CTS: Theology in Canada: The state of the discipline

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Abstract: This article provides a survey of the state of the field of theology in Canada today, taking into account the work being done by members of the Canadian Theological Society. It opens with some historical background on the beginnings of theology as an academic discipline reflecting a distinctive Canadian perspective, then provides a brief survey of how things stand today, and concludes with some suggestions about where Canadian scholarship in theology is or may be tending.

Résumé : Cet article présente un aperçu de l’état de la théologie au Canada aujourd’hui, en tenant compte du travail effectué par les membres de la Société canadienne de théologie. Il commence par un rappel historique des débuts de la théologie en tant que discipline académique reflétant une perspective canadienne distincte, puis présente un bref aperçu de la situation actuelle et conclut par quelques suggestions sur la direction que prend ou pourrait prendre la recherche canadienne en théologie.

Keywords
Canada, future, religious studies, theology

Mots clés
Canada, avenir, études religieuses, théologie

Introduction
I welcome the invitation of the President and Secretary of the CCSR to provide a brief “reflection piece considering the state of the field of the study of religion from the
perspective of” the Canadian Theological Society (CTS). Although I am the current President of the CTS, these reflections are personal ones. Still, I hope that they will allow readers some insight into the discipline of theology, particularly as it is engaged in in Canada today. To do this, I begin with a little background of theological research in Canada, provide a brief survey of how things stand today, and make a few tentative suggestions about where scholarship in theology is or may be tending.

A little background

Theology in Canada, as a creative and academic discipline, with an understanding of it as reflecting a distinctive Canadian perspective, has its roots in the mid-20th century. It was this, together with the “theological renewal” that followed the Second World War, that led to the creation of the CTS. The society was founded in 1955, the same year that the first issue of the Canadian Theological Review (CTR) was published. The origins of the CTS lie in the Canadian Society for Biblical Studies (CSBS, founded in 1933), which had counted a number of theologians among its members, and some of the Presidential addresses of the CSBS were published in the CTR (Macpherson, 1967: 17).

The first members of the CTS were primarily from Protestant denominations in the Montreal–London corridor, and while the CTS drew from academics at universities, colleges, and seminaries, it also drew from outside the academy. Gradually, there was an increase in representation of theologians in the CTS, particularly Roman Catholic theologians after Vatican II, and membership soon came from across the country.

While the CTS focused on research and study in theology, it remained close to other religion-related academic societies. By 1961, the CTS, along with the CSBS, The Canadian Society for Church History and the Canadian Society for the Study of Religion, were holding annual meetings together, and, by 1969, had decided to participate in the annual Congress of Learned Societies – the predecessor to today’s ‘Congress’ (Coward, 2014: 5). In 1971, these societies became founding members of the Canadian Corporation for the Study of Religion. Although the CTS and the CTR were independent of one another, at this point the CTR ceased publication, and a new journal, Studies in Religion/Sciences religieuses (SR), published by the Corporation, was established (Remus et al., 1992: 24). The advantage at that time of close collaboration was that it allowed those in theology to participate in meetings of scholars in cognate fields, and vice versa, and to pool resources.

Yet, in such a diverse environment, and responding to the climate of the times, there were debates, including in SR, whether theology was primarily an act of religion or a genuine academic discipline (or both!), and what the relation between theology and the ‘new’ field of religious studies might be. Though these two debates have receded in recent years, it is not obviously because they have been settled, and there remains a distinctiveness and, perhaps, a tension between theology and religious studies in methods and objectives that resist easy reconciliation.

In his 1985 ‘retrospective’, WO Fennell, then Professor Emeritus of Systematic Theology at Emmanuel College in Toronto, provided a brief history of the first 30 years of the CTS (1985). He noted that membership had become more diverse and inclusive in denominational affiliation, and was genuinely national – and somewhat international –
with membership in the Maritimes (12%), Ontario (49%), Western Canada (17%), and outside Canada (10%). (Québec is not explicitly mentioned, though it presumably had around 12%) (Fennell, 1985: 412). At that time, one found theologians at universities, colleges, and seminaries, and in other disciplines and occupations, in every province. Still, many, if not most, of those who studied theology did so in view of ordination (in Christian churches), and most of those who taught them were ordained clergy as well.

Though as a scholarly society and member of the Federation of Humanities and Social Sciences the CTS represents the interests of Canadian theologians, there are many theologians and persons interested in the academic study of theology in Canada and who write in the area, who, for various reasons, do not always participate in the Society’s meetings and are not CTS members. There are, moreover, other scholarly societies in theology in Canada. In 1963, those doing theological work in French, primarily in Québec and francophone Canada, formed la Société canadienne de théologie and, in 1990, theologians primarily from evangelical traditions formed the Canadian Evangelical Theological Association (today, the Canadian-American Theological Association). While the CTS has, periodically, organized joint sessions with CATA, outside of meetings of the Corporation, interaction with the SCT has been minimal. Further, and not surprisingly, perhaps, a number of English-speaking theologians find their intellectual community with theologians and theological societies abroad, particularly in the United States.

**Today**

A little more than thirty-five years after Fennell’s retrospective, while one finds a number of continuities, there have also been significant changes in theology, including theology in Canada.

For example, in 2020, membership in the CTS continues to be focused in Ontario (54%), followed by Western Canada (28%), Québec (7.5%), the Maritimes (6%), and internationally (4%). It is, as it has been from its earliest years, primarily focused on theology in or related to what one might call “Western” Christianity. Research and teaching in theology occurs across the country, particularly in universities, but also in seminaries and a number of colleges. Faculties of theology exist in Toronto, Ottawa, London, St John’s, and Québec, and seminaries and divinity, theological, and related colleges are still to be found across the country, from British Columbia to Newfoundland. It is a challenge, admittedly, to know the number of theologians at work at present in the country, given that (as has always been the case) theologians may be employed in educational institutions, but also engaged in ministry, congregational or missionary work, church administration, chaplaincies, and bioethics consultancies, and so on, while still continuing to be engaged in study and research.

Yet, social and cultural factors of the past 30 years have led to change and a richness and depth in the range of theology being done today. While CTS membership still draws on mainline Protestant (including Anglican) traditions, there is significant Catholic representation, as well as from evangelical and ‘new’ churches and the Orthodox churches. There are many more lay theologians, a greater participation of women scholars, and greater diversity overall, and a concomitant revisiting of earlier methods and approaches. Interdenominational cooperation has increased – or, perhaps better put,
much theological research and reflection is trans-denominational. Interdisciplinarity in approach and method is a characteristic of much of the theological work being done. InQuébec, at the Universities of Sherbrooke and Montréal, for example, theology faculties have become ‘institutes of religious studies,’ retaining the teaching of theology, but expanding into interdisciplinary studies.¹ The Toronto School of Theology brings together various religion-affiliated scholars and colleges, and relations with the University of Toronto have become stronger. These collaborative and curricular arrangements provide a significant breadth for students of theology, including those seeking ordination. Expectations and demands on theologians to carry out original research and to publish, particularly on those working in universities, has led to a geometrical increase in publications and – as will be noted below – venues of publication.

The diversity of the field of theology globally today is significant and, in many ways, is reflected in theological research in Canada. In a recent study of Presidential Addresses of the CTS, Jeremy Bergen (2019) notes this diversity: some addresses deal with methodological issues of how theology situates itself in relation to modernity and postmodernity; some deal with constructive theories, particularly concerning ethics and moral vision; and some focus on theology in a Canadian context, particularly when it relates to theology in particular denominations. Similarly, a review of recent programs for the Annual Meeting of the CTS also shows that theological scholarship is broad in scope, method, methodology, and theory – demonstrably broader than in the mid-1980s described in Fennell’s report (1985). Research and scholarship done by members of the CTS aspire, however, to be broader still, and there has been a sustained effort by theologians to break out of the tendency of academics ‘just talking to one another.’ It is fair to say that a good deal of research and writing is ‘non-confessional’ and even ‘secular,’ with the discipline of theology holding itself up to expectations that any academic discipline generally requires.

One result has been that theology is, at times, ‘disruptive’ – disruptive of presumptions of normativity and traditional academic study, and also as recognizing the radical character of religious faith, particularly as it is to be expressed in daily life. In research done by members of the CTS during the past decade,² for example, one finds that there is an engagement with postmodern and sometimes post-secular epistemologies. Historical and scriptural approaches, which reflect key themes in theology (e.g., studies of salvation, justification, grace, and Christology) or of theological figures (e.g., Augustine, Luther, Barth, Hauerwas, Moltmann, Gutiérrez, and Lonergan) are, arguably, increasingly directed towards a closer concern with practical and applied issues. These issues may include theological studies on our ‘natural home’, particularly the environment and ecology, on social justice, on issues related to gender and disability, and on the influences and effects of colonialism. There have been contributions to political theology, drawing on continental European philosophy (Agamben, Foucault, Marion, and Mouffe), in order to highlight and to deconstruct theological concepts underlying the political. One finds, as well, efforts to draw on theology and epistemologies from outside the traditional center – introducing perspectives and analyses from LGBTQIA+, BIPOC, and racialized theologians, from feminism, and from Asia, the Caribbean, and Latin America.³ There is a greater consciousness of, and concern with, methodology, with studies of, or using, feminist and ecofeminist and critical race theory, but also
drawing on aesthetic theory, insights from liturgical practice, and subaltern perspectives. There have also been explicit efforts to do a critical theology on and from within the Canadian context—a context of plurality but also of interculturality.

One area of consistent recent scholarship in Canada has been the role of theology in increasing awareness of decolonialization and indigeneity, especially immediately preceding and following the release of the Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (in 2015). Canadian theologians are more aware of their contextual locatedness, and are more prone to reflect on this locatedness in their work.

Still, much of theological discussion has been focused on “Western” Christianity and, as one surveys the papers presented at the annual meetings, there is relatively little on Eastern Christianity or on Christianities of Asia, India, and Africa. There has also been relatively little recent explicit or extensive discussion of worship and of pedagogy—though theological studies of these issues, as with other areas not significantly represented at recent CTS meetings, such as the Hebrew Bible and Church history, may be taking place at allied scholarly societies.

Underlying much of this discussion—and periodically surfacing—has been reflection on the vocation of the theologian. This is, indeed, apposite, particularly given that the study of theology has become interdisciplinary, but also because theology itself need not be related to a single denominational or confessional approach, and because there is an increasing number of theologians who are not ordained or in religious life (though many may work at religion-affiliated institutions). It is still the case that many theologians are ordained or in religious life but, in many of the larger theological institutions, it appears that that number has significantly declined.

It may well have been true that the “theologian teaches the religious leader (priest, rabbi), and in turn the religious leader teaches the lay person”4—and perhaps this is still true today. But the vocation of the theologian is certainly much more than that. Former CTS president Pamela Dickey Young holds the Christian theologian to be one “committed to interpreting all of reality in terms of Christian symbols that must be credible, coherent, and non-contradictory,” but that this is a task that needs to be “articulated anew in each time and place.”5 Others would hold that this vocation involves both recognizing one’s own commitments, and seeing them as tools essential to “speaking truly about God.” Theology is also a reflective and reflexive activity—interpreting and reinterpreting its subject matter but also oneself, as one engages in the activity. Some theologians challenge the intelligibility of talking about God6 and the dynamics of theological language and its referents, or displace the task of theology as involving the seeking of ‘Truth’ or ‘Wisdom’ and, thereby, engaging in a broader search for what theologians have called the divine.7 Also, as noted above, interest in interdisciplinary or cross-disciplinary work is also important. Thus, the audience of theology is no longer as confessionally bound—or, even, confessionally required.

Some theologians draw on a wide range of philosophical, sociological, and historical resources, as well as the scholarly contributions of religious and biblical studies, though there is still an effort to root their scholarship in a distinctive, if not unique, voice. And, while in the mid-1990s it could still be said that “The place of theology in, or the relationship of theology to, religious studies remains a contentious issue,” it is not clear that this is still the case (Neufeldt, 1993: 142). Further, the relations between philosophy
and theology found in an earlier generation – for example, a number of CTS Presidents had also been professors of philosophy (e.g., Alistair McKinnon, Donald Evans, Jay Newman) – continue, particularly through the Jay Newman Lecture in Philosophy of Religion, initiated in 2009. Speakers here have discussed such topics as the contributions of classic Christian and Jewish philosophers (Maimonides, Spinoza), the relation of religion and science, miracles, the intelligibility of religious belief, “rhetorical invocations of ‘objectivity’ and ‘facts’” and their bearing on religion, and the relation of analytic philosophy to religion.

Publishing in theology, perhaps as in most academic disciplines, is robust. In Canada, major theological journals include the Toronto Journal of Theology, Laval théologique et philosophique, Theoforum, Canadian-American Theological Review, Religious Studies and Theology, Science et Esprit, Critical Theology (formerly, The Ecumenist), and ARC, along with a number of smaller journals such as Consensus, Touchstone, and the McMaster Journal of Theology and Ministry – and a new journal, The Canadian Journal of Theology, Mental Health and Disability, was founded in 2020. Since 1985, ten of the CTS Presidential Addresses and almost all of the Jay Newman lectures have been published in the Toronto Journal of Theology, two in SR, and several in other Canadian theological journals.

**Toward the horizon**

A key characteristic of theology is its orientation towards the future. Not surprisingly, there is also concern among theologians worldwide about theology’s future as an academic discipline, and this applies as well in Canada. There has been disquiet as it relates to the vocation of the theologian, but particularly to ‘the profession’ in the academy, to its relations to confessional and denominational bodies, and to society overall. Is theology in service to the church, the Church, to the ‘truth,’ or . . . ?

There are social factors that bear on the future of theology. Predictions of a ‘disenchantment of religion’ and the ‘secularization’ of society have not come true as quickly as some of its proponents had expected, but there is little doubt of a marginalization in the West of religion and that its absence, at least explicitly, from public discourse, has accelerated over the past two decades. With the ‘disappearance’ or ‘privatization’ of religion, and the ascendancy of ‘secular’ and ‘scientific’ disciplines in the academy, so goes, one might fear, an understanding of the importance and the study of theology (Paul-Choudry, 2019). Yet some sociological studies remain cautious here – noting a “secularizing west [but] a rapidly growing rest.” A recent Pew survey confirms this (Pew Forum, 2015). In pluralistic societies, such as Canada, the prospect of increased immigration from regions where there is active and public religious outlook and expression may lead to transforming religious communities and Canadian society and, by extension, theology.

There are other ‘external’ challenges to theology. Some challenge whether theology is a genuine academic discipline and should be taught in universities or, at least, in publicly funded institutions. For example, the popular writer Richard Dawkins (2010) writes that “Christian theology is a non-subject. It is empty. Vacuous. Void of coherence or content. . . .”. He also writes that “The achievements of theologians don’t do anything, don’t affect anything, don’t mean anything. What makes anyone think that ‘theology’ is
a subject at all?” (Dawkins, 1998: 6). And Dawkins is far from alone here. How far such criticisms have an effect on the discipline is unclear, but it may influence the public – more fideistic attitudes in believers, but also a lack of comprehension in the minds of our academic colleagues about what theologians do. Another challenge concerns the relation of churches and denominations to the teaching and study of theology. Declines in financial resources, the number of congregations or parishes, and ministerial vocations, have led to retrenchments and closures in faculties and schools of theology, to declines in the number of academic theologians, and to reduction of support for scholarly research in theology.

Theology long drew on support from denominational bodies, and there was even a symbiotic relation – particularly, I believe, in the Roman Catholic traditions. It is, however, doubtful how far that relationship still exists. In part, in some churches, there is little reciprocal commitment to engage and draw on the work of theologians. This is recognized by some church leaders – that much of that leadership is “more interested in pragmatic leadership training and no longer read theological books” (Tomlin, 2016). Lay theologians, feminist theologians, and theologians coming from racialized communities in particular may have no clear place in ecclesiastical structures, and may be less able – and less willing – to be controlled by that leadership. Theologians themselves may see their obligation and audience to be the wider public.

There are also, however, many ‘internal’ challenges to theology today.

An increasing number of theologians, in Canada and abroad, regard traditional approaches to theology as too narrow. Moreover, given the increasingly pluralistic character of theological education, theologians are called not only to increase attention to context and contextualization, but to (re-)examine their own understandings of the task of theology and how to engage in it. Theologians, further, recognize the creative challenges and opportunities that result from new and different methodologies. Again, or alternately, as theology is arguably less and less rooted in denominational and confessional teaching, particularly when it is engaged in publicly funded or public universities, it finds itself freer from church control, and called to engage in more ‘neutral’ or academic practice. Some have argued, however, that theology has thereby become ‘estranged’ from some of the intellectual and institutional resources that might sustain it, and also from those younger church members who embrace neo-traditional or conservative views (Faggioli, 2018).

How theologians are responding, and will respond to such, and related, challenges, influences theology today and for the future.

One encouraging sign is the recognition of the need for a genuine diversity in theology – for example, an increasing place for the insights of racialized, indigenized, and minoritized theologians within the field; this is particularly true in Canada. The insights that result will very likely inform theology’s continued presence. Moreover, there is a sign of increasing interest in Orthodox theology, particularly given its apophatic and mystical character, which allows for ways, frequently neglected in Canadian theological research, of understanding experience of the divine. There is also, as mentioned earlier, growing appetite for Indigenous expressions of theology.

A related feature that is encouraging is the increasing theological reflection on nature, the environment, and ecology. Present in a number of presentations given at
annual CTS meetings is a call for an ecological theology that, in Jürgen Moltmann’s (2016: 6) words, will give birth to “a new concept of the nature of the earth and a new image of the human being and human destiny, and with these a new experience of God in our culture.

With a (re)turn to nature, there is some evidence of a recognition and a need for a new or renewed theological anthropology – one in which “memory, imagination, and hope will be central” – which keeps humanity, its institutions, and its theories open to the divine (Boland, 2005). Such an anthropology, together with a more robust and contemporary account of human subjectivity, will have an impact on how theology can be shown to be relevant in an environment which is, at the same time, “multireligious and multi secular.” And some hope that, in such an environment, educational institutions, particularly universities, will see theology as offering a way in which to understand the human person as material and spiritual, that can engage with different religions, and thereby contribute to public discourse.

Some theologians argue for a retrieving of traditions and the principal doctrines or articulations of faith, and carrying out a ‘rethinking’ and reexpression of them. The writings of the American scholar Roger Haight have had some impact on academic theology in Canada. Haight (2008) has described how theologians have expanded theology’s “horizon and deepening perceptions, allowing a complexification of issues that leads to greater understanding,” and argues that “the future of Catholic theology depends on its capacity to represent the articles of the Creed in a form that is comprehensible to the dominant culture in the West” (Haight has, however, encountered significant opposition to his work from Catholic Church authorities) (Magister, 2009). Moreover, almost 40 years after his death, Bernard Lonergan continues to offer a model of how to understand and engage doctrine, particularly in Catholic traditions.10

Other theologians argue that theology needs to involve not only a ‘retrieval’ of the tradition and a ‘(re)thinking’ of it, but also engagement and expression in public issues (Ford, 2011). As an example, there has been an effort in recent theology to engage contemporary science, and there have been opportunities for significant research funding in this area. While scientific naturalism has arguably long ago dissuaded theologians from engaging in naïve apologetics, issues such as the purpose and value of creation give theologians an opportunity to provide a conceptual space and a discourse to allow themselves and others to reflect on such questions (Keogh, 2015: 414).

Education and interest in diversity and interdisciplinarity have led theologians today to explore new methods and methodologies. I have referred to theologians drawing on minoritized, indigenized, and racialized perspectives, and the CTS has recently established a ‘Dignity, Equity and Justice Committee’ that will help the Society and its members in coming to deeper understanding. Interdisciplinary approaches are being adopted as well. For example, one model is for theologians and scholars of various faiths to engage one another in a practice of “intensive conversation” around their respective Scriptures and religious texts, which might enable “participants go deeper into their own tradition,” and, thereby, not simply find a common core but, rather, a rich theological pluralism (Ford, 2017: 4). Alternately, some argue that theology needs the theologian to “expound” the dynamic relation between one’s subjective faith and allegiance to church teaching in reflecting on and critically engaging Scripture, tradition, and practice.
Insights from phenomenology – “interpreting suffering in the light of Christ’s passion” and better understanding the life and the living of the faithful – will likely continue to inform theological research. And a somewhat novel approach is that of analytic theology, which focuses on theology, particularly systematic theology, using the skills and resources of analytic philosophy. These theologians argue that religious teaching can be “illuminated by the best insights of analytic philosophy” (Abraham, 2009: 55; see Sweet, 2012). In a narrow sense, this does not require any particular creedal commitment, though in practice many of those who engage in it come from a range of Christian traditions. Former CTS President Jay Newman (1991: 242) was broadly sympathetic to such an approach, for he argued that theologians need to engage critics directly, by “finding the right words” and speaking them “as effectively as possible,” and to ensure that theology is not simply inward looking, to the work of other theologians, but also outward looking, to the intellectual community and to all those “who stand to benefit from hearing them.”

**Conclusion**

Theology, theological research in Canada, and the work of the CTS are all marked today by an increased rethinking of text and tradition, as well as an increasing diversity. Theology frequently follows methodologies and methodological norms importantly different from those of the late 20th century and earlier, and many theologians find themselves called to engage with a much broader but also more critical public than their predecessors. In part, this has been because the environment in which theology is done has changed, particularly in ‘the West.’ The secular critique of religion and theology, the expectations of theology within the academy, the experience and insights of racialized, indigenized, and minoritized communities and individuals, increased interdisciplinary and interdenominational cooperation, and the varied relation of churches and denominations to theological scholarship, have led theologians to reassess their own work and the discipline as a whole. A number of theologians see their work as ‘disruptive,’ as drawing on diverse voices, and as including and engaging a number of previously unrepresented voices. Research and scholarship within the CTS reflects all of these interests. Despite many contemporary challenges to, and serious difficulties for, theologians, particularly those working in colleges and seminaries, there are encouraging signs that theological reflection is needed for engaging present realities. The diversity of professional activity that is theological in nature continues to make theology a rich and pluriform discipline, that is called on to articulate the right words, and provide a distinctive and useful discourse for interpreting to an evidently plural world a reality that goes far beyond the contingent and natural.

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Notes
1. See, for example, Roulot-Ganzmann (2017).
2. See Bergen (2019); see also the programs of the annual meetings of the CTS from 2009 to 2020 (in documentation held by the author and by the CTS Secretary).
3. For examples, again, see the programs of the annual meetings of the CTS from 2009 to 2020.
4. The Princeton Review, https://www.princetonreview.com/careers/212/theologian
5. See Dickey Young, as summarized in Bergen (2019: 85).
6. See Kaufman (1972).
7. See, for example, Ford (2017).
8. For example, Drees (2007) writes that “theology is not a science.” See also an interview between the CNN Wire Staff (2010) and Stephen Hawking, the latter stating that “The scientific account is complete. Theology is unnecessary”: http://www.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/europe/09/11/stephen.hawking.interview/index.html
9. See the discussion by Hollerich (2018).
10. For a recent, general introduction to how Lonergan may be used in this regard, see Hammond (2017).
11. See also Faggioli (2018) and Hollerich (2018).
12. See, for example, Pattison (2018).
13. See Supplemental Material for CTS Presidents 1985–2021.

Supplemental Material
Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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