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## Religion

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### Textbooks in the study of religion\': introducing a new feature series

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## Editorial

# Textbooks in the study of religion\': introducing a new feature series<sup>1</sup>

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Michael Stausberg\* and Steven Engler

Monographs and, increasingly, articles in peer-reviewed journals such as *Religion* are the preferred genre of writing up research and advancing scholarship in our discipline. Further genres of scholarly publication include edited volumes on a variety of topics (often based on conferences), reference works such as lexica and encyclopedias, and multi-author field guides such as companions or handbooks (see McCutcheon 2007 and Engler 2008 for review essays).<sup>2</sup> While these rank as high-prestige ventures, this is generally not the case with another important genre of academic writing, the textbook. Textbooks are often regarded as not really worthy of the attention of serious research scholars. Yet we will argue that textbooks are important for the discipline.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a textbook as a 'book used as a standard work for the study of a particular subject; now usually one written specially for this purpose.' The two words 'study' and 'standard' point toward the distinctive goals of textbooks: they are pedagogically oriented and, as such, they aim for a degree of completeness and consistency that implicitly offers a normative standard of what students at a given level *should* know about the area.

In the study of religion\'s one finds relatively few advanced textbooks as compared to other disciplines, such as economics, history, psychology, sociology, etc.<sup>3</sup> In our discipline, however, there is no sharp line between textbooks and introductory overviews. The latter provide basic information on a given topic (i.e., what the respective authors consider most relevant).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Following Stausberg (2010), we use 'religion\'s' to draw attention to the fact that the concepts of 'religion' and 'religions' carry many and contested assumptions along with them. The backslash is meant to be more jarring than parentheses or a forward slash, in order to highlight these constitutive issues in the discipline.

<sup>2</sup>See Johnston (1998) for an audacious summary bibliography of all reference works published in religious studies.

<sup>3</sup>There are, of course, many textbooks in the area of religious education in secondary schools (high school or A level), but these tend to be far more general overviews than is useful or appropriate in the post-secondary study of religion\'s.

<sup>4</sup>Some publishers have book series for that kind of titles (*A Very Short Introduction to ...*; *The Basics*; *For Dummies*; *A Guide for the Perplexed*; etc.).

Adopting a textbook, of course, does not guarantee a successful class. Good course books can be used badly, and sometimes even 'bad' ones can contribute to efficient learning, for example by stimulating independent critical discussion. Textbooks can never replace gifted teachers and talented students and their fruitful interaction, but they can facilitate the learning process. While textbooks set a path, they can also lead to points of friction, highlighting potential disagreement and opening up different and dissenting perspectives. Some teachers choose to teach without a textbook for various reasons: e.g., they disagree with the authors' views; they have their own ideas that they wish to pursue in a more creative manner; they feel that textbooks belong to primary or secondary schools and are not in tune with the spirit of the university; they consider textbooks unengaging for students; or they find that 'an authoritative single voice undermines the lively exchange of ideas' (Forbes 2009: 256).<sup>5</sup>

Textbooks (and to a lesser extent introductory volumes) are characterized by several features:

- They provide a ready-made package for instruction and learning, often aiming at providing a complete framework for a given course (e.g., textbooks for a Western Religions or an Anthropology of Religion course). In their attempt to provide full coverage of the topic some are more 'encyclopedia-like,' while others are more 'argument-like,' i.e., focusing on a string of questions to be probed and explored (Cloutier 2009).
- They are more explicitly pedagogical than most genres of academic writing. They aim at guiding teachers in their teaching and students in their learning.
- They have to be comprehensible to untrained or minimally trained readers, implying clarity in style and terminology and the use of pertinent examples. These features are typically highlighted by design and layout; they should be easy to navigate and easy to engage with.
- They should have a structure that leads readers progressively from the basics to greater complexity and more advanced levels of discussion.
- They often include didactic features such as illustrations and figures, chapter guides, term lists or glossaries, key points, checklists and exercises, questions for discussion and review, and additional resources (today mainly online).
- They aim to offer an accurate and reliable portrayal of up-to-date scholarship, preferably by engaging the international research landscape – as opposed to remaining parochial – while at the same time appearing relevant for the local context.
- They are the one specimen of academic literature where lack of originality in content seems permissible. At the same time, they have to be sufficiently distinctive from each other to compete on the market – and a good textbook is more difficult to write than many would think.

Several consequences follow from these characteristics of textbooks and introductory overviews. Textbooks manifest important national variation. Not least, certain sorts of courses are more common in some countries than others. For example, the Introduction to World Religions courses and textbooks that serve as a standard introduction to the discipline in North America are largely lacking in

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<sup>5</sup>In practice, of course, textbooks are often supplemented by other reading materials.

some other countries, e.g., Brazil and Germany. It is important to pay attention to this variation, and hence to textbooks published in different languages, in order to arrive at a more global understanding of the discipline.

In addition, textbooks are economic commodities. Publishers seek to commission and produce textbooks for the courses that are most commonly taught within a discipline. This same logic applies to all books, to all commodities, however textbooks are especially lucrative products, given the number of sales that follow from a single instructor's choice to use one for a given class. (Hence, they should be priced within the means of a majority of students.) Market pressures (to publish only texts that promise to sell well) contribute to privileging certain topic areas, and, hence, certain university courses, as the expected face of the discipline. The availability of course books may also facilitate the decision by instructors to offer new or different courses.

Textbooks are also – at least potentially – regulated commodities (Apple 1991, 7). In this light, it is worth recalling that the consolidation of the field of religious studies in the United States (and to a lesser extent in Canada) reflected two US Supreme Court decisions (*Engel v. Vitale* [1962] and *Abington School District v. Schempp* [1963]) (Engler 2006: 452–457). These decisions effectively prohibited the teaching of theology in publicly funded universities while asserting the value of religious studies. Delivering the opinion of the court in the *Schempp* case, Mr. Justice Clark wrote: 'It might well be said that one's education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion ...'<sup>6</sup> This precipitated a dramatic redesign of and innovation in curricula, leading directly to the viability and popularity of textbooks such as those by Ninian Smart.

Four additional points prompt us to take better account of textbooks and introductory overviews in this journal. First, teaching is an essential part of the disciplinary status of the study of religion's: a field that is not taught does not qualify as a discipline at all (see Engler and Stausberg 2011). In the spirit of the modern research university, research should be explicitly linked to teaching: research informs teaching and, on occasion, the process of teaching can generate insights that inform research. This cross-fertilization calls for critical attention to teaching tools such as textbooks. Second, when designing a new course beyond one's own area of specialization, the question often arises as to whether to adopt a textbook, and if so, which one to choose. Scholarly reviews written by experts will be helpful in this process. Third, introductory works and textbooks are not only useful for students. Given the increasing specialization and/or fragmentation of advanced scholarship, at some time or other most scholars will face the need to familiarize themselves with the state of the art in some field of work. For this kind of update, one can turn either to encyclopedias, to review articles, to field guides, or to introductory volumes/textbooks. Textbooks are at the interface between specialist knowledge traded in one (sub-) discipline or field and various recipients of this knowledge. Finally, textbooks implicitly frame academic (sub-)disciplines by including certain issues, themes, topics, and discourses and excluding others. This framing function involves an interplay between two factors. On the one hand, authors attempt to reflect current understandings of (sub-)disciplinary and discursive boundaries. On the other, because textbooks often serve as students' first

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<sup>6</sup><http://laws.findlaw.com/us/374/203.htm>

exposure to a certain subject area, they play a crucial role in shaping the understanding of these boundaries among new generations of scholars.

All the above points underline the fact that textbooks and introductory overviews play a central, not a minor, role in the constitution of academic disciplines. Yet because they are written to reflect rather than to advance research, textbooks are typically not reviewed in research journals. It is time for this to change.

Given the importance of textbooks for our discipline, starting with this issue *Religion* will publish an open-ended series of review articles on textbooks and/or introductory volumes. This issue carries four review essays, which were submitted and published online in 2012: psychology of religion (Michael Stausberg), Western Esotericism (Wouter J. Hanegraaff),<sup>7</sup> Judaism (Ira Robinson), and the Baha'i Faith (Denis MacEoin). The first two essays review literature in a variety of languages, while the latter two focus on works published in English. By reviewing introductory volumes/textbooks the essays also provide meta-introductions to selected fields of study and their specific problems and concerns.

We have no fixed questionnaire, so that the authors are free to construct their own narratives in their evaluation of the academic and didactic quality of the available works. All these review articles are subject to peer review. We have commissioned some further essays and hope to publish at least two per year. As editors, we are open to proposals for review essays of this type. While the journal will try to cover topics that are routinely taught in various programs (starting with introductions to the study of religion\`s and introductions to world religions), the series is also open to emerging topics (such as Western Esotericism), provided there is a minimal selection of at least three competing textbooks currently available on the market, not necessarily in English.

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<sup>7</sup>Wouter Hanegraaff's initial proposal to submit such a review article made us consider and develop the feature series formally launched in this issue.