From Theological College to University: A Perspective from Queen’s

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Abstract: This review complements Hughes’s book by reflecting on the development of the Department of Religious Studies at Queen’s University to the present. It validates his claim that the growth of religious studies in Canadian universities was dependent on administrative cultures often idiosyncratic to particular institutions. In the case of Queen’s, a pattern of administrative interaction and shared faculty between the University and Queen’s Theological College persisted much longer than in comparable organizations. This can be explained by three considerations: the ethos of the United Church of Canada, growing awareness of multiculturalism from the 1970s onward, and the influence of the Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada. Although the first two of these factors are identified by Hughes, the last has been overlooked. It explains why, however, the Masters of Theological Studies could act as a de facto graduate degree in Religious Studies at Queen’s until the department developed its M.A. in 2001.

Résumé : Cette recension complète le livre de Hughes en réfléchissant au développement, jusqu’à aujourd’hui, du département d’études religieuses de l’Université Queen’s. Elle valide son affirmation selon laquelle la croissance des études religieuses dans les universités canadiennes dépendait de cultures administratives souvent idiosyncrasiques, propres à des institutions particulières. Dans le cas de Queen’s, un modèle d’interaction administrative et de faculté partagée entre l’université et le Queen’s Theological College a persisté beaucoup plus longtemps que dans des institutions comparables. Cela peut s’expliquer par trois considérations : l’éthos de l’Église unie du Canada, la sensibilisation...
Aaron Hughes’s engaging account of the emergence of religious studies in Canada selects only a few departments for a description of the discipline’s florescence over the past several decades (154–172). The interest of this review is to supplement his survey by providing some reflections from the perspective of Queen’s University. Queen’s sheds an informative light on Hughes’s observation that the creation of Canadian departments of religious studies was often dependent on “idiosyncratic bureaucratic and administrative cultures” (157). Known as the “Department of Religion” at its inception in the early 1970s, in the mid-1990s the name was changed to the “Department of Religious Studies” to better reflect affinities with cognate departments in other Canadian universities. For this brief historical overview, sometimes it will be more appropriate to use the older name rather than its current designation.

The Queen’s experience does not overturn Hughes’s major theses regarding the emergence of religious studies as an academic enterprise in the Canadian university system. Nevertheless, the development at Queen’s did not closely follow a pattern he ascribes to other educational institutions in Ontario or in the West. To some extent, there is a parallel with the former Faculty of Religious Studies at McGill. Unlike McGill, however, the model for delivering religious studies at Queen’s did not involve a cluster of theological colleges, nor did it have the benefit of interaction with a separate academic unit such as McGill’s “Institute of Islamic Studies.”

In fact, the history of religious studies at Queen’s reflects a bureaucratic culture somewhat idiosyncratic in comparison to similar Canadian departments. For, at Queen’s, the history of religious studies cannot be discussed without considering its administrative relationship with the Theological College. Queen’s University began as “Queen’s College at Kingston.” Its original mandate was to provide training for candidates in the Presbyterian ministry. For this purpose, it provided not only instruction in theology but also courses in the arts and sciences. But, by 1912, in order to become a university fully recognized by the province, it was necessary for Queen’s to hive off theological instruction onto a separate educational institution called “Queen’s Theological College” (QTC). Although QTC’s professors were eligible to sit on the university senate, they were
actually employees of a legally distinct corporation. Nevertheless, QTC retained the right to be housed in a building maintained by the university (“Theological Hall”). In addition, degrees in theology continued to be formally granted by the university (although the Theological College had its own charter to grant degrees). By the mid-1950s, undergraduates could take up to four introductory courses in religion from the Theological College, including one called, “The Chief Non-Christian Religions of the World” (Queen’s University, 1956: 194).

Between 1955 and 1972, interest in religion underwent an unanticipated expansion. By 1972, the Theological College was teaching more than 1,000 undergraduate students registered in 16 different courses (Rawlyk and Quinn, 1980: 190, 239). The creation of a distinct “Department of Religion” in the Faculty of Arts and Science dates from that era. In 1973, a single student graduated from Queen’s University with an honors degree in Religion (Queen’s University, 1973: 1). Yet, faculty in the Department of Religion remained employees of QTC until 2012—exactly 100 years after the Theological College was created. At that time, admissions to theology programs were suspended; and QTC was formally closed in the Fall of 2015. As a result, Queen’s no longer has any affiliated colleges, the way that other universities do. Today, all members of the Department of Religious Studies at Queen’s are employees of the university and belong to a division of the Faculty of Arts and Science called, “Queen’s School of Religion.” This administrative unit delivers undergraduate majors and minors and the MA to the university through its Department of Religious Studies.

Still, in the early 2000s, QTC’s religious studies department drew “upon the expertise of eleven faculty members... Some teach exclusively in the Department of Religious Studies; others divide their time between religious studies and theological studies” (Department of Religious Studies, 2003: §1.1.1). How was it possible for QTC to deliver a department of religious studies fully acceptable to a secular university, long after the division between religious studies and theology had become administratively much more fixed in other Canadian universities during the same period (1972–2012)? Certainly, it was not the case that the tensions between theology and religious studies, which Hughes describes so aptly (145–149), weren’t fully operative at Queen’s. But a pattern of administrative interaction and shared faculty persisted much longer than in comparable institutions.

Answers to the question posed above will occupy the rest of this review. Two of them have been anticipated by Hughes: they are the ethos of the United Church of Canada (UCC) and growing awareness of multiculturalism from the 1970s onward. But there were also trends in theological education that deserve to be recognized when accounting for the arrangement at Queen’s.

As Hughes observes, the formation of the UCC in 1925 produced a Christian denomination that placed a lower premium on dogmatic conformity—a necessity in order to effect a union between Congregationalists, Methodists and the majority of Presbyterians. This development helped to create an environment in which a more secular academic approach to the study of religion could flourish (176). There is no doubt that QTC’s affiliation with the UCC played an important part in holding together the unique combination of theology and religious studies that characterized it until 2012. The ethos of
the UCC, particularly its emphasis on the social gospel, made its theological colleges amenable to dialogue with trends in the secular world.

This openness can be seen in the development of clusters of Canadian theological schools during the 1970s. Hughes describes the formation of five major clusters of theological colleges and seminaries at that time: in Halifax, Montreal, Toronto, Saskatoon and Vancouver. It is no accident that colleges of the UCC were involved in the creation of these consortia; its predilection for ecumenical relationships made its theological colleges a natural partner in each case. As Hughes points out, one of the effects of such mergers was to strengthen the relationship between theological education and post-secondary education in general (131). Although QTC was not in a position to join with another theological college, it was keenly aware of these developments and eager to keep pace.

Hughes also observes that growing awareness of multiculturalism played an important part in the development of departments of religious studies in Canada (133–138). To some extent, religious studies at Queen’s anticipated this trend before other units in the university. Through the 1970s and 1980s, Queen’s University was a relatively small mid-size institution with a fairly Eurocentric curriculum. During those years, QTC housed the university’s expertise on Islam (John Cook) as well as its specialist in Hinduism (Clifford Hospital). Its faculty also included Queen’s first bioethicist (Millard Schumaker), who taught hundreds of students in nursing and medicine before those academic units developed their own courses in that field. By providing expertise in such areas through its Department of Religion, the Theological College was able to contribute to the university’s growing interests in multiculturalism. Additionally, a few courses in theology and biblical studies remained open to undergraduates. This also benefited the university because staffing for these shared courses was funded by QTC.

Nevertheless, there was a development that Hughes overlooks, which also encouraged a rapprochement between theological and religious studies. I am referring to the influence of the Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada (ATS). Its importance can be seen, for example, in the shift of nomenclature from the Bachelor of Divinity (the basic degree in theology and professional ministry) to the Master of Divinity that took place under its auspices across North America in the early 1970s. Membership in ATS entailed the application of a set of standards commensurate with the perception that even the first degree in theology was a graduate program (because it normally required a bachelor’s degree for admission). Moreover, ATS was insistent that all other degrees granted by theological colleges (e.g., the Master of Theology and doctorates) reflect generally agreed standards for graduate education in the university system (Tanner, 2018: 40). Concomitant with that emphasis was a growing awareness of the broader horizons in which Christian ministry had to operate in the late 20th century. As one theorist in theological education noted, “The future minister or priest will have to deal with [people who have taken university courses in religious studies] at a professional level. Many of them will be his parishioners. It is imperative that he be at least as well versed in the broader aspects of religious studies as the layman who has taken this work in college” (Bechtold, 1972: 96). The decision of QTC to join ATS had a demonstrable impact on its programs and reinforced a vision of theological education that tracked university standards.
One example of the way that ATS affected QTC’s delivery of religious studies was through its development of the Master of Theological Studies (MTS) following ATS standards. Through the 1980s, it became apparent that some students were coming to Queen’s wanting to study theology without training for professional ministry—a growing trend in theological education at that time. It was also evident that there were honors students from the Department of Religion looking for graduate studies at Queen’s. QTC was able to address both constituencies by mounting the MTS. As a thesis-driven program, it was able to direct students in a variety of academic areas. Consequently, though it could only benefit a few students, the MTS was the Department of Religion’s de facto graduate degree until it launched the MA in 2001. During the 1990s, the quality of the degree was such that it was possible for students graduating with the MTS from Queen’s to be accepted for doctoral work in other departments of religious studies.

Declining enrollments through the early 2000s and growing economic problems in the UCC ultimately led to the demise of theology at Queen’s. What survived was—and is—a well-staffed Department of Religious Studies fully integrated into the university. Naturally, it finds itself needing to respond to the kinds of larger cultural trends and national agendas that Hughes depicts as influences on the discipline (173–174). For instance, as with many other departments, Queen’s has emphasized knowledge of religious traditions. Historically, this meant hiring experts in texts and literature. Latterly, the department’s newest hires predominantly reflect training in the social sciences (Queen’s School of Religion, 2020: 5). This shift responds to various influences, not least the value being placed upon research on human subjects (in conformity, of course, with the Tri-Council’s ethical standards). Time will tell how changing societal commitments may shape future configurations of religious studies at Queen’s, as well as elsewhere in the Canadian context.

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