societies in the twentieth century and the parallel violation of human rights in democratic societies. In each of these, records and archives may play an important role in exacting accountability in the present, most notably by providing the evidence to convict individuals and groups of particular crimes. Apart from any given system of laws (national or international), however, some crimes in these areas rise to larger moral proportions. They are historic crimes; perhaps, applying theological language, we might even call them historic sins. Those committed by totalitarian regimes are the most clear-cut. By all accounts, the century just past was the bloodiest and most gruesome in human history. The desire by dictatorial regimes to control others utterly or to brutalize them was probably not any greater than it was in earlier eras, but the means of doing so became much more efficient and lethal. Do we need to recite the catalogue? The Armenian genocide; Nazi Germany and the Holocaust; the gulag in the Soviet Union and its satellites; the cultural revolution in Mao's China; Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge; "ethnic cleansing" in Yugoslavia, Rwanda, and other places; the gassing of Kurds in the Iraq of Saddam Hussein – all represent efforts, successful for a time at least, by totalitarian regimes to rule through fear and to eliminate all opponents. The uses of records in sustaining these regimes and in their systematic terrorizing of their own and other populations have been widely reported. On their face, these coolly mundane record-keeping systems offer a sobering answer to one of Frank Burke's questions: yes, there is indeed something in human nature that mandates the making and keeping of records, even in the most grisly circumstances. Records of the Nazi "final solution" continue to be used in the trials of those who were complicit and in the exposure of companies and governments which profited from the slave labour of the camps. Where such records were destroyed, as in the case of the immigration application forms in Canada, the sense of moral outrage has been understandably high. The obsessive record-keeping in Khmer Rouge torture prisons likewise demonstrates both how documentation may be used to manage tyranny while it is in power and to expose it afterwards.<sup>12</sup>

12 See Terry Cook, "'A Monumental Blunder': The Destruction of Records on Nazi War Criminals in Canada," in Cox and Wallace, *Archives and the Public Good*, pp. 37–65. On this general subject, see Alan A. Ryan, *Quiet Neighbors: Prosecuting Nazi War Criminals in America* (San Diego, 1984), David Matas and Susan Charendoff, *Justice Delayed: Nazi War Criminals in Canada* (Toronto, 1987), and James McKenzie, *War Criminals in Canada* (Calgary, 1995).

Those of us who live in representative democracies should not be too smug in noting the use of records in repressive regimes, however, for our governments and institutions too have engaged in the denial of basic human rights and have left documentary evidence of their doing so. In the United States, these cases begin with slavery, of course, and the persistence of racism following its abolition. Historians have only just begun to use some of the most obvious records of that “peculiar institution” to understand it from the slaves’ own point of view: Walter Johnson’s *Soul by Soul* is the first to make extensive use of slave auction records, for instance, which exist widely across the American South, to study the actual point at which human property changed hands. Other large-scale violations of human rights in otherwise commendable political systems have also come to light in recent years: Japanese internment during the Second World War; the treatment of First Nations and Native Americans, both in the reservation system and in native schools; the consignment of marginal people to mental institutions; medical experimentation on those who had little ability to resist, often in the name of eugenic “improvement”; the concealment of health hazards in certain products, tobacco most prominent among them.<sup>13</sup> Historical accountability requires that we look at such examples not as mere exercises in breast-beating or self-flagellation, opportunities to feel good about ourselves by feeling bad, or chances to reassure ourselves that we are more moral and, well, just better than those who went before us. Rather, they highlight the importance of taking a long historical view and exploring the ways in which records of the offences may be used to expose them and to pass moral judgments on those who perpetrated them. Given human nature, it is too much to hope, I think, that such exposure will actually prevent their recurrence in the future, but we probably have to act as if that is possible. At the very least, a sort of justice can be restored, however long after the fact.

### **Morality, Accountability, and Archival Processes**

Most likely, historians will continue to take the lead in exposing such sins to historical scrutiny and to general public awareness, but archivists and other records professionals have a crucial role to play in making the evidence available for use in this way. In such cases, archives may indeed be, as the tradi-

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See also Dawne Adam, “The Tuol Sleng Archives and the Cambodian Genocide,” *Archivaria* 45 (Spring 1998), pp. 5–26.

13 Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, MA., 1999). For other examples, see Tywana Whorley, “The Tuskegee Syphilis Study and the Politics of Memory,” in Cox and Wallace, *Archives and the Public Good*, pp. 165–75, and Robin L. Chandler and Susan Storch, “Lighting Up the Internet: The Brown and Williamson Collection,” *Ibid.*, pp. 135–62.

tional (and on several counts offensive) phrase has it, the “handmaidens” of history. Building considerations of morality and historical accountability into some of the basic archival functions will contribute to this work. When archivists appraise and acquire records, when they represent them in various descriptive media, when they make them available for use, they are engaging in activities that have moral significance beyond the immediate concerns of managing forms of information. Let me point out the moral nature of some of those archival activities as a way of suggesting how a concern for historical accountability is a part of the archival mission, a way of elaborating a practical moral theology of archives.

First, appraisal and acquisition. Enough cases of the use of records contrary to the interests of their creators have come to light in recent years that many institutions have learned the value of destroying records, of guaranteeing that they never get into archival custody in the first place. Just recently, I heard on the radio an advertisement for Brink’s, the armored car company, offering a new mobile shredding service for its clients. So efficient was this service, the ad said, that they could destroy in fifteen minutes the same amount of records it would take an entire staff days to shred. In the anti-trust suits against IBM in the 1980s, the company’s own records were used against it. More recently, in the sexual abuse scandal that continues in the Catholic Church in the United States, the existence of records of abuse and what church officials may have done to conceal or even destroy them has been at issue. A former bishop of Springfield, Massachusetts, who resigned his office amid charges that he himself had abused two teenagers in the 1970s, attracted attention when he seemed to boast that records of abuse by other priests had been destroyed and that he had even placed an accused abuser in charge of the diocesan archives. “Fortunately for the church,” Bishop Thomas Dupre is reported to have told a group of priests just before the scandal became public, his predecessor as bishop had destroyed “many personal and personnel files.”<sup>14</sup> In the political realm too, the acquisition of records by archives has been controversial in a way which suggests that archival preservation and accessibility are not universally recognized as good things. Gregory Sanford, the state archivist of Vermont, became something of a public figure in 2004 in connection with the papers of the state’s former governor, Howard Dean. Sanford had had to do some close negotiating with Dean and his staff on the governor’s leaving office, agreeing to greater restrictions on access than he would have liked; had he not done so, the governor (who was not obligated by law to deposit his papers in the archives) might have simply destroyed them or given them to a

14 Kevin Cullen, “Ruined Files Spark Allegation: Priest Says Bishop Called Springfield Diocese ‘Fortunate,’” *Boston Globe* (17 September 2003); Kevin Cullen, “Diocese’s Report on Sex Abuse Questioned,” *Boston Globe* (21 February 2004).

more pliant repository. All this became an issue during Dean's unsuccessful presidential campaign, when the fact that his records remained closed made him a target of "opposition research" by other candidates.<sup>15</sup>

In cases such as these, the role of records in various kinds of immediate accountability seems clear enough. But the need for longer term accountability is also apparent. Shouldn't the records of child sexual abuse be preserved so as to document this crime, this sin of historic proportions? If we are ever to understand the causes of such behaviour and to guarantee that it either is not repeated or is exposed and punished as soon as it is known, we will need a documentary record of it no less than of, say, Japanese internment. Such considerations are not, however, covered adequately in the codes of ethics of the professional associations, and in fact they probably cannot be. The Association of Canadian Archivists' (ACA) Code says that acquisition and appraisal decisions should be made "in accordance with their institutions' mandates and resources," adding that these decisions should be "guided by consideration for the integrity of the fonds." The Society of American Archivists' Code contains similar language about acquisition "in accordance with their institutions' purposes, stated policies, and resources," and it urges appraisal on the basis of "impartial judgment," a judgment that is nevertheless guided by "their institutions' administrative requirements or acquisitions policies."<sup>16</sup> There are both useful phrases and big loopholes in that language: from one perspective, the record-destroying bishop was advancing his "administrative requirements." More than anything else, these cases demonstrate the reason not to rely on codes of ethics alone. Ethical codes cannot anticipate every eventuality and should not try to do so. All the more reason, then, to elaborate a broader moral theology of archives, one that embodies and articulates "in the clearest and most coherent language available" (to recur once again to Macquarrie's phrase) certain values and behaviours beyond those that can be expressed concisely in any code of ethics.

Historical accountability in the work of archival description will demand a broader moral vision than has perhaps been usual. Archivists are practiced at highlighting the specific kinds of information that bodies of records contain, helping researchers find the points of intersection between their own interests of the moment and the contents of files. Such activity is focussed fairly closely on the subject matter of the documents themselves. But before preparing such descriptions, archivists might take a step backward to see and to describe the larger ecology of record-keeping systems in a way that will strengthen their

15 Rick Lyman, "Presidential Campaign was Cited during Talks to Seal Dean's Papers as Governor," *New York Times* (27 December 2003). On this larger phenomenon, see Joshua Green, "Playing Dirty," *Atlantic Monthly* (June 2004), pp. 73–80.

16 Association of Canadian Archivists, *Code of Ethics* (Ottawa, rev. 1999), section A1; Society of American Archivists, *Code of Ethics* (Chicago, 1980), sections III and VI.

description. I have often thought that every archives, at least those in institutional or government settings, ought to begin its descriptive program by studying and writing an essay about the history of record-keeping in that institution. Before preparing any finding aids for particular collections, they ought to have analyzed the nature of record-keeping itself. Many archivists know or intuit this as they go along, but they are not systematic in setting that knowledge down in fixed form and in sharing it with others. I myself tried to do this (somewhat imperfectly, I now recognize) in the front matter of my guide to the archives of the Catholic archdiocese of Boston, characterizing what seemed to me very different record-keeping practices at differing points in the two hundred year life of the institution.<sup>17</sup> Analysis of where the records in archival custody came from, who made what records for what purposes, how record forms changed, and what the records went through before ever coming into archival control tells us something we might otherwise miss, something that those who seek to use records in long term accountability may find helpful.

Consider, for example, the relentless banality of the record making and record using processes of the East German secret police. We know about this largely through the work of the historian and writer Timothy Garton Ash, who managed (after the Wall fell) to get his hands on his own file, the one kept on him by the Stasi as he went in and out of East Berlin in the 1970s and 1980s. Read today, the file's crushing ordinariness is what impresses us most. Here is the summary of an agent's observations for a single afternoon and evening in October 1979. At quarter past four, Garton Ash met a "female person" at the train station, shaking her hand and kissing her on the cheek; she was slim, with curly blond hair, and was wearing a dark blue cloth coat, a red beret, and carrying a brown handbag. Ten minutes later, they entered a café down the street but found it too crowded, so they went to another and drank coffee; at quarter to seven they came out and watched a government political rally. Then they went to another restaurant – pardon me, "gastronomic establishment" – and afterwards walked back to the train station, where they separated just before midnight.<sup>18</sup>

Now, the purpose of this file and the thousands, literally thousands, like it was intended to be a practical one, identifying opponents of the regime so they could be rounded up. Like Bentham's panopticon prison, where convicts

17 See "Introduction," in James M. O'Toole, *Guide to the Archives of the Archdiocese of Boston* (New York, 1982), xi–xviii. For another example of this, see Peter J. Wosh, "Bibles, Benevolence, and Bureaucracy: The Changing Nature of Nineteenth Century Religious Records," *American Archivist* 52, no. 2 (Spring 1989), pp. 166–78.

18 Timothy Garton Ash, *The File: A Personal History* (New York, 1997), pp. 7–10. For a full discussion of the archival issues involved here, see Elena S. Danielson, "Privacy Rights and the Rights of Political Victims: Implications of the German Experience," *American Archivist* 67, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2004), pp. 176–93.

would be constantly observed by their jailers, this system was designed to reinforce the psychological point that Big Brother was in fact always watching. With the fall of the East German regime, these surveillance files could be and were used to hold accountable those who had managed this system of state control; they were presented in evidence at the trials of former officials. There was even a highly personal form of accountability, evident in the number of cases in which it became apparent that spouses were informing on one another. But there ought to be a kind of historical accountability as well, applied to those who maintained these records. The very existence and nature of the record-keeping system itself demands scrutiny. The file clerks could perhaps think that their actions were morally neutral: after all, they were not interrogating suspects or killing them. But they were maintaining the records that permitted such activities, and their complicity is thus more apparent after the fact than it may have been at the time. Making such judgments is a form of historical accountability: history will rightly condemn their participation in the system. Their culpability may even be greater than otherwise because they could delude themselves into thinking that their own role was not really significant. Calling attention to all that in the archival description takes the implicit power of records to advance historical accountability and makes it explicit.

Finally, access may be the area of archival practice where questions of long-term accountability are clearest. If records are preserved in archival custody but remain withheld from contemporary or historical scrutiny, how can any accountability be possible? The secrets will remain secret, and those who are guilty of moral failure will be safe from those who cannot know about it. The clearest case I can think of here is that of the records of the Vatican pertaining to the Second World War and the Holocaust. The actions of the papacy in the face of the challenge to western civilization presented by Nazi Germany have been debated passionately since the war itself, and there are few signs that this will abate. Publishing on the subject is something of a cottage industry. Archival records, particularly the holdings of the Vatican Archives itself, are at the centre of these debates. Ever since Rolf Hochhuth's 1964 play, *The Deputy*, made the case for papal complicity by refusing to take effective public action against Hitler, scholars, journalists, and others have sought access to records that will support one side or the other. Every additional documentary discovery is big news. Just recently, a young Jesuit historian stirred this pot again by publicizing a letter he had seen in the Kennedy presidential library in Boston – an unexpected place for it – which seemed to suggest that Pius XII recognized the Fuhrer as “untrustworthy” and “fundamentally wicked” from an early date.<sup>19</sup>

19 Charles R. Gallagher, “‘Personal, Private Views’: A Newly Discovered Report from 1938 Reveals Cardinal Pacelli’s Anti-Nazi Stance,” *America* (1 September 2003), pp. 8–10. In the

In many ways, however, the Vatican Archives has been its own worst enemy in these disputes by being slow to make the records it holds on this entire matter freely accessible. It has published a multi-volume collection of edited documents on the Second World War which, while helpful, cannot entirely quell suspicion about the selection and publication criteria. It has not yet opened the original files to researchers. The Archives normally follows a policy of opening bodies of records papal reign by papal reign, but the cut-off date for that has been stuck at 1922 for more than fifteen years: material before that date is open, material after it is closed. A commission of historians, significantly including Jewish as well as Catholic scholars, was appointed several years ago to try to speed the opening of Holocaust related records, but the entire commission suspended its work shortly afterward in protest of what they perceived to be obstruction by the Archives itself.<sup>20</sup> There are a number of archival lessons in this experience, beginning with abandonment of this kind of flat cut-off date for the opening of archives, a procedure that over-protects non-sensitive records even as it under-protects those that should legitimately be restricted.

Here again, our professional codes of ethics cannot offer more than the most general of statements, endorsing “the fullest possible access” (ACA) and promotion of use “to the greatest extent possible compatible with institutional policies, preservation of holdings, legal considerations, individual rights, donor agreements, and judicious use of archival resources” (SAA).<sup>21</sup> What is clearly needed is a broader moral vision than can be embodied in any code, one which recognizes that sometimes it is necessary to abandon routine procedures in the service of higher goods. Particularly in this case, I would say without irony that a moral theology of archives is needed, one that seeks to promote historical accountability at the earliest possible moment. Historical accountability will eventually come in this case, as it does to every case, though this must not be allowed to run on what might be called a “Galileo

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often polemical literature on this subject, one of the most balanced accounts, despite its somewhat lurid subtitle, is Peter Godman, *Hitler and the Vatican: Inside the Secret Archives that Reveal the New Story of the Nazis and the Church* (New York, 2004).

20 *Actes et documents du Saint Siège relatifs à la Seconde Guerre mondiale*, ed. by P. Blet et al. (Vatican City, 1965–1981). On the difficulties of the commission, see “Joint-Religion Panel to Study World War II Archives,” *New York Times* (4 December 1999); “Jewish and Catholic Scholars Seek Pius XII’s Files,” *Ibid.* (27 October 2001); and “Panel of Historians Halts Study of Church Role in Holocaust,” *Washington Post* (24 July 2001).

21 Association of Canadian Archivists, *Code of Ethics*, section C1; Society of American Archivists, *Code of Ethics*, section VIII. From their own perspective, historians obviously concur with this general approach. The code of the American Historical Association (*Standards of Professional Conduct*, section 1, “Scholarship”) says that they should “advocate free, open, equal, and nondiscriminatory access.”

time clock,” with the opening of the full record of the trial of the famous scientist coming only after the passage of nearly five centuries.<sup>22</sup>

### Conclusion

If there is a moral theology of archives that can support long-term accountability through the use of records, there are several questions that need fuller thought, questions that would take us beyond the scope of the present inquiry. How, for example, do we develop the moral sense of archivists? For that matter, what is a moral archivist, and what is an immoral one? Is this whole subject treated sufficiently in the coursework of budding archivists? My guess is that it still is not. Surveys of archival course offerings in the U.S., at least, still show little attention to the subject outright.<sup>23</sup> More importantly, how do we work up from particular cases, our own casuist literature, to the general principles?

More broadly, is it too much to hope for a return to Frank Burke’s notion and to urge that the research and publications of archival faculty will be in part devoted to describing in some detail the underlying theology of archives? The archival parish priests certainly have an important role. They, the ones who sit (as it were) in the archival confessional, can offer candid discussions based on their own experiences on how they have addressed knotty moral and ethical questions. Multiplying the cases is a first step, but extracting the general principles from the particular examples is the crucial next step. For that, we will have to return again and again to the fundamental reasons for doing archives work in the first place, a belief in the value of preserving part of society’s collective memory and helping to bring that memory to bear when and where it is needed. Articulating the elements of archival theology generally, and archival moral theology in particular, remains an important professional task.

22 The best treatment of the complicated dynamics of opening church records remains Owen Chadwick, *Catholicism and History: The Opening of the Vatican Archives* (Cambridge, 1978); the Galileo case is considered in chapters 2 and 3.

23 James M. O’Toole, “The Archival Curriculum: Where Are We Now?,” *Archival Issues* 22 (1997), pp. 103–16. A more recent analysis of the content of archival education programs is presented in Elizabeth Yakel and Jeannette Bastian, “Archival Education and Archival Knowledge,” unpublished paper, International Council on Archives conference, Vienna, Austria, August 2004.

