



# Entangled Religions

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## Textbook Gods. Genre, Text and Teaching Religious Studies

Sheffield/Bristol: Equinox, 2014.

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BENGT-OVE ANDREASSEN & JAMES R. LEWIS (EDS.)

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This volume deals with textbooks and their textual, visual and cartographic representations of religion and religions in various national and institutional contexts. With its focus on textbooks as a medium of school education not limited to primary and secondary schools it contains a wide range of case studies treating Norway, England, Switzerland, Japan, but also Quebec, Denmark and Australia. Such a global perspective seems quite illuminating due to the fact that textbooks—or the making of schoolbook contents respectively—are subject to requirements and guidelines defined by various national educational systems, politics and publishers.

The legal or juridical context of textbook production is only one problem addressed by the editor Bengt-Ove Andreassen in his introduction, which outlines several theoretical, analytical and methodological issues. Textbooks are mainly understood as educational sources with a functional purpose and a defined target audience. They are powerful and authoritative because “[t]he educational text conveys ‘key knowledge’ from someone who knows to someone who does not know and is in search of or in need of this knowledge.” (p. 4) With respect to approaches of discourse analysis Andreassen raises questions about the discursive power and orders of

textbook representation, for example: “what is included and what is left out (and for what reason?)”? (p. 8) Along similar lines, we can read his observations on what one could label the ‘dominant time diagnosis and normative frame’ conveyed by textbooks (p. 9). But the volume is not limited to a discursive approach in a narrow sense. Andreassen recommends examining the genre as a whole, including aesthetics, illustrations, maps, the authority over definitory power regarding the essential traits of certain subjects, authors, institutions and politics. Furthermore, the unchallenged status of textbooks as representative and authoritative sources for a history of discourses about religion has to be scrutinized. To disentangle these various strands of educational Othering appears to be the main objective of Andreassen’s opening remarks.

One example of a mainly discursive approach is presented by Suzanne Anett Thorbo in her contribution on what she calls the cartographic “‘spatialization’ of religions” (p. 159) in Norwegian textbooks. While Thorbo expressly restricts herself to a “critical examination” instead of looking for “alternative knowledge or alternative ways of representing”, (p. 158) one might think of other paragraphs in this volume as potentially orientated towards the question of how to improve existing textbooks and their content:

If students are to learn to interpret what they see of religion in textbooks, then more attention needs to be given to the use of the photographs as evidence, but also as offering insight into and empathy for others’ beliefs and spirituality. Knowing the provenance of the visuals is important here, and this in turn might sharpen decisions about what is included and the context it is given. (p. 153)

With these words, Mary Hayward draws a conclusion in her contribution on “Visual Engagement: Textbooks and the Materiality of Religion” (pp. 134-156), in which she analyzes representations of Hinduism and Christianity in Religious Education school books. With regard to the so-called ‘material turn’ in the Study of Religions she is interested in the endeavors that have been undertaken to include aspects of materiality in the production of textbooks, even though she clearly deduces from her analysis of illustrations and photographs that “textbooks give no guidance to students in relation to interpreting these different kinds of visual materials.” (p. 152)

A similar observation in a different context is made by Katharina Frank in her discussion of educational material used for teaching the subject ‘Religionskunde’ in public schools in Switzerland:

Although the textbook [Sachbuch Religionen] provides much religious knowledge and is rich in visual material, it fails to provide any information about how to use this knowledge in a teaching situation. (p. 77)

What is apparently at stake here are things “that should matter to the authors of future books for religion education”. (p. 78)

Another example is the contribution by Jens-André P. Herbener. He presents a harsh critique of a school bible published some years ago by the Danish Bible Society (pp. 227, 238, 246-248):

...religious organizations typically lack the distance to present their sacred texts in a [...] critical, comprehensive and religio-historical way. [...] The point is that the school system should take care when using textbooks for which religious organizations are responsible. A critical, secular distance

is a necessity, and this cannot reasonably be required from religious organizations.

Against this background the discourse about textbook religion seems to be multi-layered and potentially normative in ensuring appropriate means and resources to define the manner and contents of educational instruction.

What is even more interesting from a discursive point of view is the observation made by Andreassen in his essay “On the Conceptualization of ‘Religion’ in Introductory Books for RE in Teacher Education in Norway” (pp. 177-197). These books “presuppose that every student has a longing for the Holy and that teaching religion in school should help students deal with this longing.” (p. 185)

Besides the obvious fact that this “religious” (p. 185) understanding of religion refers to phenomenological traditions of delineating religion it seems worth mentioning that a Study of Religions approach in sources analyzed by Andreassen appears as the Other of educational textbook religion:

It is descriptive-empirical, distant, intellectualized and limited as an approach to understand religions, and thus, according to the textbook authors, irrelevant for RE. This seems to be mainly because religious studies has no place for experience and emotions and does not take the student’s spiritual growth as a primary goal. (pp. 192-193)

In sum *Textbook Gods* provides a variety of insights into the complex discussion about representations of religions in educational contexts. Unrestricted geographically in its scope, this volume brings together

various country-specific facets<sup>1</sup> and does not exclude the textbook authors' point of view.

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1 For a typology of how textbooks are authorized in different countries see endnote 3 in the chapter on “Establishing Religion through Textbooks: Religions in Japan’s ‘Ethics’ Programme”, authored by Satoko Fujiwara (pp. 43-61).