

Textbook Gods: Genre, Text and Teaching Religious Studies, edited by Bengt-Ove Andreassen and James R. Lewis. Equinox, 2014. 271 pp. Hb., \$108.45 CDN. ISBN-13: 978-1-78-179054-0.

Reviewed by Edgar Schmidt, Concordia University of Edmonton,
edgar.schmidt@concordia.ab.ca

Textbooks are essential instructional tools for teachers. They are relied upon as resources for authoritative information on particular topics, for spring boards into class discussions, and in some cases foils for addressing controversial issues. Much has been written about the role of the teacher and effective pedagogical practices and what good instruction looks like. Textbooks play a powerful role in the formulation of instructional topics and activities. Textbooks often come with additional teacher support materials and suggestions for instruction; however, they are largely unexamined in the context of religious education.

Andreassen and Lewis bring the examination of textbooks in the field of religious education (RE) to the forefront. The volume is an edited collection of perspectives from international religious educators and scholars. The book is made up of twelve chapters and the authors present their research about religious education from primary to post-secondary education. Each contributor addresses RE in relation to the use of textbooks in his or her particular national and educational context.

The authors of each chapter highlight unique strengths and weaknesses of the textbooks they examine. The authors provide general positive comments about many of the textbooks, acknowledging aspects of scholarship, historical facts, visual materials selected, and suggested student activities. The volume is, however, a critical examination of textbooks and a number of common concerns emerge. Questions related to what is seen and not seen in a textbook, along with what is focused upon and what is missed are powerful analytical questions. Space does not allow an examination of all issues raised, but I will address four key areas.

A common criticism of religious education textbooks is the tendency to over-simplify and essentialize specific religious belief systems. At times world religions are reduced to single word values or descriptors such as compassion for Buddhism, love for Christianity, obedience for Islam, law for Judaism. The opportunity to delve into rich complexities and contradictions within and among religions can be lost when textbooks oversimplify or essentialize key topics. In addition, some religious beliefs and practices are privileged in relation to others, for example Christianity is the lens through which other religions are considered; or small and influential sects are not identified at all in the study of Islam. Over-sim-

plification, essentialist statements, and subtle emphasis or exclusion of important features serve to make textbooks much more active in shaping students beliefs beyond the stated purposes of such authoritative sources of information within RE classrooms.

The political nature of textbooks is also raised. Curricular topics and outcomes are often state approved. Outcomes are tested either at the exit of programs or for entrance into higher level study. The state identified outcomes serve to structure topics, activities, and the overall focus for textbook publishers. Since publishers must also produce profitable books, ensuring that they are aligned with state outcomes is necessary. This can serve to distort aspects of religious values, beliefs and practices, as more expansive, comprehensive or controversial topics tend not to be examined.

The selection of art, photographs and maps can be problematic within the textbook. The intent of visual material is to illuminate and support the concepts presented. At times, the visual material does not align with the text or the concepts or they may not be relevant at all. Maps of religious growth and change over time may appear to overstate or understate the regional aspects of religion. Such maps can misrepresent known differences among sects of the same religion. The semiotic analysis of photographs in sets of RE texts is insightful and highlights the power visual materials have in supporting and, in some instances, contradicting the text messages.

The topic of indigenous religions is addressed in highly variable ways. At times, indigenous religions, regardless of their location, are identified as “simple” religions that have not evolved to the complexity of world religions. The so called “evolution of religion” groups indigenous religions and religious practices as primitive, ancient, or early, implying that theistic and some eastern religions are more highly evolved. Another risk is that indigenous religions may become associated with nations or regions, which could be seen as being less civilized than others.

Finally, the role of teachers and the knowledge and skill of RE teachers is raised. Teacher education is not the central theme of the book, yet in almost every chapter, teacher roles are touched upon. Teachers are called upon to be RE experts, whether as content experts, willing to address sensitive or controversial issues; or as pedagogical experts who lead their students through personal discovery as they “learn from” religions. The demands on teachers (time, knowledge and skill) in a school setting are very high. Some expectations of teachers are not attainable without more extensive education or professional learning opportunities. The challenge, of course, is that the demands of expertise in relation to other subjects are extensive as well.

This volume offers thoughtful and extensive consideration for the use of textbooks in RE classes. The international contributors show that the challenge of RE textbooks is global in nature. An outcome of this book is that it inadvertently places greater pressure on RE teachers to be knowledgeable of the potential effect textbooks have on students and to ameliorate the most negative impacts (over-simplification, essentialism, privileging of one religion over another, etc.). Another outcome is to challenge policy makers to ensure that textbook publishers work harder at balancing content and suggested student activities to reduce negative effects.

Textbooks must be scrutinized for their power in learning environments. The authors of this book provide insight into the ways in which textbooks are useful and helpful to students and teachers. The writers also point to the weaknesses and dangers they can present. Useful methods of analysis are presented, giving RE teachers and university instructors tools for critically examining the textbooks they choose and how they choose to use them.