

THE RESEARCH POTENTIAL OF RELIGIOUS ARCHIVES: THE MENNONITE EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT: Researchers often bypass religious archives when they write secular history. This article surveys seven broad areas of secular history in which religious archives may offer resources: women's history, genealogy, economic and business history, social history, politics, education, and ethnic history. The Mennonite Library and Archives (Bethel College, North Newton, Kansas) serves as a case study with examples of collections in each area. Although the article attempts to create awareness of new resources among scholars, it also focuses on the responsibility of religious archivists to shape and publicize their collections for broader and more efficient use by researchers working on less traditional topics.

During the last quarter of the nineteenth century twelve thousand Mennonites, persecuted throughout Europe for their religious beliefs, migrated from Russia and Europe to the central United States seeking freedom and security. One large group of Mennonites from Russian Volhynia arrived in Kansas in 1874. Upon leaving the train depot for their new homes on the unbroken prairie, they passed an American grocery stand containing the largest, reddest apples they had ever seen, with a glow quite unlike Russian apples. They purchased several pecks to enjoy on the ten mile hike to their new farms, and after walking a few miles they paused beside a small stream and chomped into their refreshing apples. However, the first bite produced a stream of bitter juice and tiny seeds; a few people panicked and screamed that they had been poisoned.

This story describing the Mennonites' introduction to tomatoes is only one of many accounts of pioneer life found among the church records and diaries in the Mennonite Library and Archives (MLA), North Newton, Kansas. It exemplifies the wealth of information that secular historians may discover when they take the time to conduct research in religious archives. Collections such as those found in the MLA often can provide much more than simple anecdotal or illustrative material; many of the records contain unique information that may fill important gaps in the existing documentary record, or add a new perspective on certain subjects.

Scholars should remember to consult such religious archival collections as they conduct research, but more important, religious archivists should learn

to promote their collections to secular historians who stand to benefit from this largely untapped lode of information. The core collection and supplementary holdings of the MLA serve as a good case study showing the variety of available resources, and the ways they might be promoted by archivists and used by researchers.

Founded in 1936, the Mennonite Library and Archives contains the records of the General Conference Mennonite Church.¹ Like most denominational archives, the MLA has records from a central administration, including a treasurer, executive secretary, and various support services. The General Conference Mennonite Church sponsors a foreign mission program, which accounts for a majority of the church's staff, expenditures, and, of course, records. Evangelism and home (or social) missions programs produce additional records as well as a variety of periodicals, newsletters, Sunday School materials, and books. Supplementing these archival resources from the denomination are personal papers from ministers, church administrators, and other leaders in the community. These MLA archival collections have significant information pertaining to seven broad subject areas of secular history: women's history, genealogy, economic and business history, social history, politics, education, and ethnic history.

Women's history has been one of the fastest growing areas of historical research in the past decade. Yet many researchers have found the archival resources in this field to be limited. The same is true with any field of history which looks at the past from the "bottom up," and it is also the case with groups which were not in positions of power and did not leave records. Religious archives such as the MLA are an important exception to this trend. Although women could not until recently serve as ministers or administrators in most denominations, they played very important roles as deaconesses or missionaries. Women often had their own separate church organizations and mission support groups, the records of which are keys to the ideas and activities of women. Mennonite women became active outside the local congregation during the first quarter of the twentieth century and focused primarily on missions and relief work. For example, an MLA collection from the local chapter of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom documents reactions to international affairs and local campaigns to promote peace and justice.² Another from the Women's Missionary Association of the General Conference Mennonite Church documents a group which has been active in missions since the turn of the century. This organization represents one of the first efforts of Mennonite women to establish a semi-independent route of service and involvement in a denomination with only men in leadership positions.³ The deaconess movement played a similar role for Mennonite women. The MLA has the papers of the deaconesses who began Bethel Deaconess Hospital in Newton, Kansas, in 1908.⁴

Although secular society also had women's organizations early in this century, groups with a religious connection or purpose are perhaps more numerous and often better-documented. Although recent surveys of women's history materials include many collections relating to women's organizations, much information is still hidden in religious archives, since archives of local congregations, in particular, are seldom included in such surveys.

Perhaps the greatest contribution religious archives can make to the study of women's history is in the area of documenting the careers of individual

women. For example, the MLA has several collections of papers from female missionaries. Aganetha Fast was born in Minnesota in 1888 and served in China from 1917-1941. Miss Fast, who died at age 93, wrote numerous accounts of her mission experience.⁵ Her extensive correspondence details the life of a single female missionary and includes a dramatic escape from the Japanese invaders at the beginning of World War II. Wilhelmina Kuyf and Marie Regier were other Mennonite missionaries in China⁶ whose papers are valuable sources of information for understanding the role of women missionaries and Christian missions in the third world.

A second major area in which religious archives serve the secular public is genealogical studies. Many congregational record books at the MLA were carried to Kansas from Europe or Russia and date back to the early nineteenth century. A few trace families to the eighteenth century or earlier. Constituent congregations deposited these records, which were in a few cases photocopied or microfilmed. Since family history is extremely popular, a religious archives may add special resources for genealogists. The MLA, for example, has dozens of microfilmed ship lists and census records. Most important, several hundred published Mennonite family histories also supplement the archival resources pertaining to family history. These other materials often provide the key to locating families in the church records. For example, finding a family on the census or ship lists will usually assist the researcher in determining the appropriate church records to search. A religious archives is a natural place to seek genealogical information about ancestors who were members of the denomination.

Religious archives such as the Mennonite Library and Archives also may serve as a resource for economic and business history. This third area may seem unlikely for a religious archives, but denominations often have a complete and long-term set of financial records, which are usually more accessible than those of many corporations. Recently, the MLA has become the archives for several Mennonite owned and operated businesses. The records of the Buhler Mill and Elevator trace the history of this firm, and the operation of the Herald Publishing Company is detailed in another major collection obtained by the MLA.⁷ Although not many religious archives will contain independent business records, they still provide opportunities for scholars to study fund-raising techniques, reactions to economic trends, and structures of financial and managerial organization. Even a relatively small denomination will have a budget of several million dollars and operate in a manner that might be studied by business students who may learn much from the structural chart and personnel procedures. For example, church charities endeavor to spend very little on administration and are thus very efficient operations. Church organizations also tend to foster high employee morale, cooperation among personnel, and unity of purpose. Some corporations could learn from studying the streamlined organizations of denominations. Perhaps the techniques used in Japanese industry are not as unique as Americans have assumed.

Another popular area for historical studies in recent years has been social history. Many denominational archives have extensive records documenting social ministry programs. The General Conference Mennonite Church has had a Peace and Social Concerns Committee since the 1950s and the publications and activities of this committee reflect the attitudes of society towards social issues. One can study the Great Society programs of the 1960s, the welfare pro-

grams of the 1970s, and the budget cutbacks of the 1980s by examining their influence on the needs that churches have attempted to meet. Even subtle changes in social philosophies are reflected in church publications. While many of the social programs or institutions of denominations are permanent or long-term (hospitals and orphanages), a tremendous variety of efforts to meet more immediate needs illustrates the unfolding of social history. The records of prison ministries or counseling services for unwed mothers are examples. In addition, the MLA obtained the papers of the Kansans Concerned About Vietnam, a group based in Ellis County in the late 1960s and 1970s. This collection documents one special phase of the national protest against American involvement in Vietnam.

Social history is closely related to the fifth area: politics. The General Conference Mennonite Church speaks out frequently on political questions, and the concerns expressed by religious leaders and denominations often reflect the political climate of the country. Certain political candidates may be endorsed or rejected by denominations. The church may speak out on issues such as abortion or capital punishment. The MLA contains numerous records documenting attitudes toward war and the selective service. The historian should remember to consult religious archives when writing about political events, especially in recent years as movements such as the Moral Majority have entwined religion and politics more closely in American society.

The field of educational methods and curriculum development is a sixth area in which scholars might find information in a religious archives. The MLA has complete sets of Sunday School materials for several age groups dating back over fifty years. These resources reflect the theology of the church and on another level its educational philosophy. Thus they also allow the student or educator to study the teaching techniques used by the church. A trip to the local religious archives might supplement curriculum material available in the university or college library.

A final major area in which religious archives provide resources for secular historians is ethnic history. Many religious archives, like the MLA, contain materials predominantly about specific ethnic groups. These archives will have many resources relating to ethnic or immigrant history. In fact, they are often the only significant source of information about a particular ethnic group. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the church was the primary organization to which most immigrants belonged; only labor organizations provide similar documentation for some groups and regions. The records of the church thus contain much data about the immigrants' acculturation, as well as social, political, and economic issues. Church conference reports and minutes describe even the migration and expansion of immigrant populations. For example, in the 1890s hundreds of Mennonites migrated from Kansas to Oklahoma and participated in the various runs into the Indian Territories. Church records carefully document and explain this movement. Several books and articles have been produced on these topics by historians using the MLA. Dennis D. Engbrecht's recent dissertation examined "The Americanization of a Rural Immigrant Church: the General Conference Mennonites in Central Kansas, 1874-1939" (University of Nebraska, 1985).

The ethnic materials of the MLA are not exclusively Mennonite. A recent NHPRC grant preserved several thousand endangered negatives of Hopi and

Cheyenne Indians taken by Mennonite missionaries around the turn of the century. These photographs have been used in several scholarly monographs and also published in history textbooks. Thus the MLA has become a center for the study of native Americans.

The Mennonite Library and Archives, like many other religious archives, has a number of unique collections outside these seven primary areas which might be of interest to the secular historian. Although larger denominations cannot collect local history materials from every community where they have members, many resources of the MLA extensively document the local history of certain areas because Mennonites have tended to cluster in about a dozen states and within a few counties in each of those states. The archives of larger denominations exhibit less focus on particular regions or communities, but they also are sources for local history documentation. For communities where Mennonites reside, the MLA acquires books and other materials to supplement the archival holdings. For example, the records of eight one-room school houses portray life in pioneer settlements in central Kansas. These materials also provide information about education in this region from the 1880s through the 1930s.

Musicology is another area of secular research where MLA resources provide information. The MLA has one of the country's largest collections of song books and hymnals. The hymnals are from many denominations, and manuscript collections support research in the published books. Several new song and hymn books have been compiled using these resources, including one recently in the Cheyenne language. Scholars using this collection have also written papers describing the development of hymnody in the United States.

The collection policies of a denominational archives will have a major impact on its ability to serve historians interested in secular themes. The Mennonite Library and Archives is unique among religious archives because of its extensive supplementary collections. Most denominations do not independently sponsor a library with thousands of volumes (20,000+ in the MLA) as part of their archives but rely on the denomination's institutions of higher education to collect published resources. Few archives have hundreds of oral history interviews or reels of microfilmed ship lists, census records, and even European church records.

This study has focused on the possibilities of promoting and using resources in the Mennonite Library and Archives for secular historical research. Since other denominational archives will have both similar materials and other subject strengths, researchers should make it a practice to inquire about religious archival resources when probing secular topics.

However, for archivists who wish to develop the use of their holdings by secular historians, it is not sufficient to simply dispense information about materials available in religious archives. Such archivists should also remember the following general guidelines which may help them to evaluate and implement their plan.

First, religious archivists must determine whether they really want to serve the secular scholarly community, and whether their holdings will support such an initiative. A religious institution may view its archives as existing solely for the use of church officials, and its collection may consist of only the inactive files of the central administration. The archives that does not have any con-

gregational records, personal manuscript collections or supporting materials may have relatively little of interest to secular historians. Furthermore, it may even contradict the policies of some institutions to serve researchers outside the denomination. One such religious archives has even asked scholars to sign a statement agreeing not to write on themes which might "damage" the church. With such restrictions, secular historians will rarely be persuaded to utilize religious archival holdings.

Second, visibility and the active promotion of secular topics is essential for those who wish to attract secular researchers. Most religious denominations are associated with some institution of higher education. Some archivists achieve success by promoting research topics that correspond to the interests of students or curricular offerings. Although senior academic scholars usually arrive at an archives with topics fixed in their minds, some may be willing to explore new ideas and respond to suggestions from archivists. Archivists who are not directly associated with a college or university may not have so obvious an opportunity, but they may still develop relationships with area educational institutions. The MLA announces the addition of every important collection not only in church newspapers, but also in other MLA publications and in local secular newspapers.

The third and final conclusion is obvious: every archives is unique and has a different balance of resources, priorities, and needs. This fact has a strong impact upon the responsibilities of every religious archivist to publicize and promote the use of his or her collections. Not every archives will have the resources to match the interests of every secular user—unlike history, an archives cannot be all things to all people. The seven subject areas summarized in this article are simply general possibilities based upon the holdings of the Mennonite Library and Archives. Other archives will have strengths in completely different areas. It is important for religious archivists to develop collecting policies that build upon the strengths of their denominational records. They should also remember that many "religious" records may be of interest to secular historians, and that it is the special responsibility of the religious archivists to inform the secular researcher about potentially useful material.

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NOTES

1. A published history of the Mennonite Library and Archives does not exist, but much information on the archives is found in a special issue of *Mennonite Life* (September 1977): 18-24.
2. Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, Record Group VI, Series 1, MLA.
3. Women's Missionary Association of the General Conference Mennonite Church, Record Group 1, Series 7A, MLA.
4. Deaconess Collection, Manuscript Collection 84B, MLA.
5. Aganetha Fast Collection, Manuscript Collection 47, MLA.
6. Wilhelmina Kuyf and Marie Regier Collections, Manuscript Collections 130 and 54, MLA.
7. Buhler Mill and Elevator and Herald Publishing Company Records, Record Group VI, Series 3 and 7, MLA.