Textbooks for Teaching the Anthropology of Religion: a Review

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This review essay about anthropology of religion key textbooks is part of a new initiative in *Religion* described by the editors (Stausberg and Engler 2013, 231) as an opportunity to assess the resources scholars find important for teaching or studying religion. Immediately, the question arises – what do they mean by ‘textbook’? They note that:

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.

Such books are important for the representation and reproduction of the discipline, but raise significant questions about what is to be regarded as ‘standard’ or complete, as well as the appropriate ways in which to design the pedagogy best suited as an introduction to a given subject area. In the anthropology of religion, for instance, much debate has revolved around whether to ask students to read entire ethnographies, or whether strategically selected extracts can convey the relevant parts of the text. Other significant challenges include the question of whether a single disciplinary ‘canon’ exists, and if so how it can convey differences among significant national traditions of research (American, British, French, etc.). Some teachers may rely wholly on their lecture notes and others’ ethnographies, while others may feel such reliance on individual competence risks not embedding sufficiently the sub-discipline in anything other than the teacher’s own bodies and those of the students. Further, when lecturers are designing a new anthropology of religion course, they are conscious that they are contributing to the birth, and life, of a sub-discipline through its recognition: unless a subject is taught, it is not recognised as a discipline. As Stausberg and Engler argue (2011, 131), ‘A discipline is a subject that is taught at universities and that is transmitted and inscribed pedagogically’ (citing Jean-Louis Fabiani).

In preparing this essay, we began by asking several colleagues from universities around the world what they would recommend as their key textbook for teaching the subject to undergraduates. The response was, uniformly, that they did not know of any one ‘textbook’, but rather that they relied on what they considered classic and contemporary works, usually supplemented by a short list of overviews or Readers. To consider further our selection, we also examined reading lists of anthropology of religion courses currently running at universities and, when the course was in a foreign language, asked colleagues in those countries what they relied upon. We discovered, again, that there was no one common textbook that could be considered core, or essential, to all of them. This finding resonated with what Stausberg and Engler (2013, 131) noted:

In the study of religions one finds relatively few advanced textbooks as compared to other disciplines, such as economics, history, psychology, sociology, etc. 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.)

The selection and assessment criteria for the books reviewed in this essay are therefore multi-sited from both a lecturer’s and a student’s perspective. Three main criteria guided what is obviously a very small selection. First, we chose books that we use in our own teaching or that had been recommended by others. Second, for final year Religious Studies students taking the Anthropology of Religion module at the University of Kent, Canterbury, Abby Day asked that they review books they had found useful as an introduction to the module. Finally, the books mentioned here take slightly different approaches to the subject from each other and thus permit some degree of comparison.

In the following we summarise the contents of the texts chosen, offer an evaluation of their appropriateness for teaching and learning at different levels and by different kinds of students (for example, Anthropology students studying religion, or Religious Studies students studying anthropology) and comment on common themes and differences that might matter for different educational purposes. The main qualitative criteria used are the extent to which the texts cover a good range of classic and contemporary cross-cultural concepts, topics and cases, and the degree to which each book succeeds in showing how the anthropology of religion is a distinctive sub-discipline. Students engaged in theology, sociology and religious studies, for example, often read works by anthropologists in the course of their study: Edward Burnett Tylor, Mary Douglas, Clifford Geertz, and Talal Asad are just a few examples. What is distinctive, we would argue, is the anthropological method of deconstructing the obvious (whether, for example, belief, pollution or secularism) combined with close, ethnographic attention to practice and processes as religion is lived. Courses tend to contain explicit or implicit comparisons among religions, but also across cultural and social situations. Therefore, a key question is not only, for instance, ‘What is Christianity?’, but also ‘Does Christianity in this context have similarities to Christianity as it is practised in other, very different contexts?’

**Michael Lambek**: *A Reader in the Anthropology of Religion*. (2008) 2nd edition. 696pp.

**Janice Boddy and Michael Lambek**: *A Companion to the Anthropology of Religion.* (2013) 584pp

Critics of Religious Studies have focused on the way the sometimes distant and abstract worlds of philosophy and theology obscure what is fascinating and important about lived religion. In particular, Vasquez (2010) described how university courses often frustrate students for being based on *a priori* assumptions about belief, gods and ‘the sacred’, divorced from everyday religious practice and complex issues such as globalization, transnationalism and hybrid identities. We would agree, and commend works in the anthropology of religion specifically for providing that ‘lived’ focus. Understanding the world from the informant’s perspective is the ethnographic goal, and is therefore at the heart of the sub-discipline of the anthropology of religion. Michael Lambek writes in the Introduction to his Reader that an anthropological perspective is different from a theological or otherwise distanciated perspective in that it attempts to grasp a religion’s understanding of the world and its actors.

Lambek’s *Reader* provides an overview that is helpful to those without a prior knowledge of anthropology. It is therefore appropriate for students located outside the discipline, although teachers will need to work more closely with those students who may discover unfamiliar words or turns of phrase. He introduces the book as a way to trace broad connections within the anthropology of religion as a ‘live tradition of intellectual inquiry’ (2008, 2). Any Reader is, by its nature, selective, but the 46 authors he includes cover wide historical, theoretical, geographical and empirical ground, ranging temporally from the 19th century to the present day. He does not suggest that the authors provide a systematic history of the anthropology of religion, but rather that they have made significant contributions that have passed the test of time and created important interventions in the progression of anthropological thinking. He views the disciplinary tradition to be one essentially of dialogue rather than prescription, and has therefore organised the book according to certain emphases rather than categories and topics. Ways of making (poiesis) and doing (praxis) form sections, rather than more reified categories such as ‘prayer’ or ‘spirits’. His engaging introduction reveals an agonised process of choosing, where he apologises for inevitable omissions and slights, and concludes that the best he can offer is an invitation to readers to follow the extracts to the unabridged originals or to an author’s other works.

The book is immediately notable for its organisational style and evocative section headings: The Context of Understanding and Debate; Poiesis: The Composition of Religious Worlds; Praxis: Religious Action; Historical Dynamics: Power, Modernity, and Change; and Research Tools. Each section is further sub-divided into three sub-sections, with each of the latter containing up to seven extracts preceded by a short explanatory commentary of between 500 and 1500 words. The commentaries not only summarise the content but also assess its impact and connections to others’ works both within and outside the volume. In sum, the 18-page introduction, 46 extracts with commentary, substantial conclusion, guide to the literature (organized by region and topic) and full bibliography represent an extraordinary undertaking, blurring the line between textbook and Reader. In this sense, the book requires more active engagement from the student than a monograph providing summaries and discussion of research through the voice of a single author. Day’s Religious Studies students drew attention to the value of the bibliographic information that allowed them easily to access the unabridged versions. The index is also generous, with copious detail by key words, sub-categories and authors.

While the same students tended to agree that the structures and commentaries by Lambek helped guide them through what, to a beginner, might seem to be a complex and confusing discipline, not even he could help them muddle through some of the dense writing styles of the authors themselves. Those students who are reading the book alongside other anthropological texts as part of an anthropology course may have attuned their ear more finely to the style. In hindsight, perhaps Lambek could have offered additional guidance on the varieties of anthropological terminology and syntax.

Janice Boddy and Michael Lambek have more recently produced a ‘Companion’ to the anthropology of religion. This also has a pedagogical purpose but contains 28 original essays rather than extracts and detailed overviews found in Lambek’s *Reader*. His lead chapter does a similar job of orienting the reader, by contextualising religion and its place in anthropology, and vice versa. Section headings again form an argument in themselves, and include ‘Worlds and Intersections’, ‘Epistemologies’, ‘Time and Ethics’, ‘Practices and Mediations’, ‘Languages and Conversions’, ‘Persons and Histories’, and ‘Powers’. The articles tend to reflect the research interests of individual authors, and therefore to provide a snapshot of the contemporary state of the sub-discipline, while challenging rather than merely reinforcing understandings of what religion is and where it can be found. For its scope and detail we think it will find a place on many courses, particularly at more advanced levels. Read alongside Lambek’s *Reader* it could ease the non-specialist into contemporary and complex debates. Its essays offer ethnographically-informed, internationally broad analyses of some of the most current and pertinent themes within the discipline, from new media to urban sacralities.

**Fiona Bowie** *The Anthropology of Religion* (2006) 2nd edition. 332pp.

Fiona Bowie calls attention throughout her single-authored text to the problem of women’s muted voices in anthropology, a discipline that has too often foregrounded the experience of men in works written by men.( Lambek’s volume holds up well in light of her critique of the discipline.) Bowie positions her book as accessible not only to anthropologists but also to people from other disciplines. She describes it as an introductory text for undergraduates or anyone else who wants to know about the anthropology of religion.

Bowie structures her book to provide 10 thematic overviews of what she deemed were important topics, drawn together initially as she designed her first anthropology of religion course: Theories and Controversies; The Body as Symbol; Maintaining and Transforming Boundaries: the Politics of Religious Identity; Sex, Gender and the Sacred; Religion, Culture and Environment; Ritual Theory, Rites of Passage and Ritual Violence; Shamanism; Witchcraft and the Evil Eye; Pilgrimage; Myth. She explains that her choice of topics was driven by a desire to incorporate links between the founding figures or ‘ancestors’ of modern anthropology, and contemporary ideas and practices. She then provides reflexive observations about her Christian upbringing and fieldwork in Africa, and describes how she chose to focus on themes and controversies that affect most religions, rather than limiting her approach to descriptions of and comparison with different religions.

Bowie introduces and maintains a strong emphasis on women in religion and it is this that makes her work truly distinctive. What she rightly points to is not only the fact that women’s experiences are neglected in the study of religion, but also that an anthropological understanding of religion is skewed towards a specific understanding based on the viewpoint and practices of the people who have largely been the voices: men. Women have been excluded from public spheres and sites of representation. As she says, ‘Women were never absent from the ethnographic record, but their lives were filtered through and interpreted by men. The devaluation of women in Western cultures and an empirical bias toward the study of structures and institutions meant that women were considered less important than men as informants’ (2006, 84).

Her attention to women is not simply noted in a single chapter—although she treats it extensively in Chapter 4: ‘Sex, Gender, and the Sacred’—but rather interwoven throughout the book. That strategy helps to correct gender imbalances. For example, she provides a lengthy overview of rites of passage, via Arnold Van Gennep and Victor Turner, and then turns to the often-neglected accounts of women’s initiation rites.

The book is written as an introductory text, where explanatory passages are broken up by boxes summarising key terms and the biographical details of anthropologists. Each chapter includes further notes and an extensive bibliography. Arranging the bibliography in this way is particularly helpful to students needing to explore specific themes in more depth. The appendix of Film and Video Resources provides an excellent supplement for both teaching and personal learning. The index covers key words, authors and themes, corresponding well to the main text. Perhaps the book’s only weakness is the idiosyncratic arrangement of chapters and themes, making it difficult at times for students new to the discipline to feel confident that they have received a sufficient ‘overview’.

**Brian Morris** *Religion and Anthropology, a Critical Introduction* (2006) 350pp.

Morris confronts the lack of textbooks in the Anthropology of Religion. Such potential textbooks are, he says (2006, ix) scorned by ‘elitist Oxbridge scholars’ who had rebuked Morris for teaching anthropology as an undergraduate course at Goldsmiths, that edgy fringe of the University of London. According to Morris, the stuffy dons claimed that the subject was suitable only for postgraduates. He further observes (ibid.) that ‘anthropology is the only university discipline that is not part of the school curriculum, even though Britain is a multicultural society’ (though, we note, in recent years an A-level has finally been instituted, after much effort on the part of the Royal Anthropological Institute and others, even if it is now under threat).

And so, ‘Unlike some pretentious academics, ensconced in some elite university, I have always found introductory texts extremely useful as teaching aids, in the same way as travel guides are useful in exploring the landscape’ (ibid.). Morris had another agenda besides the desire to provide a map, however. He wanted a map with a text people could read, unlike articles in academic journals ‘where obscurantist, neo-Baroque jargon is often a cover for sociological platitudes’ (ibid.). He explains that he hoped that the book was not only informative but also accessible to readers, be they new students on access courses, established anthropologists, students of general social science or anyone interested in comparative religion.

In the book’s Introduction, Morris continues to criticise other anthropologists for what he describes as postmodern anthropology and takes a tough line on phenomenology. Morris’ own anthropological work focused on hunter-gatherer peoples of southern Africa and on animals and insects. Interestingly, he quotes James Beckford, an eminent sociologist, to describe the ‘sociological’ approach as studying ‘the processes whereby religion, in all its variety and complexity, is interwoven with other social phenomena’ (Beckford 1986, ix). We would not disagree with Beckford, but it is unclear about why Morris would choose a sociologist to make a well-known anthropological point, unless he is conflating ‘social scientific’ and ‘sociology’.

His book is structured into eight sections, each divided further into sub-sections: Shamanism, Buddhism and Spirit Cults; Islam and Popular Religion; Hinduism and New Religious Movements; Christianity and Religion in Africa; African-American Religions; Religions in Melanesia: Neopaganisms and the New Age Movement. His approach in each section is to discuss relevant themes by reference to specific religions and ethnographies, describing them in detail and sustaining a critical evaluation throughout. Morris sees ethnographies as substantive studies in their own right, offering not just description but also interpretation of cultural phenomena, leading to analysis and theory.

In the body of the text Morris largely, and not before time, dispenses with the muscular, combative tone he launched against postmodern anthropology in the Introduction, instead offering readers concise summaries, evaluation and comparisons to other studies. He usually distinguishes carefully between what an ethnographer describes and argues, and how he himself judges such work. The book is accessible and generally informative, although its rehearsals of disciplinary in-fighting may irk students coming to the discipline for the first time. Its index is adequate, but lacking some key words that normally appear in such works, like ‘belief’, and erring towards the author’s personal interests. Shamanism, for example, has eight sub-categories, Rastafari six and Christianity none.

**James S. Bielo**, *Anthropology of Religion: the Basics* (2015) 176 pp.

James S. Bielo's *Anthropology of Religion: the Basics*

This text is part of the Routledge 'Basic' series texts that are oriented to readers new to a discipline or topic. Bielo opens with an engaging introduction in which he explains his own inadvertent introduction to the theme. It began with a university option course in Anthropology of Religion that showed him an 'excellent way to understand not only particular religions, but also to understand something basic about the human condition’ (Bielo, 2015 xi).Acquiring such an understanding is not a straightforward matter as it comes with certain 'basic' challenges. Identifying and elaborating those challenges become the organizing principle of the book.  
  
 The text is structured around six key themes: What is religion?; Doing Religious Ethnography; Bodies, Words and Things; In Time, in Place; Who Do you trust?; Going Global. Within each chapter, Bielo places text boxes inviting students and instructors to pose certain questions and do suggested activities. Chapters also contain case studies to locate the concepts and questions in real examples. The effect is similar to other texts whereby readers are given helpful key points, questions, and empirical illustrations.  
  
 Bielo's text provide a contemporary and generous acknowledgement that ethnography is not the exclusive preserve of anthropology, explicitly and frequently addressing scholars in religious studies and the sociology of religion. He succinctly describes ethnography as 'being there, wherever there is’ (Bielo 2015, 31). Bielo helpfully explores how religious ethnography poses distinctive issues. He asks:

How do we manage the intense relationships we forge through fieldwork alongside our scholarly research goals? What does it mean to do participant observation, a hallmark of ethnography, in religious settings where the stakes of participation can be especially high? What, if anything, is compromised or gained when a researcher finds personal value in the religion that they are in the field to learn about? What is the proper place,if any place at all, for notions like "objectivity" or "bias" in doing religious ethnography?' (Bielo 2015, 30).   
  
 What makes the text particularly helpful and interesting is Bielo's theoretical contribution. For example, he begins with an insight that should help students of the anthropology of religion to appreciate one of the strengths of the discipline-- engaged deconstruction. Rather than re-state the well-rehearsed claim that all definitions are provisional and situated, Bielo invites the reader to locate the orientation of the person doing the defining:‘We begin with definitions because how a scholar defines religions reveals important insights about their basic assumptions and commitments in the study of religion. In short, definitions are clues to theoretical orientation’ (Bielo 2015, 2).’ He not only lists and summarizes nine definitions but also analyzes them to illustrate how each is rooted in a particular set of assumptions and priorities. Further sections illustrate how he puts theory into practice. For example, by analysing scholars who theorise about how religious worlds are made, he concludes that 'All religious worlds plot their adherence on the two horizons of time and place' (Bielo 2015, 83). While many anthropologists may rankle at the universalizing sense implied in 'all' that he uses here and elsewhere in the book, he makes a good case and writes his chapter accordingly.  
 Some people may not like his folksy, informal writing style but it is probably suitable for the undergraduate reader at whom the book is targeted.It also conveys something often lacking in academic books – a palatable passion for the subject.

**Robert L. Winzeler** *Anthropology and Religion: What We Know, Think, and Question* (2012) 323pp

Robert L. Winzeler, an anthropologist of South-East Asia, has written his book specifically aimed at upper-level students. And yet, the tone and language provides an accessible text that could usefully be read along-side Lambek’s *Reader* as an introduction.

It is not often that reading a book’s index is such an enlightening exercise, showing how the text is rooted in both classic and contemporary theories woven together with authorial judgment. Robert L. Winzeler’s index to *Anthropology and Religion* includes conversational asides and parenthetic insights:

* Robin Hood (as hero), 112–113, 114.
* Sacred, as a defining characteristic of religion for some theorists, 5, 9–10.
* Belief, ‘religion conceived in West as a matter of, 21–22’.

And, unusually for a book written by an anthropologist, ‘belief’ is in the index as a topic worthy of attention, including the insightful entry ‘religion conceived in West as a matter of,’

The occasionally chatty tone of the index is one of the many qualities of this book that marks it, like Bielo’s, as either inclusive and friendly, or slightly intrusive. As the sub-title promises, it is about anthropology *and* (not *of*) religion, ‘what we know, think and question’. The inclusion of ‘us’ and his universal ‘we’ is a little disconcerting: surely anthropologists vary in what they know, think or question?

The first question he poses is whether or not religion is a useful term for anthropologists to use when so many societies do not have such a word. He opens that particular query by comparing ‘religion’ to other words for which many societies also have no terms, such as art, economy, or environment. He argues, however, that religion is a human universal, although the range of religious intensity across societies varies from deep to superficial. He points to Tylor’s original definition of religion as ‘the belief in spiritual beings’ as often too minimal to be useful. Of course, this observation introduces the thorny problem again of ‘belief’[[1]](#footnote-1). Winzeler argues that, while other-worldly presences may be, in many societies, taken for granted rather than believed in, it is not easy to do without the notion of belief that usefully conveys the idea that people hold certain assumptions about the nature of reality.

He concludes that particular part of the discussion by saying that the majority of anthropologists, including himself, accept a Tylorian orientation to religion that includes a supernatural referent. Winzeler helpfully reminds the reader that terms of natural and supernatural only exist in relation to one another, which raises the question of whether all people acknowledge this distinction. Anthropologists have concluded, he says, that people in all the societies they study do recognise such a distinction—between, say, a ghost and a living person—but have differing interpretations of what it implies. He turns then to Durkheim, who broke away from the Tylorian definition based on a supernatural belief by arguing that religion was more than the idea of gods or spirits, and therefore could not be defined exclusively in relation to them. Durkheim, and the anthropologists who followed him, preferred to consider different domains of a sacred/profane distinction rather than natural/supernatural. Importantly, as Winzeler stresses, this did not mean that the two domains were perfectly complementary: societies may conceive something as sacred but not supernatural, such as a national flag. He continues briefly to trace the Durkheimian legacy through anthropology, mainly through Geertz and Douglas, to demonstrate the focus on collective representations (religion) rather than individual practices (magic). The example above is just one of the many ways that Winzeler helpfully takes readers through a reflexive account of what people may believe, situating the anthropologist as part of the discussion and interpretation.

Winzeler says the structure and contents of his book were chosen because they conformed to a single criterion: the nature of central beliefs. He indicates that anthropology’s traditional preoccupation with small-scale indigenous societies began to shift after the Second World War to include ‘world religions’, even in Western societies. His opening chapter—‘Religion Here and There: Western Notions in Contemporary Practice’—is in itself worth assigning to students who often arrive at the subject with a lack of awareness of their own ethnocentricity. It provides a helpful guide to some of the embedded notions about religion that students are likely to confront, sometimes only implicitly. We would agree that the notion that religion is largely a matter of faith or belief needs unpacking, although his main source on that point, Lord Raglan, was unknown to us as a significant figure in this area. Raglan was a twentieth-century independent anthropologist active in Welsh archaeology, and a former President of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain. And yet, the sources more familiar to us on that topic were not cited. This is an important point to help locate Winzeler’s work as drawing from, and probably directed towards, an American school of anthropology or perhaps one that shares both Raglan’s and Winzeler’s interest in archaeology.

Winzeler’s other arguments about misconceptions concerning religion are interesting and useful for students to consider. For example, it is a misconception that one can only have one religious identity at a time; such complexities that arise often produce more valuable descriptive terms, such as ‘Japanese religion’ rather than ‘Buddhism’, for example. It is also not true, he says, that religion is always conceived as a separate realm of life in small-scale indigenous societies (but neither, we add, is it separate in some large-scale, modern societies such as Israel or Iran). Religion, he continues, is not necessarily associated with a special building, is not the basis of all morality and does not necessarily concern the transcendental rather than the practical. Here, he makes the useful point that although Westerners rely increasingly on other practices and forms of knowledge—the ‘space for practical religion in modern Western life has greatly narrowed’ (Winzeler 2011, 36)—there are important variations within highly ‘modern’ societies like the United States (and, we would add, the UK) with, for example, the rise of Pentecostal denominations.

The remainder of the book does a good, historically detailed, job of covering many important and familiar themes that all the texts reviewed here summarize as representative of the anthropology of religion. While it brings a large part of the record up to date with observations about religious change under socialism and capitalism, the date of its second-edition publication (2012) caused us to suppose that it would have been more thorough in exploring recent investigations and debates that have rocked the discipline. Other than a few sentences and a footnote, the author pays little attention to cognitive anthropology, nor to the move towards a more ethically-driven, engaged anthropology, nor to the impact of digital technologies and epistemologies. Absent also is commentary on the important and detailed debates within the American Anthropological Association of where the discipline bests fits—as a science, or a branch of humanities?

**Digital Anthropology of Religion**

Although this essay is principally concerned with textbooks, there are digital media emerging that can provide much of the same material and editorial overviews as the more conventional style of book reviewed here. The digitalisation of the humanities and social science is already having an impact on universities everywhere as researchers, teachers and students consider how people’s interactions with such technologies—from using smart phones to becoming implicated in the increased surveillance and securitisation affecting campuses—are affecting their lives.

The difference such a development may make to the concept of the ‘textbook’ is significant. As Heather Horst and Daniel Miller suggest (2013, 3): ‘The digital, as all material culture, is more than a substrate; it is becoming a constitutive part of what makes us human.’ In their Introduction to their collection *Digital Anthropology* they define the digital as anything that potentially can be reduced to the binary. The development of binary code simplified communication and opened up new possibilities. As more students turn increasingly to the domain with which they are most familiar—the digital—they will expect knowledge to be produced for and in that domain. That may affect the relationships they have with their texts and their teachers, which may not be a good or bad thing in itself. Horst and Miller argue (2013, 11–12) that digitalisation does not have the effect of reducing humans to something non-human or somehow less authentic than they were in the pre-digital era: ‘people are not one iota more mediated by the rise of digital technologies’.

As a consequence, professional organisations, universities and publishers are turning to more innovative ways of sharing and creating knowledge that influences the notion of ‘textbook’. For example, the American Anthropology Association has a wide range of online resources on its site: http://www.aaanet.org/resources/. Most of these link to other sites for which subscriptions are often necessary, though some are open access. The Royal Anthropological Institute web-site now contains a section dedicated to education (https://www.therai.org.uk/education).

Journal publishers increasingly offer enhanced sites with links to resources and forums. We have been recently involved in a project developed by Oxford University Press: Oxford Bibliographies Online (Day and Coleman 2013). This digital resource is structured by subject areas, including the Anthropology of Religion, with such topics as Mary Douglas, Evans Pritchard, Clifford Geertz, Magic, Missionization, Secularization and Witchcraft. As the site is still developing, the choice of topics is patchy rather than comprehensive: there is, after all, more to the anthropology of religion than that handful of names and themes, but each topic contains detailed commentaries by guest editors on selected sub-themes. Approximately 100 evaluative abstracts, linked to journal articles and books, are provided for each topic by the editors. In the case of Secularization, the topic was structured by General Overviews; Ethnographies; Historicizing Secularization; Secularization and Society; Challenges to the Secularization Thesis; Subjective Secularism; Gendering Secularization; The State and Religion; Secular Rituals and Practices; The Secular Observer; Ideology; Science and the Postsecular.

People engaged in the emerging sub-discipline of digital anthropology explore issues beyond how people use technology to explore how lives, relationships, communities, discourses and knowledges are enacted, embodied and shaped. This engagement will become increasingly important in the way knowledge—contained in ‘texts’—is created, accessed and shared.

**Conclusion**

The approach in this essay initially followed the model set by Ira Robinson (2013) who reviewed texts on Judaism in this journal by offering advice on the suitability of the texts for different purposes, ranging from texts that were best for a broad overview of Judaism, to those that were better for a contemporary focus. We find, in conclusion, that all the texts and resources we evaluated offered a broad overview of the discipline, perhaps even constituting the ‘canon’—religion is socially constructed in different ways by different people at different times, mostly acting to bind people together in cultural specific ways, and the best way to understand this is to study people ethnographcally. We would recommend any of them for any student. Different teachers may, however, decide to use them differently.

Lambek’s *Reader* is the most comprehensive and also, at times, the most challenging. It would therefore be a good choice for any course from the undergraduate to postgraduate if the teacher is prepared to spend the time working with, and perhaps against, some of the more difficult passages and sections that may be unfamiliar to, for example, a Religious Studies student. While Morris purports to offer a neutral overview without the obfuscation he dislikes in other works, his own aggressive opposition to them is itself a distraction, making his book more suitable for those at a stage where a critical overview rather than a first introduction is desired. Bowie’s and Bielo’s texts can sit alongside Lambek’s *Reader* to help students appreciate the lacunae of gender and to quickly grasp key terms and theories, particularly for those not yet familiar with anthropology. Winzeler, while agreeably broad and comprehensive, should also be read with Lambek to correct some of the former’s ethnocentrism. The digital resources are more up-to-date in terms of works published, and yet a reflection of current themes and even fashions is not necessarily the criterion everyone seeks in their teaching at all levels of the discipline. They should therefore, in our view, accompany standard ethnographies and a selection of broader texts such as those evaluated above in order to be contextualised.

Ultimately, of course, there is no substitute for original work and first-hand ethnographies and none of the above authors would argue otherwise. It is perhaps a counter-intuitive recommendation, but ours would be to use overviews, readers and companions lightly and selectively. Their best contribution is to provide overviews to act both as introductory and review guides. Teachers will vary in their styles and emphases and it is therefore unlikely that a single anthropology of religion textbook will emerge. Indeed, in a recent (January 8, 2014) conversation with Fiona Bowie, she said that she is working on a revised, third, edition of her book. During the editorial process, she contacted lecturers familiar with the book for their teaching purposes to determine what changes they would recommend. Although some suggested new material be added, particularly on the after-life and spirit possession, there was, she said, no agreement on how the existing material could be changed: everyone seemed to be using the book differently. Anthropologists of religion seem to be as diverse as their informants.

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1. For example, see Day 2013 [2011] for a discussion of belief’s ‘genealogy’ through sociology and anthropology and Lindquist and Coleman’s 2008 overview of its use as a concept to work against. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)