Defamiliarizing National Histories through Cross-National Reflections in the Study of Religion

Teemu Taira
University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

Abstract: As part of the review symposium of From Seminary to University: An Institutional History of the Study of Religion in Canada (University of Toronto Press, 2020) by Aaron W. Hughes, this review essay compares and contrasts the narrative it tells us to other national contexts and explores what might be the Canadian peculiarities not necessarily obvious to those who have been educated in that system.

Résumé: Dans le cadre du symposium de recension de From Seminary to University: An Institutional History of the Study of Religion in Canada (University of Toronto Press, 2020) par Aaron W. Hughes, cet essai compare et oppose le récit qu’il nous livre à d’autres contextes nationaux et explore les particularités canadiennes qui ne sont pas nécessairement évidentes pour ceux qui ont été formés dans ce système.

Keywords
Canada, Finland, study of religion, university

The study of religion has several histories. Each national context has its own story to tell, although many aspects overlap with other nations and there are practically always some repeating patterns connecting one story to more cross-national developments in the study.
of religion. Because of this, any particular national context tends to include familiar and unfamiliar aspects. Such is the case also when a Finnish scholar who has worked in Britain for a few years and who thinks he is relatively well educated in European scholarly history of the study of religion familiarizes himself with the Canadian history. Despite several academic travels this reader has done to Canada (mainly to Ottawa, Toronto and Montreal) and extensive interaction with Canadian scholars, it is fair to highlight that the detailed institutional history of the study of religion in Canada has in many ways been an unknown territory for me. It is therefore not possible for me to evaluate whether Aaron W Hughes gets everything right in his *From Seminary to University* (2020). It is possible, however, to compare and contrast the narrative he tells us to other national contexts and explore what might be the Canadian peculiarities not necessarily obvious to those who have been educated in that system and perhaps learned to take some aspects of its scholarly history for granted.

My approach here pays special attention to the Finnish context, and touches the wider Nordic and European contexts, not because I assume that it would be nice for Canadian and international readers to know more about the study of religion in Finland, but because such an unexpected comparison may expose something about the Canadian history. What it reveals could be about paths the scholarly history did not travel in that particular context, but it would be difficult for me to answer why certain paths were chosen. In some cases, such paths may have been taken, but they are forgotten, either from the conventional narration or from Hughes’s version, but again, I have to be modest and not pretend to know which parts of my observations are based on the peculiarities of Canadian history and which on how Hughes narrates it. Thus, I take it as my task to ask questions in a similar manner as a stranger might ask when visiting an unfamiliar place, using their familiar settings as a point of comparison in getting to know the unknown. As a result, those who are already familiar with the Canadian history of the study of religion may be able to see it in a different light—neither better nor worse, just different.

Canadian religious history is built upon denominationalism, whereas most European countries have been practically monoreligious. Although European nations have been more or less diverse in practice, the self-understanding of different nations has been related to the maxim of *cuius regio, eius religio* (“whose realm, their religion”) for hundreds of years. This principle is still echoed in the entanglements with churches and states.

That history is very different in Canada and North America in general. This is the background that clarifies why the institutional history of the study of religion in Europe is not told as a narrative from theological seminaries to universities or as a narrative where multiple denominations run their own educational institutions. The absence of university theology plays a key role in Canadian history, and for Hughes, the narrative from seminary to university largely takes the reader from theology to the secular study of religion. The standard European narrative of the secular study of religion is also about distancing itself from theology, with some exceptions: this narrative takes place within the university; in most cases there is one dominant form of Christianity that directs the substance of theology; and theology is still alive and well in European universities. Hughes knows this well and it is also true that in practice the line between theology
and the (secular) study of religion has been fine, but it is one of the most important lines by which institutional identity of the study of religion has been constructed in most nations. However, this is only a part of the story.

The battle between theology and the study of religion is only a footnote in the narrative we tell ourselves in Finland about how our discipline/field emerged and became established. The first religious studies departments were established about the same time in Canada and Finland (1960s and 1970s), but we tell our history from the late nineteenth century onwards in relation to folklore studies, ethnology, anthropology, linguistics, and sociology, because the first scholars whose institutional position was related to the study of religion (comparative religion) or whom we later have started to consider part of us and “our history” were educated in or inspired by those disciplines/fields.

For instance, Edvard Westermarck (1862–1939), who was professor of philosophy in Finland and professor of sociology in London School of Economics, represented evolutionary anthropology, and his first supervised PhDs were closely related to evolutionary study of religion—*The Origin of Worship* (1905) by Rafael Karsten (1879–1956) and *The Origin of Priesthood* (1905) by Gunnar Landtman (1878–1940)—and soon after finishing his PhD, Karsten was named as a docent of comparative religion in the philosophical faculty in 1907. One of the forefathers of Finnish study of religion, Uno Harva (1882–1949), was appointed as a professor of sociology in 1926, but the description of his position highlighted comparative religion, and he was known for his fieldwork and ethnographic interest. Several key scholars in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, such as Julius Krohn (1835–1888) and his son Kaarle Krohn (1863–1933), were researching folk poetry and started their careers as linguists, whereas MA Castrén (1813–1852), who reconstructed Finnish mythology and used ethnographic methods, was a professor of Finnish language (Anttonen, 1987: 38–42). This narrative that locates the pre-history of Finnish study of religion departments in the humanities and social sciences rather than in theology—in fact, the faculty of theology at the University of Helsinki—rejected comparative religion in Finland in the early twentieth century, whereas in Sweden comparative religion found its home in faculties of theology. These stories show that, as in Canada, “the study of religion did not rise out of the blue with the rise of religious studies departments” (Hughes, 2020: 12), but it also allows me to identify some interesting absences in the Canadian institutional history.

Anthropology and related fields are practically absent in Hughes’s history. As I mentioned earlier, I cannot say whether this is because of Hughes or Canada, but it is surprising (at least to me) that there is no major overlap between the study of religion and institutional history of anthropology in late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Canada. Perhaps because of this, there is a strong emphasis on textual methods in Canadian scholarly history, whereas in Finland, the early scholars in the study of religion highlighted fieldwork and ethnographic methods. This relates to what was studied and why. Early Canadian studies have focused on sympathetic study of (so-called) world religions, whereas Finnish scholars were primarily interested in Finno-Ugric and Balto-Finnic folk religion. This brings another absence to the fore: although the issues concerning indigeneity are crucial in the contemporary Canadian politics, public discussion and academic research, the study of Indigenous inhabitants does not seem to play a
significant role in the history of Canadian study of religion, although it was relevant in the development of anthropology in Canada.

In Finland, non-theological study of religion developed in close relation to the interest in studying pre-Christian roots and identity, thus asking, “What were we before we became Christians?” This task was about both celebrating or exoticizing our imagined roots—presumably answering who we really are and thus constructing our “tradition” and, on that basis, our national identity as Finns—and seeing how we have developed from more a elementary religious form to a more developed one (i.e., Christianity, which practically always came on top in the comparison of religions and in the binaries used by scholars; see Dubuisson, 2003). This history is slightly different in most European countries, although their shared Hegelian roots are clear in their attempts in nation-building through the study of religion.

Here this peculiar history allows me to wonder why the “folk religion” of various peoples and ethnicities does not figure in Canadian history, or at least in Hughes’s version of it. Canadian history of the development of the secular study of religion is more a story about the transition from the study of Christianity to “Eastern religions.” It is a national story in the way all institutional histories of the study of religion are, but it is not really a story of constructing national identity by examining imagined roots of the nation, at least in the same way as in Europe. This might be because of the denominationalist nature of seminaries and their capability to confine study of religion to them. There also seems to be a link between the denominationalist history and later emphases on interfaith dialogue and multiculturalism in which Canada has been in the forefront. Such ideas are latecomers in organizing the study of religion in Finland. Although the value of tolerance has been highlighted frequently in justifications of what public good the study of religion could offer, the formal promotion of interfaith dialogue that is quite common in our field is still done mostly outside the study of religion departments.

These reflections about Europe, and Finland in particular, would require much more substantial and systematic examination to be fully convincing, but such a work would be true to the spirit of Hughes’s suggestion to study the issues he does in other national contexts. Moreover, such a work would give us a chance to defamiliarize Canadian history more thoroughly, to see some of its specificities and absences in a new light. If successful, it could even offer some ideas of where one wants the study of religion to go in the future, or help scholars in avoiding some futures.

This comment has focused on the histories of the study of religion and even prehistories of study of religion departments, but the past is still partly present in institutional identities. And institutional identities are embedded in national histories and social structures. Perhaps one point of departure for further comparison would be to think more deeply about how significant a factor the established religion or its absence has been for our field in particular national contexts. The problem with such a work is that there are relevant national differences within the nations with (some kind of) established religion, but at least some of the Canadian specificities relate to such factors, including the absence of a strong tradition of religious education in public schools. In many other countries with histories of established religion, the study of religion has become one of the ways societies prepare teachers to offer religious education, a role that allows
scholars to make a significant impact outside academia, whereas in other contexts the social justification of the “utility” of our field has to be done differently.

In addition to learning about the Canadian institutional history of the study of religion, Hughes’s study has helped me to defamiliarize my thinking of Finnish (and European) histories. Likewise, I hope that this comment has offered some insights on how Canadian institutional history could be made strange, not simply for the sake of the past itself but for our attempts to reconsider the future of our field.

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**ORCID iD**
Teemu Taira https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8122-2494

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