The Study of Religion and the Canadian Social Order

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Abstract: In his book From Seminary to University: An Institutional History of the Study of Religion in Canada, Aaron Hughes provides a unique analysis of how the study of religion developed throughout the history of Canada by examining the evolution of its institutional context, that is, from faith-based seminaries and theological colleges to secular departments of religious studies. He situates these institutional changes in the development of the Canadian social order. In this uniquely Canadian context, the study of religion moved, Hughes notes, “from religious exclusion to secularism, from Christocentrism to multiculturalism, and from theology to secular religious studies.” While this is an important and original argument, Hughes offers only a cursory analysis of the unique developments in francophone Quebec universities (as he readily admits) and ignores the study of religion in other disciplines. Moreover, while Hughes traces the motivation for the transformation of the study of religion in the 1960s to the new ethno-religious diversity of Canada, I argue that it should be traced to a growing liberal cosmopolitanism that had infiltrated Canadian society, including its churches, seminaries, and theological colleges. Hughes does not adequately explore the religious roots of why Canadian Christians decided to secularize the study of religion. Finally, while Hughes examines patriarchy and colonialism in his analysis of the study of religion in earlier periods, he drops these topics in his discussion of the secularization of the study of religion, which did not address either of these issues sufficiently.

Résumé: Dans son livre From Seminary to University : An Institutional History of the Study of Religion in Canada, Aaron Hughes propose une analyse unique de la façon dont l’étude de la religion s’est développée à travers l’histoire du Canada en examinant l’évolution de
son contexte institutionnel, soit des séminaires et collèges théologiques confessionnels aux départements laïques d’études religieuses. Il situe ces changements institutionnels dans le développement de l’ordre social canadien. Dans ce contexte canadien unique, l’étude de la religion est passée, note Hughes, “de l’exclusion religieuse au sécularisme, du christocentrisme au multiculturalisme, et de la théologie aux études religieuses séculières”. Bien qu’il s’agisse d’un argument important et original, Hughes ne propose qu’une analyse superficielle des développements uniques dans les universités québécoises francophones (comme il l’admet volontiers) et ignore l’étude de la religion dans d’autres disciplines. De plus, alors que Hughes attribue la motivation de la transformation de l’étude de la religion dans les années 1960 à la nouvelle diversité ethno-religieuse du Canada, je soutiens qu’elle devrait être attribuée à un cosmopolitisme libéral croissant qui avait infiltré la société canadienne, y compris ses églises, ses séminaires et ses collèges de théologie. Enfin, si Hughes examine le patriarcat et le colonialisme dans son analyse de l’étude de la religion dans les périodes antérieures, il abandonne ces sujets dans sa discussion sur la sécularisation de l’étude de la religion, laquelle n’aborde pas suffisamment l’une ou l’autre de ces questions.

**Keywords**
Aaron Hughes, Canada, multiculturalism, secularism, secularization, study of religion

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The Canadian Church historian, John Webster Grant (1977), outlines three periods of church–state relations in Canadian history: the early colonial period, marked by the attempt to transplant “Christendom” from Europe where church and aristocratic government worked hand in hand to define and control society (1608–1854); Christian Canada, marked by a “pluralist establishment” in which mainline Christianity enjoyed a semi-established status (1854–World War II); and the increasing separation of Church and State and the secularization of Canadian society after World War II (1945–present). In *From Seminary to University: An Institutional History of the Study of Religion in Canada*, Aaron Hughes traces the evolution of the study of religion in Canada across these three eras—each marked by a new social order, including a new public role for religion.

There is much to admire in this book. While relying on earlier state-of-the-art studies of religious studies as an academic discipline, Hughes goes beyond them to examine how the study of religion was shaped by its institutional context as it moved from the church-controlled seminaries and theological colleges to secular departments of religious studies. Hughes’s important contribution is to demonstrate that what was studied, why it was studied, and how it was studied were tied to these institutional changes, which themselves were products of broader structural and cultural changes as Canada moved from colony to confederation to secular state. He shows that the development of the study of religion in Canada was unique to its social and political context; it did not simply mirror the American story.
For example, in the colonial period, Hughes argues, the study of religion was conducted under the auspices of “established” churches, which enjoyed special privileges and protections by successive colonial governments (first French and then British) in exchange for their “civilizing” moral influence. As a full partner in the project of colonization, the Church (first Roman Catholic and then the Church of England) as well as those who studied “religion” (i.e., exclusively Christians studying Christianity) in seminaries adopted a racist, imperialist, paternalistic, and sometimes hostile stance towards outsiders—especially Indigenous peoples, but also those who did not fit the profile of the ideal settler (French/British, Catholic/Anglican, and white-European) (p. 37).

As we know, this project of recreating Christendom failed. With no one church able to secure a religious monopoly in the fledgling state, Canada entered a stage of “plural establishment,” with mainline churches working much like Canada’s banks today, that is, as separate institutions theoretically and (sometimes) practically in competition with one another but all united in keeping their privileged positions and the sector itself strong through cozy, self-serving relations with the state. Hughes outlines the impact of this arrangement on the study of religion, namely the establishment of various denominational colleges and seminaries, each competing with one another—despite the high-handed efforts of the Anglicans to dominate or monopolize the field—but all united in their belief in public, state-supported Christianity. Meanwhile, the emerging nation-state had practical concerns that could only be addressed through higher education. Theology did not build railways, factories, or farms. Increasingly, religion and the study of religion were marginalized in these institutions, sometimes confined to schools of divinity or seminaries, and sometimes—for important reasons that Hughes outlines—just ignored.

Still, from roughly 1840 to 1960, the study of religion reflected the parochial concerns of Christian Canada. Even in the 1950s, Hughes shows, the rare discussion of other religions in academic journals, for example, existed only to show the superiority of Christianity. The study of religion was controlled by denominational institutions in which Christianity was taught to Christians to make them better Christians. The curriculum was narrow, with theology, church history, and biblical studies taking up the lion’s share. These institutions shared the religious, racial, and ethnic chauvinism of the colonial period. Patriarchal structures and a paternalist ethos were also shared broadly across all denominations.

It was only with the secularization of Canadian society after World War II and especially the 1960s that this denominational/theological paradigm was overturned. Departments of religious studies differentiated themselves from seminaries and theological colleges, and the discipline differentiated itself from theology and other faith-based sub-disciplines. The study of what are now called “the world’s religions” emerged; Christian privilege and chauvinism slowly (though never fully) retreated; the principle of academic freedom was enshrined, and the methods and theories of religious studies scholars began to mirror those found in other academic departments. Hughes ties these developments to the evolution of the Canadian social order, which he traces to the remarkable emergence of multiculturalism and secularism. He may have easily added
the concern for human rights, which served as the third pillar of the secular/multicultural social order we now enjoy (Bramadat and Seljak, 2013; Seljak, 2016).

Hughes argues that the transformation of the study of religion from a narrow focus on Christianity to the secular study of the world’s religions was inspired by the new ethos of multiculturalism in Canada and by the new religious diversity that followed the liberalization of Canada’s immigration policy in the late 1960s. “As immigrants made their way to Canada, and as multiculturalism became an official governmental policy,” he writes, “it became necessary to understand the beliefs and customs of new Canadians” (p. 133). He points to a number of the milestones of secularization, such as the founding of departments of religious studies (1960 McMaster, 1964 UBC, 1967 Université de Montréal, 1968 Manitoba, 1969 Toronto, etc.), the creation of the Canadian Society for the Study of Religion (1965), and the first publication of Studies in Religion (1971).

While multiculturalism as a value predated the Trudeau government’s policy announcement (1971), it was hardly a widespread or compelling motivation for change. Tying interest in world religions to the new religious diversity in Canada is even more dubious. According to Census data, between 1961 and 1971 over 75 percent of new Canadians in the 1960s were Christian, meaning that the small Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, and Sikh communities, for example, grew very little. The only big change was in the number of people who declared they had no religion, a figure that grew by 10 times in that decade.

That change points to a more likely source for the desire to move past the Christocentric study of religion, that is, the growing liberal cosmopolitanism of a country that made a successful and independent contribution during WWII and enjoyed three decades of unprecedented economic growth afterwards. One might also look at the impact of decolonization movements and debates over equality (reflected in the adoption of the UN’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights) for more likely influences. This cosmopolitanism had permeated the Canadian churches, which is why institutions founded by Christian denominations and staffed almost entirely by Christians could willingly open themselves up to a pluralistic study of religion. After all, the three key figures (George P Grant, Wilfrid Cantwell Smith, and Fr Klaus Klostermaier) that Hughes identifies as critical to this intellectual perestroika were committed Christians (and two were ordained). Christian ecumenism and an emerging openness to other religions—witness the reversal of centuries of suspicion and hostility to Jews and other religious groups during the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), for example—were also likely sources. They all predated multiculturalism and religious diversity in Canada, which would have a later influence on the study of religion.

While Hughes misattributes the source and impetus of this glasnost, he accurately analyzes the effects of the conundrum introduced by the fact that the new pluralistic study of religion relied (almost always) on men trained in Christianity who applied Christian categories of analysis (focusing on texts and beliefs, for example) to other phenomena that looked like Christianity (official forms of Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Islam, and East Asian Religions—the “usual suspects” in the “world religions” approach). This conundrum, including the inclusion of “crypto-theology,” that is, putatively neutral theories about religion that have not freed themselves from essentialist, universalist, and, ultimately, theological assumptions about religion, has shaped (as Hughes rightly argues) the academic study (and teaching) of religion in Canada.
No short book on the evolution of a broad discipline across centuries, studied and taught in two official languages, and throughout many regions, is going to cover every development thoroughly or even sufficiently. Hughes makes no claims to being comprehensive. Still, what a scholar decides to include and exclude is informative. For example, French Quebec, with its unique history, culture, and structures of higher education, does not get the attention it deserves, as Hughes himself admits. In fact, the University of Toronto alone enjoys more in-depth treatment by Hughes than all of French Canada and/or Quebec. In his 1978 classic, *A General Theory of Secularization*, the British sociologist David Martin first argued that the form of secularism that developed in any society was largely determined by its religious configuration at the time of secularization. Hence secularization in religiously pluralist societies, like the United Kingdom and the United States, differed dramatically from societies in which a church held a religious monopoly, as was the case in Spain or France. Later, Martin (2000) examined the secularization process in Canada, concluding that it fit somewhere in between the experience of the US and the UK—with the exception of the influence of Quebec, where the Roman Catholic Church enjoyed a semi-established status and quasi-monopoly in Francophone Quebec well into the 1960s.

Hence, in Quebec, some universities bucked the trend Hughes saw at the University of Toronto and elsewhere. They retained faculties of theology and remained, until recently, connected to the Roman Catholic Church, both in developing its theology and training its personnel (*agents de pastorale*, teachers of Roman Catholicism in public schools, etc.). Others, especially those in the Université du Québec system, became more systematically secular than their Anglophone counterparts in the province and the rest of the country. This polarization reflected a deeper division in the 1960s in Quebec society about the place of religion in public life. The trend towards secularizing the structures and content of the study of religion was shaped by the continued identification of French Quebec national identity with Roman Catholicism and the continued public role of the Church (Rousseau and Despland, 1988).

Hughes also ignores the fact that, in Canada, the study of religion in the 20th century was not confined to seminaries or departments of religious studies. In the rest of the university, secularization theory reigned supreme, and so entire departments in the humanities and social sciences did their work not only as if God did not exist but also *as if religion did not exist*. If studied at all, religion was most frequently reduced to other social forces (political, social, cultural, psychological, etc.). Examining this ideological context would have helped Hughes explain how marginal religion was to Canadian society and the academy before 1960 and, hence, why the transformation of the study of religion could be so rapid. The quiet revolutionaries of Hughes’s story were opening up their discipline to the approaches and culture of the dominant departments in the university. This context would also help explain the lengths to which Wilfrid Cantwell Smith and others went to defend the autonomy of religion against reductionism.

Finally, what is missing in Hughes’s analysis is a critique of the persistence of colonialism and patriarchy in the secular study of religion in the 1970s and 1980s—and to the present day. Hughes rightly points out that colonialism and racism were part of the framework of the study of religion before 1960. However, the critique of colonialism disappears as Hughes focuses on the conflicts between denominations and then the
struggle between the secularizers and those loyal to the paradigm of Christian Canada. Hence, he offers no insight into how the secular study of religion has also served to marginalize and exclude Indigenous people and spirituality by promoting a monocultural approach to truth. It would be interesting to see how Hughes sees the role of the secular study of religion in ongoing colonization, but his discussion of colonialism ends largely on page 37, that is, during the colonial period.

One can raise the same critique about Hughes’s treatment of patriarchy and the study of religion in Canada. On a number of occasions—but largely in passing—Hughes points out that the study of religion in the colonial and Christian Canada periods was patriarchal both in its structures (male-dominated seminaries and churches) and content (male-dominated theology, history, biblical studies, etc.). Even so, he largely passes over the role of the study of religion in the establishment of narrow gender roles, the subordination of women, suppression of diversity in sexual orientation and identity, and replication of the patriarchal structures of Canada. Even his passing observations disappear when Hughes turns his attention to the post-1960 period. Feminist scholars of religion would argue that the secularization of the study of religion failed to address sufficiently patriarchy in religion or in its academic study.

Hughes claims that his study is not guided by an evolutionary scheme. However, despite his denials (p. 13), it is clear that his narrative of the transformation of the study of religion in Canada is structured along the lines of classical secularization theory. We evolve, or so the story goes, from communities united by a common religion marked by chauvinism and irrational hierarchies of all kinds (racism, sexism, colonialism, etc.) to secular, pluralistic, egalitarian societies rooted in the common ground of reason or, as Hughes puts it, “from religious exclusion to secularism, from Christocentrism to multiculturalism, and from theology to secular religious studies” (p. 6). It is clear that Hughes sees the emergence of the secular paradigm of the study of religion as both an epistemic and moral advance. Hughes is not just writing about these values; he is writing out of them as well. José Casanova insightfully called secularization theory a “prescription for” rather than a “description of” modernization. While many will share much of this agenda (as I do), they may question why this prescription should ignore the epistemic and moral failings of the secular study of religion—failings that continue do this day.

Declaration of conflicting interests
The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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