SCT: Theology today in Quebec: A time of transition

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Abstract: In 2015, three Quebec theological institutions undertook an institutional transformational process to address a long-term decline. The profile of Quebec theology was thus reassessed, both institutionally and in its understanding of its status, plan and future. This is true not only for the three institutions involved, but also for the entire community of university-level theologians and institutions. In this article, I will begin by connecting these transformations to the founding period of Quebec theology. I will then describe the restructuring that took place from 2015 to 2017 and explain its immediate impact. Comparing Quebec these institutional shifts to a debate about the situation theologians’ liberty with respect to Church magisterium in Austria (2011), I will emphasize the end of a fundamental tension between theologians and Church leadership in Quebec’s context, and the new problem that has replaced it in the context of the secular Academy. I will conclude by presenting some outcomes of the new configuration in three Quebec universities.

Résumé : En 2015, trois institutions théologiques québécoises ont entrepris un processus de transformation institutionnelle pour remédier à un déclin à long terme. Le profil de la théologie québécoise a ainsi été réévalué, tant sur le plan institutionnel que dans la compréhension de son statut, de son projet et de son avenir. Cela est vrai non seulement pour les trois institutions concernées, mais aussi pour l’ensemble de la communauté des théologiens et des institutions de niveau universitaire. Dans cet article, je commencerai par relier ces transformations à la période fondatrice de la théologie québécoise. Je décrirai ensuite la restructuration qui a eu lieu de 2015 à 2017 et j’expliquerai son impact immédiat. En comparant ces changements institutionnels québécois à un débat sur la situation de la liberté des théologiens par rapport au magistère de l’Église en Autriche (2011), je soulignerai la fin d’une tension fondamentale entre les théologiens et les dirigeants de l’Église dans le contexte québécois, et le
nouveau problème qui l’a remplacée dans le contexte d’une académie laïque. Je conclurai en présentant quelques résultats de la nouvelle configuration dans trois universités québécoises.

**Keywords**
Canada, future, religious studies, theology

**Mots clés**
Canada, avenir, études religieuses, théologie

This article is written at the request of the Board of the Société Canadienne de théologie, as an assessment of the current state of theology in Quebec universities. In 2015, three Quebec theological institutions undertook an institutional transformational process to address a long-term decline. The profile of Quebec theology was thus reassessed, both institutionally and in its understanding of its status, plan and future. This is true not only for the three institutions involved, but also for the entire community of university-level theologians and institutions. In this article, I will begin by connecting these transformations to the founding period of Quebec theology. I will then describe the restructuring that took place from 2015 to 2017 and explain its immediate impact. Next, I will compare the Quebec situation to that of Austria where the key factors are different, but in a way that emphasizes the end of a fundamental tension and the new problem that has replaced it. I will conclude by presenting some results of the new configuration in three universities, spending a little more time on the university to which I am connected since among Francophone universities, which is actively creating a redesigned theological plan intended to be congruent with the new situation.

**The end of an era for Quebec theology**

In his second-last book, which addresses Quebec theology, theologian Gregory Baum (2014) clearly shows that “Quebec Catholic theology” was born in a dual or two-fold context: the cultural revolution known as the “Quiet Revolution,” and the Second Vatican Council, with the two processes fueling each other. The panorama presented by Baum (2014) lays out a bold theology abounding in dreams, promises, rifts, and reinventions. As a new theology, Quebec Francophone theology was birthed on public university campuses and in social activist spaces, as well as within the circles of progressive Catholicism where laypersons had unprecedented freedom and leadership. In the social context of the 1960s and 1970s, various thinkers who had been influenced by Catholic Action and who often articulated theology and social sciences enjoyed great intellectual and social credibility, both when speaking of the Church and when defending the plan for a fair and egalitarian democratic society. While Baum (2014) identifies Fernand Dumont and Jacques Grand’Maison as the two most iconic figures of this plan, he also mentions dozens of others who worked to solidify it in various theology spheres (fundamental theology, Christology, ecclesiology, theological ethics, Bible studies, pastoral theology,
feminist theology, etc.). What emerged was a critical pluralist theology that often asserted its freedom with regard to ecclesiastical authorities. Baum (2014) discusses the role of the Société canadienne de théologie – established in 1963 – in this process. In fact, even though many Francophone theologians from Ontario and New Brunswick were active members of the SCT, for historical and demographic reasons its membership was largely from Quebec universities. Hence the SCT became the place where the vibrant Quebec theological community developed its vision for the next decades. The SCT remains this crossroad where Quebec’s theologians can assess the present and envision the future of their discipline. And they have a lot to think about.

The deciding factor that allowed this theological plan to unfold was that it found acceptance and a promising breeding ground within the Catholic Church, as well as in public institutions. As Solange Lefebvre (2019) describes in her concise and enlightening discussion, this breeding ground has been transformed in various respects since the 1990s, against a backdrop of a decline of the Church in the Western world because of the impact of secularization. In Quebec, enrolment in theology programs has been decreasing significantly for the past 25 years. The decision of the Quebec Catholic Church to transition from theological and pastoral institutional training, which uses a critical pluralist approach, to training paths that are shorter, more homogenous, focused on Christian initiation and carried out in non-university settings, reduced collaboration between universities and Church environments. Simultaneously, the deconfessionalization of the Quebec school system led to the abandonment of theology, a discipline deemed to be denominational, as a training base for teachers in Quebec public schools. Finally, the public health network shifted from denominational chaplaincy toward a pluralist, non-denominational and often non-religious approach, which required redefining training for this personal support service. In every case, the dividing line for the theological community was the denominational marker.

The combined factors of secularization, the ecclesial circles turning inward, and multiple deconfessionalizations resulted in the diminishing of the theological community. Theologians gradually lost their status as indispensable references in Quebec societal debates, while their plan for a critical theology was neglected by the Catholic institution. The rapid decline of Catholicism in Quebec, while it is only one subculture among others, also signaled the end of pastoral networks that employed many people with theology degrees. Set in motion long ago, this process of decline has been accelerated by the endless and pervasive sexual abuse crisis that is demolishing both the economic and social capital of the Church.

The first decade of the 21st century was a period of growth in religious sciences, due to increased attention to cultural and religious diversity in the context of the development of the Ethics and Religious Culture curriculum in Quebec schools, and the urgent need since 2001 to understand transnational dynamics of Islam and Islamism. However, in public universities overall, new enrolments in master’s programs in theology fell 75% between 2001 and 2011, while a less dramatic, but still significant, decrease was observed in doctoral programs (statistics from the Conférence des recteurs et principaux des universités du Québec, 2012). We do not have information for the following decade, but overall, observers agree that no significant increase has been recorded across the province. For undergraduate programs, from 2012 to 2019, there was an overall increase in religious studies, but in fact this was attributed to a single institution, Université Laval,
for very specific circumstantial reasons. Without that university, the total of new enrolments in undergraduate programs in the public universities would have been stable throughout Quebec (statistics from the Bureau de coopération interuniversitaire, 2020).

We are therefore witnessing the end of an era, which compels academic theology to rethink the terms of its plan, and to prove its scientific, academic, and social relevance. This challenge is more than just theoretical.

**Institutional shifts, 2015–2017**

In 2015, simultaneously and even more noticeably, three universities launched a process to close their faculties of theology and of religious sciences, and replace them with more modest research and teaching units. This process is only the most recent chapter in a decline that began at the turn of the 20th century with the closing of theology departments in Trois-Rivières and Rimouski, and a major disciplinary reorganization in the department in Chicoutimi at the expense of theology. This continued in the following years due to attrition of teaching staff.

The transformations that began in 2015 are unfolding along different timelines. Since 2016, the Faculté d’études religieuses (FATER) at Université de Sherbrooke has been closed, being somewhat replaced by a new inter-faculty Centre d’étude du religieux contemporain. The FATER teaching staff has been relocated across various units (kinesiology, history, medicine, management, etc.). In 2015, the Faculty of Religious Studies at McGill University was replaced by a School of Religious Studies attached to the Faculty of Arts and Science. Finally, the Faculté de théologie et de sciences des religions at Université de Montréal was abolished in 2017 and staff were relocated in a new Institut d’études religieuses, in the Faculté des arts et des sciences. In order to understand the ins and outs of these processes as well as specific issues involved, we refer to the brief published on this topic in 2019 in Laval théologique et philosophique following a one-day conference held by the Canadian Theological Society in 2018 on the topic “Déplacements institutionnels de la théologie: Du neuf et de l’inattendu” [Institutional Shifts in Theology: Both New and Unexpected]. In this brief, witnesses of these transformations discuss them and propose analyses, while the dean of the last existing faculty of theology within a Quebec public university (Faculté de théologie et de sciences religieuses at Université Laval) describes the effects of this period on its institution (Dumas, 2019; Lefebvre, 2019; Roussel, 2019; Routhier, 2019).

Not all institutions have been directly affected by this restructuring. That is the case in the Faculté de théologie et de sciences religieuses at Université Laval, the Department of Theological Studies at Concordia University, as well as private institutions of which some are Catholic and others are Protestant or Evangelical. However, this does not mean they are immune, insofar as the restructuring of 2015–2017 is the result of extensive cultural transformations, which have been engendered by secularization and are noticeable throughout the Western world.

**Immediate impact**

Following that period, with the exception of Université Laval, academic theology has been evolving under new conditions, characterized by the elimination of ecclesiastical
status and increased interdisciplinarity. It was inevitable that these institutional changes would require Quebec theology to rethink the terms of its plan. Thus, the Société canadienne de théologie\(^1\) had already held some conferences on the practices, status, and future of theology (Beaudin et al., 2002; Nadeau, 2000; Pouliot et al., 2016), as well as the 2018 conference mentioned above.

After the theological community absorbed the shock of these obligatory changes, which came to be seen as tectonic shifts, it sought to identify opportunities opened up by these new institutional frameworks. Furthermore, multidisciplinary structures gave theology the opportunity to update its academic plan with the help of specific discussion partners from other disciplines. In theory, these structures also facilitate interdisciplinary collaboration in teaching, but for the moment we cannot help but wonder if theology is able to find collaborators as easily as religious sciences can.

Indeed, religious sciences seem to have more easily adapted to these new institutional structures. Despite the incontestable and foundational interdisciplinarity of theology practices, theology remains a distinct discipline, unlike the disciplinary field of religious sciences. In fact, this is one of the issues that arose during the transformations that took place at Université de Sherbrooke and Université de Montréal. The first has exclusively chosen a multidisciplinary study of religion. The second has preserved (after an arduous battle of theologians that went as far as the legal arena) a disciplinary unit of religious studies, including religious sciences, theology and spirituality studies. As for theology, its “faith understanding” dimension, whose institutional manifestation mainly takes the form of ecclesiastical status, must be reworked within a set of secular university practices.

The end of a historically foundational tension

Numerous theologians in Quebec public universities ceased practicing a narrowly denominational theology quite some time ago. They have instead cultivated positions with an ecumenical approach as expressed by philosophy, humanities and social science, or religious arts and science; some even frame their theology as cultural or public theology, in various sectors of civil society or alongside secular subcultures. The removal of ecclesiastical status has allowed for the elimination of a tension between academic freedom and expectations of church authorities, a tension that over time actually produced casualties among teaching staff, whether because of dismissal, the impossibility of being hired in a tenured position for moral or doctrinal reasons, or a shortened or stunted career due to a lack of Episcopal or the Holy See’s placet for attaining a dean of faculty position, which would have normally been a natural culmination.

However, we could wonder if perhaps the tension that has been eliminated was a historically foundational tension that had been practically constitutive of this theological project. For purposes of comparison, a sociological study conducted by Isabelle Jonveaux about a 2011 debate that divided the Austrian theological community seems enlightening. Jonveaux (2013) emphasizes that the question of theologians’ academic freedom, with its underlying tension between the Austrian Catholic Church and universities, arises in a country where the Church has powerful leverage against universities. In
Austria, theologians in public universities are still required to respect ecclesiastical norms, in regard to morals, to avoid being threatened with sanctions extending as far as removing their right to teach. The author points out that such a debate on theologians’ liberty with respect to Church magisterium would not be possible without the “less secularized” character of university faculties of theology (Jonveaux, 2013: 199).

According to Jonveaux (2013), the fact that teaching staff have become primarily secular, and mixed in terms of gender, shifts the balance of their respective allegiances, as it were, between: on one hand, the Church, its rules and internal culture; and on the other hand, the society to which they belong and which influences their behavior and loyalties. While the first loyalty of priest theologians is to the Church in the spirit of their vocation, the loyalty of secular theologians is more dispersed. For them, theology is a profession, often attached to that of a university professor; moreover, they are often spouses or parents, with resulting loyalties that generally take precedence over other loyalties. In addition, female theologians most often subjectively feel a permanent tension with Roman Catholic positions regarding women, which priest theologians obviously do not feel, at least not subjectively. Therefore, if a vocation unfolds for secular theologians, it is not toward their theological institution or the Church. Secular theologians participate in social changes, and this has an effect on their theologies. Of necessity, we thus see a multiplication of possible areas of tension between diverging allegiances.

In Quebec as well, between the 1970s and the first decade of the 21st century, secular teaching staff emerged, which sees its relationship with the Church and theology quite differently than do priest theologians. During this period, these secular staff claimed the right to academic freedom in the face of religious authorities that give precedence to criteria of orthodoxy or orthopraxy. In the context of the removal of religious authority, from that point forward, it is the university “magisterium” that prevails. Theology must henceforth articulate in a different way its non-negotiable scientific relevance and its relationship to faith-related subjectivities, which distinguish it from all other university disciplines. At Université de Montréal or Université de Sherbrooke, theologians’ academic freedom will never again be contested, and a debate such as the one in Austria will not occur. What is at stake instead is the relevance of a university position committed to faith. The question often asked by non-specialists, “Can someone be both a theologian and an atheist?” gives way to another implicit question: “Can faith be involved in a scientific study of religion?”

**Shifts in theological plans**

It is quite clear that no theological plan can exist outside of the material conditions to which it is subject. In this respect, Anne Fortin (2016: 209) writes that each statement in a theological approach becomes a “systemic” interaction between three voices: that of the theologian, of the communities, and of the church institution. According to the author, the result is that the voice of theology does not belong to anybody. She describes a theology that is not “unequivocal, unilateral, or arbitrary,” but is mobile depending on the systems where it exists. This mobility is now at stake more than ever before. However, I notice that the author’s perspective does not take into consideration the voice of
public universities, and that she only approaches the institutional (not only ecclesial but above all academic) as a limiting constraint (Fortin, 2016: 214). In the new institutional landscape, in order to have some kind of future, it is imperative that theology learns to occupy university space in a way other than viewing it as a limitation or obstacle to its own plan. This space has pragmatic implications, of course, but also theoretical and epistemological implications. And that is the key issue: Will theology find a place as a secular discipline, without ecclesiastical identity, in a Quebec public university?

In light of this reconfiguration and its expectations, a few theological plans have been proposed. Université Laval occupies the space left vacant by Université de Sherbrooke and Université de Montréal by presenting itself as “the only faculty of theology and religious sciences in Quebec that offers programs at the bachelor, masters, and doctoral level” and is committed to “the enhancement of Christian theology, from a Catholic perspective.” This institution is adopting a more classic layout of the theological discipline, not without various innovative breakthroughs and academic collaborations with Catholic, Presbyterian, Evangelical, Eastern and Orthodox organizations. This was set out clearly by Gilles Routhier (2019), dean of the Faculté de théologie et de sciences religieuses at Université Laval during the 2015–2017 period of institutional transformations.

At Université de Sherbrooke, the Centre d’étude du religieux contemporain has a goal of “distinguing itself with bold programs breaking out of the constraints usually associated with religious issues.” However, from now on the investment is being made primarily in sciences of religions, while theological work actually occupies a limited space. Yet, we notice attention being given to nondenominational spiritual experiences, particularly from an anthropological perspective, but in which theology as a discipline is also involved from a hermeneutic and faith standpoint.

As for the team of theologians at Université de Montréal, they have tried to formulate a disciplinary plan for theology. In the resulting document that has not yet been published, the team first describes the new context of theology practice: the end of homogenous student cohorts and a variety of ways to approach the study of theology, culminating in a “multireligious” approach; henceforth with an overwhelming proximity to religious sciences, which make a significant contribution to the study of theology even though their theoretical frameworks are different; interdisciplinarity; and the need for partnerships with both religious groups and other academic institutions.

Next, the potential theological plan is laid out in four sections: studies of biblical sources; study of past and contemporary theological trends; contextual theologies; and analysis of practices and discourses of “religious or spiritual” people. The text continues decisively as follows:

Theology is a human science in which the research topic is not only religion and beliefs, but all reality (culture, society, art, ecology, etc.). It contributes to thinking about the future of subjectivities and collectivities in modern times, taking into consideration all dimensions of life including spirituality. The classic definition of Christian theology, understood as “faith understanding,” has now been broadened in an analysis of the self-understanding of religious or spiritual persons, but also of communities.

As tradition in motion, theology participates in this motion: it is not limited to studying religious facts from a distance, but seeks to transform them. As intellectual tradition,
theology primarily studies the biblical and Christian heritage that constitutes a matrix of the Western world.

Theology studies faith subjectivities, including those of theologians as well as faith communities, assuming a connection with one or several faith communities in varying degrees of institutionalization (particularly churches, baseline communities, collective trends in civil society, etc.).

The team of regular professors in theology have expertise in Christian theology, which currently represents the reference background of their theological approach. That being said, the theology practiced at Institut d’études religieuses (IER) is ecumenical and can also be expressed within aboriginal, Jewish, Muslim, or Asian traditions. In a pluralist perspective and at the heart of greater Montreal, the theology at IER is obliged to also refer to equivalent practices in non-Christian spiritual traditions.

In such a conception of theology, we find some similarities to most of the theologies taught in Quebec universities: a dimension that is not only descriptive and analytical, but engaged in a transformation of faith. This distinguishes it from religious sciences taken as a whole. Of course, sciences of religions can also claim to analyze subjectivities and faith communities. However, while they include engaged approaches to religion and faith (feminists and decolonial, for example), most often this dimension of engagement and the analysis of the subjectivities of researchers themselves does not play the same role as it does in theology. The Western contribution to intellectual and cultural history is also mentioned. We note, however, that “faith understanding” is partially redesigned, by integrating the study of faith forms that are not necessarily denominational. Finally, and far from being insignificant, the Christian referent is now no longer presented as being inherent to theology: it is rather a matter of fact connected to the “current” composition of the team of professors in question. Further, this theology must (“is obliged” to) expand to “equivalent practices” in other traditions. Does this mean non-Christian theologies? Will this designation be accepted outside of Christianity? On this point, the document chooses flexible wording.

The plan of the Institut d’études religieuses at Université de Montréal is characterized by its originality, and likely will require further enhancement and implementation in academic practices. Within it are a few aspects from a work recently published by Denise Couture (2021: 28–34), in which the plan is presented primarily as a cultural practice, a study of subjectivities and intersubjectivities, that is no longer Christian-centered, but establishes itself on the basis of a broader conception of religion. The plan presented by the author is both relevant and inspiring. As a rule, it should therefore demonstrate some viability within a generalist and secular public university, so long as it passes the test of socioreligious and institutional realities – realities that contribute or do not contribute to verifying its viability as an academic practice in a public university. If this were not the case, would that indicate that such a theology is impossible in Quebec? Not necessarily, to the extent that theology preceded universities and has always unfolded outside this institutional framework as well.
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1. The Société canadienne de théologie is the learned society of the Francophone Canadian theologians, distinct from the Canadian Theological Society.
2. Website of Faculté de théologie et de sciences religieuses (FTSR) at Université Laval: https://www.ftsr.ulaval.ca/
3. Website of Centre d’étude du religieux contemporain at Université de Sherbrooke: https://www.usherbrooke.ca/religieux-contemporain/documents/Feuillets_programme/Certificat_2019.pdf

Supplemental Material
Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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