Managing Non-government & Private Records in a National Framework

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‘Religious’ Archives in Australia

Introduction

Is it time to recognise that the documentary heritage – and social, cultural and institutional history – of Australia encompasses more than records created by various levels of publicly elected government? If so, how do we, as a nation, go about ensuring that such records are created, captured and made accessible? Is a suite of laws the answer? Is it time to articulate a national framework or policy that informs how such records are to be managed now and into the future?

This presentation forms one element of a broader session looking at non-government records and archives, i.e. records which are created by private bodies or institutions, and whose archives exist without the benefit of legislation that mandates their creation, preservation and use. After brief introductions to each ‘type’ of archives, the speakers are aiming to provoke discussion and debate that might inform the development of a strategy to address the current disparity between private and public records. ‘Big picture’ questions which are of interest include:

- Is there enough will to challenge the notion that ‘genuine’ archives in Australia are only those which are legally mandated?
- Is this an issue of sufficient significance to warrant engagement by the profession as a whole?
- Is the formation of a ‘CONGA’ [Council of Non-Government Archives] to champion the issues raised here, a viable solution?
- In the absence of a nationwide body to lobby on behalf of the cultural sector, is there an alternative?
- What alliances can we form with other information professions or collecting institutions?

Religious archives – some assumptions

‘Religious’ archives in Australia should more properly be called records of faith-based activity: no records are inherently ‘religious’. Broadly speaking, ‘religious’ archives encompass those of recognised Churches (mostly of the Christian faiths) and religious orders (mostly Catholic). For the purposes of this discussion, we will use ‘religious archives’ as shorthand. Like many non-government archives, ‘religious’ archives include items that may not conform to an orthodox definition of ‘record’: we hold furniture, textiles, books, ceramics, metal objects, sacred relics etc. While hoping not to open debate about the definition of ‘collection’, it must be stated that the custodians of religious archives often use the terms ‘archives’ and ‘collections’ interchangeably.

Religion in Australia: 2011 census statistics

The 2011 census revealed that over two-thirds of Australia’s population identified with some form of religion. The broad breakdown is as follows: 61.1% of Australians identified as Christian; of these, 25.3% were Catholic. Non-Christian religions, including Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism and
Judaism, accounted for 7.2% of the population, while 22.3% nominated ‘No religion’ as their choice.\(^1\)

Comparisons between sets of census data reveal changes in the nation’s understanding of and allegiance to defined religious groups. While a detailed analysis of such trends is beyond the scope of today’s session, a couple of key points emerge very quickly, and will have an influence on the type, quantity and breadth of material held in ‘religious’ archives into the future:

- growth in proportion of the population which identifies with non-Christian religions
- growth in the diversity of those non-Christian religions
- growth of those identifying as having no defined religious allegiance, and
- a shift, within those identifying as Christian, from a majority identifying as Anglican to a majority identifying as Catholic.\(^2\)

**Types of ‘religious’ archives in Australia**

As mentioned earlier, archives of organised religion, organised churches, religious orders, faith traditions or faith practices are usually referred to ‘religious’ archives in shorthand. For the purposes of today’s discussion, ‘religious’ archives can be categorised into three different types.

**Diocesan archives**

These are records of an administrative structure which supports (separately) the two largest Christian religions in Australia – the Anglican and Catholic Churches. The first Bishop of the Anglican Church of Australia\(^3\) (previously known as the Anglican Church of Australia and Tasmania) was appointed in 1836; by 1847 a diocesan structure was recognisable.\(^4\) Since then, the structure has evolved to encompass twenty-three dioceses. Each diocese generates and is responsible for its own records, leading to the creation of (potentially) 23 distinct but related ‘Anglican’ archives.

The official Catholic Church in Australia can be dated to 1833, with the arrival of Dr WB Ullathorne in Sydney as Vicar-General. The following year John Bede Polding was created Bishop of Sydney and appointed Vicar-Apostolic of New Holland and Van Diemen’s Land.\(^5\) The Catholic Church in Australia has since evolved to include 33 dioceses or archdioceses, including one separate entity for the Military and three others, including the Maronite (Lebanese Christian) Church and Melkite (Greek Catholic) Church. Again, there is potential for thirty-three linked but separate archives. The Australian Catholic Directory of 2012-2013 reveals that eleven of the 33 Dioceses have Archivists (with that specific title) in charge of diocesan records, while a further five either have an historian, a history committee or another member of staff serving as de facto custodian of the collection.

**‘Whole of’ archives**

The types of archives falling into this artificial category can be considered as those which are created and held by the smaller Christian churches and non-Christian faiths: for example, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Judaism, the Baptist Church, the Lutheran Church and the Uniting Church.

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\(^2\) 1921 Census data reveals that 43.7% of the population identified as Anglican; by 2011 this had fallen to 17.1% of the population. One rationale put forward to explain this trend was the change in immigration patterns after World War II when the majority of immigrants came from European nations that were largely Catholic.


\(^4\) Diocese of Tasmania was created in 1842, with Dioceses of Adelaide, Newcastle and Melbourne established by 1847 see [http://www.anglican.org.au/content/home/about/a_history_of_anglicanism/Part_2_The_Anglican_Church_in_Australia.aspx](http://www.anglican.org.au/content/home/about/a_history_of_anglicanism/Part_2_The_Anglican_Church_in_Australia.aspx), accessed 17 September 2013.

Many religious orders in Australia have a service-based focus; many were expressly invited to Australia on ‘mission’ from Ireland (or the Continent, in fewer cases) to assist with the provision of education, health care and welfare services prior to Federation. The records created by those orders in the course of their activities now form the early history of many institutions and services that are considered mainstream or have been incorporated into state-run services – schools, tertiary education institutions, hospitals, social justice agencies etc. The records also document a way of life that is probably in decline in the western world and has arguably had some sort of impact on our collective understanding of the nation’s past.

Religious orders in Australia tend to be Catholic; they have many forms and titles such as ‘Congregation’, ‘Institute’ or ‘Province’, all of which reflect their different governance and administrative structures. A 2009 survey of Catholic religious orders conducted by Catholic Religious Australia (CRA) revealed 118 different active religious orders in Australia comprising 75 female congregations, 38 male congregations of clerics (men who are ordained as priests) and five congregations of Brothers (men who are not ordained as priests but live life as professed religious). This does not include the many geographically-based variations within a particular order. The Sisters of Mercy, for example, all recognise the same founder and live according to a very similar (if not the same) rule of life, yet are organised into 17 separate governance entities spread across Australia. At a bare minimum then, there are potentially at least 118 separate and unique archival collections in existence. This CRA survey was the first of its kind since 1976; it revealed a significant shift in numbers involved in religious life, demographics (age and geographic location) and in ministry, i.e. the activity or activities through which members of the order gave expression to their chosen way of life.

Two female religious orders were founded in Australia by Australians: The Sisters of the Sisters of the Good Samaritan of the Order of St Benedict (‘Good Sams’) in 1857 and the Sisters of St Joseph (‘Josephites’) in 1866. The Josephites were founded by Father Julian Tenison Woods and Mary MacKillop; in 2010 Mary of the Cross became Australia’s first Saint.

**Why are ‘religious’ archives important?**

There are a number of reasons why ‘religious’ archives have significance. Church records created across different parishes and dioceses are amongst the nation’s earliest records of identity: church registers record baptisms, marriages and deaths. Local parish statistics, collected as part of the Church’s efforts to know its constituents, can be viewed as an early form of census data. Parish (and diocesan) records are also a source of local history, especially where parish committees may have been established to oversee new community developments such as schools and halls. Collectively, these records hold evidence of land ownership and use, building developments and demographic composition and changes over time.

In addition to providing basic data about the growth and spread of our cities, the records of churches and religious orders provide another (probably over-looked) source for understanding the on-the-ground impact of multiculturalism in Australia. The practice of inviting religious orders and clerics to Australia continues today, specifically to serve specific cultural and language needs.  

Above all, religious records – specifically those of the structured church – are records of power. The Catholic Church hierarchy is stand-alone, with recourse to Rome, not Canberra. Historically, bishops and archbishops had the power to invite to Australia any religious order they chose, with

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7 Further detail could be obtained through an analysis of church data, such as that contained in The Official Directory of the Catholic Church in Australia, published annually with the authority of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference by the National Council of Priests of Australia Inc.  
8 See Official Directory of the Catholic Church in Australia, for examples of religious orders and clerics serving migrant communities across Australia.
free reign over where and when the members of those orders would be sent, and what they would be doing once deployed. The Church has actively worked against elected governments over issues such as education (a universal experience for Australians since the 1880s) and conscription during World War I, a time recognised as the moment when Australia developed a collectively-understood sense of national identity. Our national and state archives may hold the government’s records of these struggles; the records held by the Catholic Church and religious orders will provide an alternative to the ‘national’ narrative as represented by the public collecting institutions.

Catholic female religious: in transition – private ‘niche’ service to public non-religious entity

While a significant number of catholic female religious orders were established to support a contemplative way of life, many more were established with a view to providing services in times and places of obvious need, especially amongst the poor and disadvantaged. The female religious orders invited to Australia in the second half of the 19th century were brought here mainly to provide services in education, health care, and aged care. Many schools, hospitals, women’s shelters and aged-care facilities (amongst other services) were established right across the nation. These services became the hub of a district, especially in country areas where the local Catholic school and the presence of nuns became part of the fabric of a town.

In some cases, what began as a small, localised service has attained status and recognition not only for longevity, but also for excellence and innovation. Some of these private institutions are now major providers alongside their public counterparts. The Sisters of Charity, who arrived in Sydney in 1857, established St Vincent’s Hospital in Darlinghurst in 1857 and in Melbourne in 1893. The Little Company of Mary established a nursing school in Sydney in 1889; this grew into a number of Calvary Hospitals in New South Wales, Tasmania, South Australia and the Australian Capital Territory. The Sisters of Mercy established the first Mater Misericordiae Hospital in North Sydney in 1906; the ‘Mater’ hospitals in Sydney and Brisbane are now as much a part of the local fabric of those cities as the public ones. The Sisters of St Joseph, under Mary MacKillop’s direction, established a teacher training school at North Sydney in the 1880s; by the 1950s it had become the Catholic Teacher’s College which has since formed one of the core pillars of the Australian Catholic University.⁹

The richness of experience documented in the archives of religious orders is slowly being recognised as a source of material which will fuel further work in the field of women’s studies.

The religious orders cited here along with many of their counterparts are in a period of transition as their members age and numbers decline. Recognising this, there has been a trend over the past twenty years or so for new models of governance to be established for schools or hospitals which were originally managed and staffed solely by members of the order. The new models increasingly involve the appointment of non-religious personnel, and require a conscious articulation of and transfer to lay custodians of the charism (‘special gift’ or unique features) that identifies each order. Records of such profound change for the orders involved reside within discrete collections. Together, they hold a story of potential significance for the nation, as we are witnessing the end of one way of life, which, it might be argued, has shaped at least some of the nation’s understanding of itself. This is change management on a grand scale.

Religious archives and the profession in Australia

What connections, if any, exist between ‘religious’ archives and their custodians, and professional archival networks?

The Australian Society of Archivists, founded in 1975, has a number of special interest groups including one dedicated to ‘religious’ archives, which has existed since 1998. This group meets once per annum for a business meeting, where office holders are elected. In 2003-2004 the group

⁹ Sisters of St Joseph Archives Agency Note A23, 27 September 2013.
conducted a survey of its members aiming to quantify the volume and type of audiovisual materials held amongst member collections. It is not known where the report of this survey has been archived.

There are 553 entries in the ASA’s online Directory of Archives, which appears to have been most recently updated in 2010. Of the 55 that could be classified as ‘religious’, seven are Catholic Diocesan archives, six are Anglican Diocesan archives and 20 are archives of faith-based organisations including welfare agencies and hospitals. The remaining 22 are archives of religious orders, although this figure includes geographically-diverse collections that fall under the same founding principle; for example, there are archives of the Sisters of Mercy in Queensland, Perth and North Sydney. Interestingly, and perhaps a matter for further exploration, there is no representation in the Directory of Archives beyond those created by western Christian religions, other than two Jewish archives. Given Australia’s multicultural reality, where are the records of the Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist and other faiths as practised in Australia?

There are a number of networks for ‘religious’ archives beyond the ASA, including those for diocesan archivists, and archivists caring for the collections of religious orders, congregations and institutes. Examples of the latter type of semi-professional network are the Archivists of Religious Institutes based in NSW and Victoria’s Association of Catholic Archivists.

Issues for the collections
A number of issues are becoming apparent which will have implications on how the heritage collections of religious orders in particular will be sustained into the future. Succession planning is one of these. Most religious orders are in a state of transition: the number of members joining is declining, and the average age of members is rising. These two factors leave the orders with a stark reality: in 10–20 years’ time, it is unlikely that the current personnel and ministries (activities) will exist, meaning that the orders need to either accept that the activity will end or take steps to ensure that non-religious will take up the work. This is equally true for external activities, such as the provision of education and health services for which an order may have had responsibility, and for internal activities, such as financial management or archives management. Issues surrounding the physical storage of collections, perhaps in a shared facility, are only beginning to be addressed.

A significant issue is the lack of data about the collections in question. While it is possible to make an educated guess as to the number of possible ‘religious’ archives we simply do not know how many archives and collections exist, where they are, how big they are, nor what formats they consist of. Little is known of their content beyond the few which are listed on access points such as the ASA Directory of Archives. It is highly likely that the custodians of these collections are aware of the significance of the material to their own orders; less is known about the potential significance of individual items, whole collections or the collections as a whole. Lack of knowledge about the collections needs to be addressed, both in terms of gathering statistics (quantity, location, dates etc) and raising awareness of the contribution made to our nation’s story by religious orders.

Going forward: issues for the profession
A close look at the records, archives and collections of non-government institutions raises some issues for the profession.

The existence of Special Interest Groups has already been mentioned. There are questions to be asked about the efficacy of such an approach, especially given the relative lack of collection-specific activity in some, and lack of connection with the profession as a whole in others. Are we inadvertently creating ‘silos’ of knowledge and experience by the SIG structure? Is the flip side of networking with other archivists caring for similar collections a confinement of professional

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engagement? Archives are archives: daily challenges, requisite skills and professional practice are (or should be) common.

In an Australian context, do we have an understanding of a totality of archives? Are the only genuine archives understood to be those which are legally mandated, such as State Records authorities and the National (Commonwealth) Archives of Australia? Do we accept that our ‘national’ story is held in records that reside outside of any number of official collecting institutions? If yes, is this acceptable? To paraphrase Sue McKemmish,\(^{11}\) when will we develop a truly national National Archives, reflective of the myriad pursuits, opinions, decisions and activities undertaken by Australians of every walk of life?

Working on the premise above, how would we lobby for this to occur? Should we confine efforts, as a profession with a professional association, to avenues which currently exist (i.e. on our own or in conjunction with professions and associations similar to our own) or is there an alternative?

Do we need a nationwide body (such as the defunct Collections Council of Australia) to lobby on behalf of the cultural, arts and information sectors, to raise the archival profile and to develop something that might encourage awareness of and responsibility for a ‘national’ archives? What would that ‘something’ look like? Would it be a policy framework? Would it be legislation? What do we know about current efforts in other nations?

These questions are put forward today in the hope of inspiring discussion and debate, which will hopefully lead to action, against which we can report at the next ASA Conference.

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\(^{11}\) Professor McKemmish asked this question from the floor at the ASA National Conference, Canberra, October 2013.