

Title: Religious Archives and the Postmodern Perspective
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1 minute introduction: how I got into my topic

Hello and thank you for coming today. My name is Molly Malone and my research topic is Religious Archives and the postmodern perspective. Essentially during my first year of graduate school I plotted on how to best incorporate my own interests into a thesis topic. And I think I did pretty well considering that I am very much interested in religion and the way in which it interacts with society – and my thesis topic certainly attempts to reveal a little more about that relationship. **3 minutes discussing postmodernism**

I was first intrigued by this relationship between archives and archivists and religious institutions and how their communities go about collecting and interning records for posterity. I then began to wonder about the types of questions I would need to ask in order to find out more information about this interaction – not to mention that I would need to make these questions broad enough and specific enough all at once since I would be asking them from very small community, a community of archivists who have devoted some or all of their careers to working with religious records. Beyond just asking questions about religious records from this community of archivists though, I also became very interested in the postmodern perspective. Why would anyone become interested in something that can barely be understood... you may be asking yourself? I must be insane, why would anyone dedicate their time to that mess. Well let me tell you, the postmodern perspective offers an intriguing insight into religion and society for a few different reasons.

One being that it is a critique of basically everything you think that you know and have come to understand about the world that we live in. This perspective makes it possible for me to then begin to question why exactly religion is so pervasive and so deeply embedded in society and culture. And not just American culture in the United States but also across the globe in places such as Italy and Russia. These countries are a few other case studies I explore in my research considering their archival records on religion and the dramatic interactions with religion their societies have dealt with, something I will consider shortly.

Another reason why I care about the postmodern perspective is because as Jacques Derrida, a noted postmodern thinker, would say an archive is nothing but a notion until value is placed on what is being preserved for posterity. With this in mind, it became obvious to me that I needed to be approaching religious archivists and religious records with this same perspective – are these records only important and valuable because of the religious communities who collect and continue to use them. Or more importantly are archivists contributing to this by unbiasedly applying the best archival principles, practices, and theories to the records – are these archivists actively engaging religious communities to ensure that their records are being preserved for posterity? And if so what might that look like? And if the archival institution is not of a religious nature, how would the religious records be treated in terms of archival principles like selection and appraisal, arrangement and description, preservation, digitization, or access and restrictions in comparison to other records being held by that institution?

The final aspect of postmodernism that I took into consideration was the way in which it reflected on modern thinking about the relationship of religion and society. Many assumed that modern societies would eventually be too advanced to need religion and many modernists believed as Karl Marx's famously stated that "religion [was indeed] the opiate of the people" and one day modern society would have no need for it because all understanding would come from science and logic. I am sure that many of you are now thinking about all the reasons why this line of thinking is false, even today here in the United States the President is signing legislation that directly impacts religion, state, and society. And while that may be beyond that scope of this research paper

an analysis of the interaction between religion, state and society from the postmodern perspective may be more easily understood. So I shall briefly consider the cases of Italy and Russia.

1 minute on Italy and the Catholic Church

Italy did not become a nation until the 1880s after a drawn out dispute with the Catholic Church over temporal power in Rome. The Catholic Church, most notably under Pope Leo XIII, utilized the Vatican Archives to bolster the importance of the Catholic Church in society – claiming that if it were to be removed Italians would lose a unique part of what made Italian society Italian. Pope Leo XIII's use of apologetics and the opening of the notorious Vatican Secret Archives is but one glimpse into how revealing the postmodern perspective can be when it comes to ways in which religion has continued to make itself an integral part of society. The case in point being here that the Catholic Church utilized centuries of archival records to demonstrate itself as a part of Italian society and even to this day the Catholic Church continues to be vitally important to native Italians as demonstrated through long voting traditions that align Catholic religious values and political party values. Not to mention that Pope Francis has proven himself to be a capable religious leader and continues to influence billions of practicing Catholics across the globe.

1 minute on Russia and atheist policy under communism

Conversely the case of the former USSR makes things even more puzzling, especially from this postmodern perspective I continue to chase. After the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 Russia became communist and a largely atheist society that pursued and relied on science and logic above all else. However things were and never are that simple. After World War II, Russia saw a drastic increase in the amount of religiosity throughout society. To curb this upsurge, during the 1950s Nikita Khrushchev implemented committees, policies, and other questionable tactics to quell religious dissent, ensure that children were being educated without religion, that religious organizations were being surveilled by the state constantly, and any unauthorized religious activity was stopped by the state immediately. The goals of these actions being to create a better communist society by eliminating other institutions and cultural traditions that may keep a citizen from being loyal to the communist cause. This behavior was altered under Khrushchev's successors Brezhnev and Gorbachev – changes in leadership conditions made it easier for religious communities to find more freedoms, even if they were severely limited while the main goals of state remained committed to communism. By the time the USSR fell in the 1990s most religious communities were back to post World War II levels. While current religious policies may be changing for some groups within Russia today, from the postmodern perspective the Russian case allows a criticism of the way in which the state attempted to quell religion – and the archival evidence that religion flourished in society despite the governments best attempts to diminish it is overwhelming.

3 minutes USA and American religious archives and what it means for our postmodern society

These case studies brought me back around to the questionnaire I sent out to religious archivists who were also a part of the Society of American Archivists. While the survey may have only been eighteen or so questions, over 90 professional archivists responded and about ten felt compelled to email me directly with their interests, concerns and questions. I did not inform any of the participants about my intentions of analyzing their answers from the postmodern perspective, nor did they know that I was particularly interested in their responses because I attempted to ask their opinions not only on the religious archival records they may be dealing with as a professional but I poignantly asked the same questions about the non-religious records in their institutions, if they had any. I did this in an attempt to catch any bias the archivists may be placing on one type of record over the other. While most of the archivists displayed no apparent biases, some of the results caught my attention over others. For instance, most archivists replied that the

same amount of money was spent on religious records as non-religious records and yet most archivists stated their institutions were seriously underfunded. To me this seems to imply that although an institution may have several different types of records, religious records face no more of an advantage or disadvantage to other records for funding. A postmodernist would say that equates to religious records holding just as much value as other records. The survey also revealed that religious records and other types of records are requested by patrons at the same rate each month, meaning that the community is actively using these religious records. Essentially all the survey questions I asked intending to discover some disparity between the treatment, use and application of best archival principles and practices was non-existent. Even the last question, asking archivists if they felt marginalized within the larger profession for their focus on religious records came back positive that they never felt that way. Perhaps it is the strong archival tradition, professional development and community that is responsible for these answers. But also perhaps, from the postmodern perspective religion is still so deeply embedded within our culture and society that religious communities and archivists find it incredibly important to preserve for posterity their records.

I minute conclusion, where I'd like to take it in the future

Throughout my research I attempted to constantly harken back to this postmodernist perspective, even today while I may be unsure of it, postmodernism has certainly allowed me to explore religious archives and the impact of religious archival records in a new way. Above all analyzing conditions between religion, state and society has proven that religion is here to stay and modern societies may never know what it is like to exist without them. As for religious archivists, they have become an integral part in ensuring that these religious records survive for posterity and continuing to interact and assist these communities will guarantee that the religious records provide us with the best picture possible just in case those socio-cultural traditions of religion do disappear.