

## **Book Reviews / Comptes-rendus**

**Aaron W. Hughes, *From Seminary to University: an Institutional History of the Study of Religion in Canada.* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020), xiii + 231 pp. ISBN: 9781487504977.**

Aaron W. Hughes is a Canadian scholar who is currently Professor of Jewish Studies at the University of Rochester. He once engaged in an impromptu conversation with graduate students concerning the possible influence on the development of religious studies in Canada of the 1963 United States Supreme Court decision that declared Bible reading in American public schools to be unconstitutional. This chance conversation led directly to the present book, which traces the history of the study of religion in Canada.

The title does not do complete justice to the contents of the book, because the author has adopted a complex strategy in the presentation of his evidence. Though he primarily addresses the issue of the development of religious studies in Canadian universities, he believes that his book will be of interest and use to readers outside Canada, who cannot be expected to know even the broad outlines of Canadian history. For that reason, Hughes provides the reader with a running commentary on aspects of the history of Canada that he believes influenced the teaching and study of religion. He begins with Jacques Cartier's erection of a cross in 1534, which allows him in passing to decry the act's "prejudice, christocentrism, and wanton disregard for the . . . traditions of Canada's first peoples." The book thus includes short but cogent discussions of the repercussions of key events in Canadian history like the British North America Act of 1867, the building of the trans-Canada railway, and the 1925 founding of the United Church of Canada, on the development of religious studies in Canada.

Not surprisingly, Hughes ties much of the early history of higher education in Canada to the dogmatic teachings and attempts at control of various Christian denominations. As postsecondary education arose in the Canadian context, the issue of whether Christian belief, however defined, constituted a requirement for students to graduate or even matriculate, came up repeatedly, and influenced the way religion was conceptualized, taught (or not taught), and administered at these institutions. The author clearly depicts the teaching of religion at Canada's universities, far into the twentieth century, as centred on Christian theology. Other religious traditions were treated, if at all, as essentially inferior to Christianity. He also traces the evolution of different, less dogmatic views of Christianity and other religions to the increasing academic acceptance of the Higher Criticism of the Bible. He finds that the 1960s is the approximate turning point for the evolution of university teaching of religion in Canada from an articulation of Christian theology to an interpretation of the Christian tradition as one tradition among many. He astutely points out that

this development coincides with major changes in Canadian immigration policy that opened immigration to Canada beyond its traditional, essentially European sources, as well as the embrace by the Canadian government of a policy of multiculturalism. In connection with this process of change, the author also briefly notes the somewhat earlier creation of a Department of Judaic Studies at the University of Manitoba in 1950, and an Institute of Islamic Studies at McGill University in 1952.

Hughes is interested in presenting a broad, institutional picture of the development of the study of religion in Canada, expecting that others interested in the academic study of religion will find the Canadian example to be both relevant and interesting. He is less interested in the details of the development of the many individual departments and programs. This almost inevitably leads to some small inaccuracies in his exposition. Thus, he claims that it was the University of British Columbia in 1964 that founded the first secular Department of Religion “not created out of previous theological iterations.” However, the UBC department was preceded in this by the Department of Religion at Sir George Williams University (later Concordia University) in Montreal in 1959. The author also does not go into as much detail with respect to developments in the academic study of religion in francophone Quebec as he had originally envisaged.

This reviewer hopes and expects that the publication of this volume will encourage others interested in this area to delve into the academic politics, personalities, and issues that underlie some of the areas Hughes does not treat in detail, for example, the development of Judaic studies and of the teaching of Asian religions in Canada. The book should also spur creative contemplation of the social and political background of trends in teaching and research within the academy. This would constitute an ideal response to a most stimulating book.

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