

He shoots, he misses again, but what about our goalie . . . : A response

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journals.sagepub.com/home/sr**Aaron W Hughes** 

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Abstract: This article provides a response to the previous set of papers that have engaged my *From Seminary to University: An Institutional History of the Study of Religion in Canada* (University of Toronto Press, 2020).

Résumé : Cet article constitue une réponse à la série d'articles précédents qui ont fait appel à mon ouvrage *From Seminary to University: An Institutional History of the Study of Religion in Canada* (University of Toronto Press, 2020).

Keywords

Canadian history, history, institutionalization, study of religion

Mots clés

Histoire canadienne, histoire, institutionnalisation, étude de la religion

Before I address the thoughtful responses to my *From Seminary to University: An Institutional History of the Study of Religion in Canada*, I would first like to offer my gratitude to Paul Bramadat for putting this little symposium together, and, following that, give my thanks to the contributors for reading the book and offering kind and constructive words about it. The comments of Rebekka King, William S Morrow, Géraldine Mossière, Jennifer A Selby, David Seljak, K Merinda Simmons, and Teemu Taira have allowed me to formulate the following thoughts as a way, I hope collectively, to move

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the project forward and, at the same time, reflect on areas that I had left out, whether by design, oversight, or some combination thereof.

As I was reading the responses, I thought of the time when I was, at least in my own imagination, a rising star center in pee-wee hockey, a little Darryl Sittler (though, of course, today and as a perennial fan of the Edmonton Oilers, I would say Connor McDavid) in the making. This, despite coach Jay's rather regular protestations, that I didn't score enough goals, to which I would effortlessly respond "well, what about Jamie, our goalie, he lets in too many, that's why we keep losing." I realized only later, much later, that whataboutism is a logical fallacy that works on a specious argument. At the time, however, all that was lost on me.

There are two overarching concerns in the book. The first is, quite simply, that we should care! Canadian history—of the religious or any other variety—is important and interesting, and is deserving of our attention. I think that perhaps Rebekka King understands this the most clearly among the respondents because, like me, she also occupies intellectual space "down here," while also having a foot in things "up there." As someone who has spent the last decade in the United States, I can reliably say that there is virtually no part of the US that has not been raked over by scholarly analysis. We witness the examination, natural or forced, of religious themes and undertones in dead presidents. In movies. In food. In Oprah. In embroidery. And so on and so forth. Virtually every department of religious studies is comprised primarily of Americanists, with the rest being "the Buddhist person," "the Hindu person," "the Muslim person," and "the Jewish person." This is the opposite of the situation in Canada, where many departments—at least historically—have had very few people working specifically on the generically-named rubric "religion in Canada" or "Canadian religious history." But we should. Certainly not to the extent that is found in the US, but there is much of interest in Canadian history and how it, among other things, intersects with the academy in general and the academic study of religion in particular.

The second overarching point, and one that is intimately connected to the previous one, is that knowledge is not natural: it does not drop from the sky, waiting for us to pick up its pieces and try to put them, humpty-dumpy like, back together again. On the contrary, institutional-disciplinary history really ought to matter more in terms both of what we do and how we analyze the world around us. Disciplines and fields construct their data, find their data, indeed make up their data because they have been conditioned to know what their data are. None of this is natural, as Simmons duly notes in her response. How this construction takes place comes from somewhere and we would do well to ascertain wherefrom. Some of my colleagues consider my concerns with such matters to be a form of "academic navel gazing," presumably because they work on the assumption that religion is just "out there," awaiting to be discovered and then studied, but I argue the opposite. And *From Seminary to University* is the practical application of this very theoretical point. In response to the charge of academic navel gazing (thankfully none of the respondents shares such an opinion), I can only say that all our narratives, terms, categories, and frames of reference emerge from the shadows, and we would do well to illumine them. Only by understanding these narratives and frames of reference—their genealogies, their investment in political, legal, intellectual, and

social contexts—is it possible to reflect on where we have been, where we currently are, and where we are heading collectively.

In this respect I wanted the book to function as a user guide for those in the Canadian academy, for those about to enter it, and especially for those who think that what happens in it is somehow unrelated to larger national (and even international) trends. As I said therein, and as I would like to repeat here: every country has an often idiosyncratic set of anxieties that structure – legally, socially, politically, and so on – issues about, for example, what gets to count as a religion, how religion is discussed in the public sphere, and ultimately what the appropriate institutional setting or settings are wherein religion should be taught, and, of course, to whom it should be taught. None of this is static, however; such contextualizations change and morph across time in response to developing conditions.

As the book seeks to chart new ground, I have tried to connect a number of issues that I have been thinking with and about over the past decade or so. There is absolutely no way that I could have done everything. It would benefit no one, to use one example, to provide an analysis of every single department in the country. This after all is what the state-of-the-art volumes were meant to do and what Coward (2014) also attempted. What good would it be to repeat what those others had done? My book tries to go deeper, much deeper, and connect the establishment of a field to a set of national and provincial narratives. Though there is an objection that I spend too much time on the University of Toronto—full disclosure: I have never attended that institution, and share the (non-Torontonian) Canadian “ambiguity” for that fair city—I had to. At that institution we see clearly, more than anywhere else, *the* fight that successfully separated the Anglican Church from higher education, something that was crucial to making the secular study of religion possible in other places (and was something, as I show, that was repeated at McGill, New Brunswick, and Queen’s, among others).

In like manner, several noted that the narrative is governed largely by an Anglophone narrative and that I ought to have spent more time on the situation in Francophone Canada. I agree, and I even point this out clearly and at length in my Introduction. It is not the case, as Selby suggests, that I muted, silenced, or otherwise omitted “part of the Canadian narrative.” If theory and method teach us anything, scholarship is always a matter of choice and selection. But it seems to me that the even greater theoretical move is to acknowledge such choice and selection up front instead of portraying such moves as somehow an outgrowth of the natural order. Within this context, I certainly made clear to the reader the choices and the selections that I made. As Géraldine Mossière, the only Francophone scholar among the responders, notes, though I include Quebec in my study, the unique position and history of the province in the Canadian landscape prevented me from delving deeply into the evolution of the academic study of religion in Quebec. To do that province justice would have doubled the size of the volume, and the result would be, invoking the title of Hugh MacLennan’s 1945 work, little more than a comparison of two solitudes.

The charge of ignoring Canada as a “settler colonial” nation is, on one hand, easier to respond to, yet, on the other, also much more difficult. In terms of the former, I could simply say that had I done so, it would have been a very different book, and certainly not the book that I wanted to write. I do subtitle the book, after all, as *an* institutional history not *the* institutional history. I certainly address the horrors of the residential school

system—though something I do much more fully (along with dealing with Quebec in more detail) in Hughes (2022)—and mention how such schools represented some of the earliest instances of “teaching religion” in the colony and subsequent country. I do not mention this to be nonchalant and certainly not “uncritically” as Selby implies. Indeed, I assume that the reader, both Canadian and non-Canadian, will understand what I mean without my having to present all of the unsavory details. In like manner, to talk about patriarchy in the academy in the 1970s and 1980s, which I do not doubt for a minute, would once again have produced a different book, one I did not intend to write. There are many things that I did not touch upon because they were not germane to the story I sought to tell and the story I was best equipped to narrate. I could also, for example, have included material on 9/11 and its role on the academic study of religion (particularly Islam). Or, then again, what about the role of LGBTIQ2S scholars and concerns in the study of religion in Canada? All I can say is that I hope that my book functions as a springboard for those to go deeper into such topics and in such a manner that they do not have to do the same heavy-lifting that I did here.

If the book were perfect, and it most certainly is not (what book is?), then there would no longer be any need to write on this subject, as everything would already be said and done. Instead, the work emerged from the points raised in the previous paragraphs in addition to my general dissatisfaction with the state-of-the-art overviews mentioned in several of the responses. I am thankful, for example, that Bill Morrow illumines the history of Queen’s, an institution he knows well, and that he can do so moreover using some of the parameters and structures that I invoked in the book is even better. My only wish is that others in other departments, with first-hand knowledge of some of the various institutional and personality issues involved in their formation, would take his lead. When Rebekka King jokes that I might encounter some disgruntled colleagues at a future event, asking why I did not mention them or their department, I might respond, tongue-in-cheek, “well I gave you the tools, so have at ‘er.”

But, more seriously, several noted that more work needs to be done on the societies that comprise the Canadian Corporation for the Study of Religion (CCSR). Let me add here, however, that many email queries that I sent to presidents and former presidents of some of these organizations went unanswered. One cannot write about such societies when such societies are unwilling to proffer the data required—and then have these societies complain why they were left out in the first place. This may be further proof, if any is needed, that most Canadian scholars of religion are not interested in the issues that I tried to raise in my book.

Perhaps, the most interesting response—coming as it does via Finland—is that offered by Teemu Taira, who, I think more than the others, understands the, for lack of a better term, “meta” issues that inform and structure the work because, as a Finn largely unfamiliar with the context of the book, he focuses on more theoretical issues in the academic study of religion. I appreciate how he argues that it aided in, what he calls, “defamiliarizing” the academic study of religion while simultaneously encouraging reflection upon religion as a nationalist project. That he takes some of the issues raised in *From Seminary to University* and then uses them to think about the study of religion in Finland (and the rest of Europe) is precisely what I had in mind when undertaking the research and

writing. More studies along these lines would help us to understand better the study of religion as grounded not in the modern nation state, but in modern nation states.

Finally, I might flag Rebekka King's point (one echoed in Morrow and Seljak) about the "ominous" title of the final chapter, "Floresence." It was indeed meant to be ominous because I do think the academic study of religion, both in Canada and abroad, is in a precarious situation at the current moment. Enrollments in courses are down, provincial funding for the arts post-COVID will inevitably be even worse than that in the pre-COVID era, and the dramatic decrease in members to the societies that comprise the CCSR is ongoing (see, e.g. Braun, forthcoming). Will we survive?

In sum, I am grateful for this opportunity to respond, albeit briefly, to the comments of my colleagues. Academic conversation and the advancement of knowledge is predicated on intellectual exchanges such as this. I leave it to others to take ideas in the book and develop them further.


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