

From Seminary to University: An Institutional History of the Study of Religion in Canada by Aaron W. Hughes

James Tyler Robertson

Volume 113, Number 1, Spring 2021

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1076084ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1076084ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Robertson, J. T. (2021). Review of [*From Seminary to University: An Institutional History of the Study of Religion in Canada* by Aaron W. Hughes]. *Ontario History*, 113(1), 116–117. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1076084ar>

From Seminary to University
An Institutional History of the Study of Religion in Canada

By Aaron W. Hughes

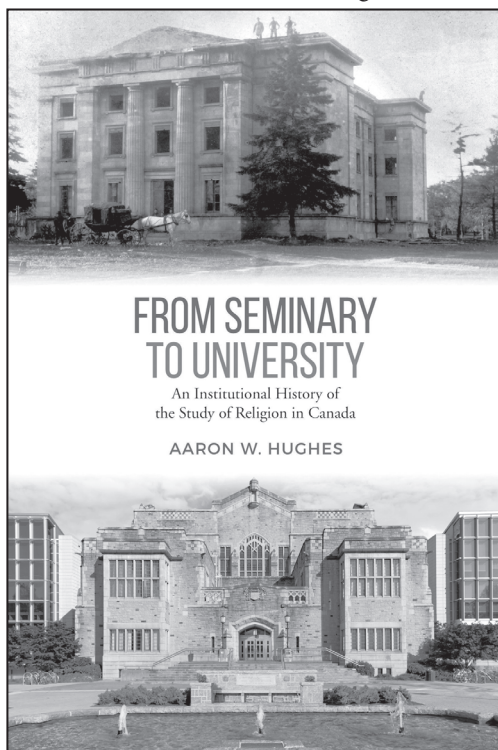
Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020. 238 pages. \$48.75 hardcover. ISBN 978-1-4875-0497-7 (EPUB) 978-1-4875-3127-0 (PDF) 978-1-4875-3126-3

Dr. Hughes explores the study of religion from a Canadian perspective that both incorporates and transcends institutional developments. This complex and multifaceted approach argues the evolution from confessional, Christianity-centered education to an academic examination of all religions should not be understood as merely a post-1960s development in Canada. This awareness provides a more robust understanding regarding the development of religious studies departments as well as a fuller picture of Canada's historic relationship to religion. Hughes convincingly argues that a more chronologically substantive examination is required to properly understand these later twentieth-century developments as the natural outworking of trends that pre-date Confederation.

Another attribute worth noting is that *From Seminary to University* intentionally focuses solely on Canadian stories. This book honours Canadian developments

without feeling the need to connect them to global trends. He notes that, as it pertains to nationally-focused studies in the West, American institutions have been privileged. While obviously influenced by America, the Canadian landscape of religious education has valuable insights to offer that are much more than a paler version of its southern counterpart. This is an important historiographical element that any student of Canadian history would do well to remember.

Hughes also recognizes the “subterranean” nature of religion in the creation of the modern nation state. Critiques calling to rethink or dismantle previous beliefs around this topic are rooted in a particular national character that derived much of its shape from earlier religious teachings. Hughes agrees the growth of more inclusive religious studies departments—a counter to the purely Christian seminary education—is indicative of Canadian culture's move to-



wards inclusivity. However, the unique contribution of this work is to show how such cultural changes were inexorably linked to Christian education. How this occurred is the substance of Hughes' book and I will leave it up to the reader to purchase it and discover the answer for him or herself.

The format of Hughes' book is almost exclusively chronological. While the complexity of certain concepts like Fundamentalism and Modernism necessitate returning to earlier periods for the sake of explanation, the majority of the book's content is presented in a clear and articulated linear fashion. The material progresses through time and space in ways that reflect the growth and development of the Canadian nation as well. This not only helps the reader keep dates, facts, personalities, and developments clear, but also strengthens Hughes' argument that the study of religion is also the study of the nation state.

The most notable weakness of the book is that it joins the substantial pantheon of Protestant religious scholarship that fails to take the French Catholic experience into consideration. While Hughes explains this as intentional and not oversight, the reader must be wary that such exclusions can alter the validity of his arguments. Ignoring the trends of other nations' religious education in favour of purely Canadian data remains helpful and does little to weaken the contributions of this book. However, I am left to wonder how many of Hughes' arguments would be better understood through acknowledging that policies, publications, and even notable elements of the early western educational experience were created in response to, or inspiration from, Catholic models and educators. To be fair, McGill University does feature prominently throughout the work but not solely as a bastion of French Catholic education.

Of particular interest to the readers

of Ontario History would be the second chapter's focus on the University of Toronto. The case study of this prominent university displays the origins of Canadian educational theory as a tool for both the moral and academic advancement of colonial life; with an emphasis on the former over the latter. This chapter not only shows the origins of U of T as well as Queen's University but also what was at stake in those early days. General education was superseded by denominational rivalries and the desire to reform such tendencies, once again, found impetus and meaning in religion. While the chapter carefully explains the origins of the U of T it also further strengthens Hughes' argument that religious belief provided the motivation for education as well as in the more "secular" realms of colonial policy and governance.

This book is comprehensive in scope and clearly displays logic in the interpretations of the data. The writing is clear, and Hughes aptly creates a bridge between solid scholarly research that embodies the best of the historical discipline with accessible and readable prose. I would recommend this book for a diverse crowd of both academic and lay-people as Hughes makes valuable and necessary contributions in several fields of Canadian history. He covers intellectual, educational, publication, religious, legal, and even specific institutional histories like U of T, McGill, Trinity College (Toronto) and Queen's in ways that will add emphasis and information to each of these topics. While the future of the study of religion in Canada is debatable, Hughes demonstrates the significance and importance of its past.

Dr. James Tyler Robertson
Assistant Professor of Christian History &
Director of Distributed Learning
Tyndale University