In the academic study of religion and in research on Religion Education (or its didactics) one can see a growing interest in textbooks. An increased focus on textbooks in the study of religion can be attributed to a growing research interest in religion in the multicultural society and to questions of representation and power.

Over the last ten years, increasing numbers of researchers have turned to textbooks as sources when explaining developments, trends and even how and why authoritative perspectives or knowledge have been established. Just one example is the academic journal *Religion*, which launched a feature series in 2013 exploring the use of textbooks in the study of religions. The journal now regularly prints review essays on textbooks that have been influential or have drawn special attention within the study of religion.

This increased awareness of textbooks – for all levels of the educational system – has to do with a growing recognition of textbooks as producers of knowledge about religion/s. As societies in large parts of the world are now multicultural, the representation of religion as a whole and of individual religions in textbooks for public education (from primary schools to universities) is constantly being questioned. The primary question addresses the representation and subsequent communication of religions in textbooks. Are the texts embedded in a Christian-cultural thinking that compares all religions with Christianity, and which regards Christianity as “the norm” or “our” religion? Does the text deal with diversity within each religious tradition, or does it provide an essentialist focus on what is common for every Christian, Muslim or Buddhist, regardless of group or national context? Do textbook authors seek to present different religions “as they really are” by focusing on the positive side of religion and thus avoiding issues related to conflict and violence? A number of similar questions could be raised, for example examining how scholars within the academic study of religion, and Religion Education, work with textbook analysis. Based on this approach to textbooks, I argued in the introduction to *Textbook Gods* (which I edited together with James R. Lewis, UiT) that textbooks can be labelled as power texts. I will use this article to elaborate on that idea.

**TEXTBOOKS - EDUCATIONAL TEXTS**

Textbooks are thus not “just” educational texts, but products with academic and ideological, as well as educational, content. Textbooks are em-
bedded in multiple discourses. They are usually adapted to educational systems that are regulated through legislation and curricula and a textbook must be in accordance with these in order to be considered relevant. It must also be tailored to a particular stage of education. Research on textbooks within the study of religion is not necessarily interested in analysing or evaluating whether textbooks are suitable for their respective stages. That is an area more of interest to educational research. Textbooks are additionally embedded in the discourses prevalent in the academic discipline from which they obtain their scientific knowledge. Research within that discipline will most likely take a different approach to the textbook and will probably ask other questions. Regardless of the educational stage the textbook is designed for, research on textbooks in the study of religions will focus on how religions are presented and depicted in textbooks: How is religion portrayed and what of individual religions? What kind of representation is at play here? What values or perspectives does this particular representation reflect? What might be the reasons for this kind of representation?

Such questions might uncover major differences between textbooks. Even if they are written for the same age groups or school types, and based upon the same legislation and curriculum, the way religion and religions are presented might be very different. Textbooks are therefore sources of interest because they provide insight into how religion and religions are treated and presented in an educational context. This is relevant for the study of religion within the public sphere because textbooks might also influence how people think of religion in general and how they perceive specific religions or religious groups.

As educational texts, textbooks intend to carve out “the right” way, the authorised way, to understand a phenomenon such as religion, or to comprehend a specific religious group or how religions are related to each other. In doing this, a textbook is never completely neutral. The choices the authors make – even under pressure from the publishers or struggling to be in accordance with the curriculum – reflect their values.

**TEXTBOOKS AS POWER TEXTS**

In order to maintain relevance, textbooks must embody authority and this is manifested in the textbook’s orientation toward the future and its normativity: It has an educational purpose and the 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. This means that educational texts always strive to convey a particular idea and/or value. One component of all textbooks is thus an attempt to convince the reader that what it contains is correct. A goal for every textbook is to be so persuasive that readers will accept what is written as “key knowledge” and as a reflection of the truth. This is achieved not only by informative prose but also by the presentation of a case so authoritative and so convincing that it appears to be self-evident and can be taken for granted. Hence, I will argue, in being persuasive expressions of ideological positions and values, textbooks can also be characterised as power texts.
There are also several external factors creating and maintaining power in a text. A first obvious external factor is the institutional base that wields power through a text. Textbooks for universities, colleges or secondary education are of course provided with power by the authors themselves working at such institutions. The text’s credibility is increased if it is written by a specialist in the field, a scholar at the university, or an experienced teacher. Most textbooks have “bio-blurbs” about the author(s) which confirm and consolidate the institutional basis for the book by emphasising the authors’ competence and experience. In textbooks for higher education, the authors’ previous publications on different topics are usually highlighted. Combined with a mention of the authors’ years of experience in researching and teaching, the text is afforded extra credibility and legitimacy. The intention seems to be to assure readers that the author, working at that particular institution, with special competence and experience in a specific academic area, cannot be wrong. He or she must be trusted in these matters.

**CLOSING REMARKS**

An approach to textbooks that focuses on their representation and power might seem strange to teachers – or even to educational researchers. It is nevertheless appropriate to view textbooks from these perspectives to demonstrate that they are not necessarily as innocent as they might seem. Even if they are written with the best intentions, they still communicate certain values and ideas. Textbook authors are required to make choices, and these choices, such as what to omit, communicate something to the reader.

I believe the study of religion and Religion Education research needs to become more aware of the special genre to which the textbook belongs. In all academic research, regardless of discipline, one should offer methodological comments on the sources one has applied. This also relates to the question of methods for analysing textbooks, which is a recurrent challenge, regardless of the academic discipline to which one might belong.