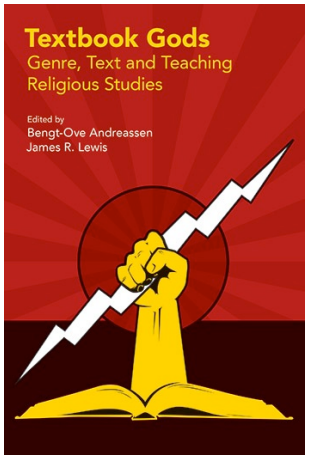


Textbook Gods: Genre, Text and Teaching Religious Studies

Andreassen, Bengt-Ove; and Lewis, James R., eds.
Equinox Publishing Ltd., 2014

Book Review

Tags: classroom teaching | pedagogical methods | textbooks

Reviewed by: Christopher M. Jones, *Augustana College*
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Textbook Gods is a collection of essays by predominantly European scholars of religion on the use of textbooks in primary, secondary, and post-secondary educational settings. Textbooks are understood to be books written primarily for classroom teaching that convey "key knowledge" within a given academic discipline (2). As such, textbooks generally present disciplinary knowledge as stable, firmly established, and definitive. The essays in this volume wrestle, first, with the problems of bias and essentialism in such authoritative, institutionally-sanctioned books. By extension, they also consider the impact of religious studies textbooks in reproducing knowledge of religion in the public sphere. Satoko Fujiwara argues in her essay, for instance, that the religion textbooks used in secular Japanese public schools prioritize world religions over ethnic religions and provide monothetic and essentializing accounts of these religions (for example, Christianity is love, Buddhism compassion, Islam obedience). Likewise, in their contributions James Lewis and Carole Cusack criticize textbooks for validating students' ethnocentric prejudices about sub-Saharan African religions and aboriginal Australian religions. In a somewhat different vein, Bengt-Ove Andreassen critiques the way that introductory Norwegian textbooks present "religion" as a positive, universal phenomenon that is necessary for human fulfillment and flourishing.

Other essays have a more methodological focus, discussing the ways that scholars of religion can assess religion textbooks, both as teaching resources and as indices of the status of scholarship on religion. Katharina Frank outlines a theoretically-informed methodology for assessing the ways that a new Swiss world religions textbook frames the phenomenon of religion. Mary Hayward surveys the use of visual aids in four textbooks that are used in England's secondary school religious education courses, tabulating types of images and their

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relation to the text. She calls for a stronger interrelation between text and image because the privileging of text mirrors the privileging of the intellectual over the material in the study of religion.

The essays in this volume are generally of good quality: they are well written, they fully contextualize the textbooks that they discuss, and they engage contemporary debates in the scholarship of religion (for example, on the public role of religion in secularizing societies; on the utility of "religion" as an analytical category). This volume should not be seen as an aid for teachers of religion who are considering which textbooks to use in their classes. Though the essays in it discuss many different textbooks at length, the primary topic is not their specific merits and demerits, but rather the role of textbooks as a genre in the production of public knowledge of religion. I would strongly recommend this book for experienced scholar-teachers who are reconsidering how they use textbooks, or even if they should use textbooks at all. The range of materials covered by the essays, and the diversity of opinions they present, make *Textbook Gods* a valuable resource.

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