Reading Religion in Norwegian Textbooks: are individual religions ideas or people?

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Abstract

Different religions are treated in different ways in Norwegian sixth form textbooks. We carried out an exhaustive content analysis of the chapters devoted to individual religions in textbooks for the Religion and Ethics course currently available in Norway, using rigorous indicators to code each word, image and question according to whether they were treated the religion as a set of ideas or a group of people. After adjusting for trends in the different kinds of data (word, image, question), we found that Buddhism and Christianity receive significantly more attention for their ideas than Hinduism, Islam and Judaism, which are treated more as people. This difference cannot be explained by the national syllabus or the particularities of the individual religions. The asymmetry also has implications for the pupils' academic, moral and pedagogical agency for which teachers play a critical role in compensating.

Keywords: textbooks, religion as idea, religion as people, Norway, asymmetry

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Introduction

The debate as to what kinds of religious education contribute to social cohesion has been going on for some time. Recent studies have used the distinction between learning from and learning about religions as an empirical tool. One of the biggest textbook surveys of recent years registered entire textbooks as taking either a 'from' or 'about' approach (Jackson et al. 2010, 21). Rarely do we find studies of the distribution of these pedagogies amongst different religions.

In Norwegian political documents, the from/about dichotomy plays in a different key. Arguments supporting Religious Education in teacher training are demographic, whereas those supporting a greater portion of Christianity in the school syllabus are historical and existential. Two answers emerge to the question "what do pupils understand in successful Religious Education?" On the one hand, the object of knowledge is religions (demography, ritual, integration); on the other, the object is oneself and the world (identity, ethics, worldview, philosophy).

In this article, we ask whether individual religions are conceived differently as ideas or as people in textbooks. Naturally, there are in fact no idealess or peopleless religions, but propositions about religion can be divided into these two categories, which are different from but related to the 'from/about' distinction. Our pilot case is the three textbooks that cater to sixth form non-confessional religious education in Norwegian state schools (ages 17-19). In presenting our findings we will also initiate a discussion of their implications for teaching and equality.

Textbook Analysis

We are of course not alone in analysing religious studies textbooks or even these in particular (Thobro 2008; Vestøl 2014, 2016; Vestøl et al. 2016). The uniqueness of this study lies in our method rather than our results or starting point.

Firstly, many valuable and rigorous studies have evaluated materials available to schools. Some textbook research has tended to embrace a 'gotcha' approach, hunting for silly errors to be corrected by the vigilant scholar. Some has taken consideration of the integration of broad approaches with contextual and pedagogical factors through qualitative and quantitative analyses (Andreassen and Lewis 2014; Jackson et al. 2010). Both are doubtless valuable to teachers and the authors behind the thankless task of producing textbooks. The current study uses only descriptive analytical categories, independent of authorial intention or concern.

Secondly, most textbook research in religious education has been qualitative, supporting identified tendencies with quotation rather than statistic (Jackson et al. 2010, 27). We will

restrict quotations to the section on indicators, engaging with the texts as numbers of stores of words rather than literature, however painful that choice may be!

Thirdly, many recent textbook studies have been diachronic (Andreassen and Olsen 2015; Lewis 2014; Thobro 2008, 2014; Haakedal 2015; Härenstam 1993). Susanne Thobro in particular has identified watersheds in the treatment of religious cartography that are valuable contributions to the genealogy of religious orientalism. Our study is strictly synchronic: we have chosen exclusively the most updated editions available in 2017.

Finally, some studies compare the understanding of religion in textbooks with that of young readers (Vestøl et al. 2016; Vestøl 2014, 2016). Such studies are able to describe religion in the broader population. However systematic our investigation may be, it can not be taken to represent public understandings, but only material that itself is normative. How successfully normative it has been is beyond our present concern (Broberg 2017; Skeie 2016, 10f; Conroy et al. 2013, ch.6; Iversen 2012, 121).

What did we do? We exhaustively coded the words, questions and images into two binary categories using clearly demarcated indicators. Received wisdom suggests that quantitative approaches are appropriate when the field is familiar and categories well understood. Religious studies textbooks have been well researched, so it is perhaps time to move away from purely exploratory research techniques.

We coded the entire set of data rather than count keywords, giving us percentages rather than the more usual frequency data (Cornish, Carinci, and Noel 2012; Hawkins 2012; Zagumny and Richey 2012). Individual words were the formal unit of analysis, so each word in each chapter on an individual religion was categorised unambiguously, even where the code changed mid-sentence. This allowed us to compare the emphases given to individual religions.

Since we were not studying individual readers, but the texts themselves, we chose to develop a robust set of indicators for the two categories rather than recruit readers to code the data (Ceglie and Olivares 2012, 60; Jackson et al. 2010, 30). This unfortunately also means we have no reliability data. We made short exploratory readings of individual chapters in order to identify potential ambiguities and developed a code book on the basis of this. Then we used this single code book on the entire set of data (including re-reading the original chapters), in keeping with standard content analysis procedure (Krippendorff 2013; Neuendorf 2002). The element of interpretation is not eradicated, but our definitions are at least transparent.

The definition of which religions were under discussion was made purely on the basis of textual evidence: all the textbooks we studied contained individual chapters devoted exclusively to one religion at a time. Whatever we may think about that kind of categorisation, it is indisputably visible in our data.

In addition to the word count, we coded the questions and images. These heterogeneous data need to be interpreted differently, but they also tell us more. Questions are read differently and engage pupils in ways the main body of the text doesn't. The unit of analysis for the questions was also different: we counted individual questions (counting sub-questions as whole questions), including mid-chapter marginal questions as well as those found at the end of each chapter. In the very rare cases when questions involved both categories, they were coded as half a question in each category.

Images form impressions independently of class and textbook context (Hayward 2014, 156). For this reason we coded individual images in their own rights rather than as illustrations to the body text. To the extent that we ever considered accompanying text, this was done with a view to establishing the image's own identity rather than to define the learning content intended by the authors. This strict separation led to significant differences between the three types of data, although each of them were expressed as percentages of the entire body of words, questions and images respectively.

The Context

Our data consists of all the textbooks written in Norwegian for the sixth form non-confessional subject 'Religion and Ethics,' a compulsory part of the final year of the university preparation programme, except for the minority Sámi textbook (Kristiansen and Henriksen 2011) designed for use in the parallel course emphasising polar and indigenous religion.

Norwegian textbooks are not required to go through a state approval system so the power dynamics only reflect the open market (Apple 2013, 61). In reality, the choice is taken by teachers themselves and their middle management. In principle, teachers can supplement textbooks with various other library and online resources, but no other literature is directly tailored to this course. We have only studied the paper resources, as the web-based support would raise so many different heterogeneous factors as to compromise the rigour of the comparison (Jackson et al. 2010, 113).

The syllabus divides into four parts:

- Theory of religion and criticism of religion
- Islam and an elective religion
- Christianity
- Philosophy, ethics and views on life/humanism (Norwegian Syllabus, 2006)

The theory of religion is obviously the subject of this article, but we are interested in the enacted theory rather than the philosophical, and so included only chapters catering to parts two and three.

Christianity has its own part in this syllabus, but the learning objectives are the same with the minor adjustment that the ethics objective for Christianity stands alone and the verbs used are 'describe and reflect on' rather than the 'discuss and elaborate on' used for other religions. An objective concerning history is also inserted into the Christianity part (for details, see Andreassen 2013, 148-54).

Social cohesion is an explicit aim for the entire syllabus, as is personal development, between which two poles the 'Purpose' part of the syllabus oscillates continuously:

> Religious, ethical and philosophical questions are important for each individual, and for society as a whole, both as the basis for who we are and as a source of conflict. Mutual tolerance across the differences in religion and views on life is a necessity for peaceful co-existence in a multicultural and multi-religious society. … As a subject aiming to raise awareness and shape attitudes, religion and ethics shall also open for reflection on the pupil's own identity and own choices in life. The teaching in the

subject shall stimulate each pupil to interpret life and attitudes. (Norwegian Syllabus, 2006)

The Division

A primary aim for this article is to craft an empirical tool out of religious education theory. The division of learning about and learning from religion is well established. How is ours different? The distinction between understanding religion as people and idea is less central to current debate, but it is both important and measurable.

Determining whether a textbook is offering learning about or from a religion is difficult. The difference is in the pupil. 'Teaching from a religion' makes little sense. Without access to concrete pupils, investigations that measure this division will have to rely heavily on individuals' judgments and indeed imagination. This division poses a hermeneutical problem.

Not all divisions are susceptible to this problem. For example, exoticisms are identifiable, as long as we are aware of what counts as irrational in that linguistic culture. Expressions like 'isn't that weird?' and 'some religionists even…' are signposts. Another clear division is thematic/systematic teaching. When religions are treated in series, the teaching is organised systematically; when in parallel, all contributing to the understanding of one theme, it is being organised thematically.

The religion as idea or people distinction is like thematic/systematic teaching, it divides the field down the middle without being normative. It also requires definition. So as we will see below, phrases like 'Mohammed said…' and 'According to Buddhist doctrine…' are typical of the idea pole of religious education, whereas images of contemporary religious practices are examples of the people pole. This division also has practical implications.

Firstly, the two poles of religious education use different canons of interpretation. An explanation of idea-religion might involve logical relations between different notions, like understanding avatars in terms of Hinduism's conception of the self. Understanding people-religion however requires no logical consistency. For example, the reformed practice of evidencing proof of election does not have to make sense as long as it explains manifestations of the protestant work ethic.

Secondly, religion as idea and people in their more polarised forms involve two different kinds of discussion. The idea of 'necessary dialogue' has come to be used of the social project of getting to know religious communities and learning to live together. 'Spiritual dialogue' on the other hand involves developing as a person through talking with others about (in this context, religious) ideas. (Leganger-Krogstad 2011; Leirvik 2011; Kozyrev 2006) The two types of discussion also address different problems.

Thirdly, the two approaches diverge in their approaches to religious stories. Whereas the idea-based way of teaching treats them in their historical context, as elements in the history of ideas and literature, the people way might teach practices of storytelling. Both might make use of the discipline of history. For example, the story of the Maccabees might be taught as episodes in the history of Judaism, or as a discussion of Jewish political theology according to idea-religion. People-religion might teach it in the context of the ritual storytelling that takes place during Hanukkah. Similarly, the Ramayana story could be an example of Hindu epic and historical cosmology on the one hand, or as background to Diwali on the other.

We will return to pedagogical implications towards the end of the article, but here it is important to note that these three consequences result whether diverging application of the poles is justified or not. We can imagine textbook authors defending teaching spiritual dialogue in the context of Buddhism, and necessary dialogue in that of Islam. That justification does not dissolve the challenges posed in helping pupils to understand the differences between the knowledge of people and knowledge of ideas.

In other words, the division has implications for religious education. It is not the same as previous divisions born from research interests, but it dovetails with them.

It is tempting to collapse our distinction into others already existing in the field, such as Heimbrock's lived religion (Heimbrock 2001) or Jackson's representation, reflection and interpretation (Vestøl et al. 2016, 2; Jackson 2011, 191-3). We are not the first to mention religion as idea and people (Jackson 2009, 4, Härenstam 1993, 19) so we hope readers will find the division straightforward. That intuitive understanding should not however disguise the concrete differences between our division and categories already established in the literature.

As mentioned above, our categories are more measurable than the now familiar "learning from or about" distinction in Religious Education. They are also substantially different however. There is no reason, for example, why pupils should not learn from attractive and exemplary religious people any less than persuasive religious ideas. Many religious practitioners would doubtless argue that the educational contribution of their religion is contained more in contemporary religious practice than in orthodox doctrine.

Our categories mirror Jackson's in that both aspire to be empirically useful in a pedagogically relevant way. His still cut across our binary division in the way the from/about categories though: it is logically possible that religions may be represented, interpreted and used as a locus for pupils' reflection on their own life whether they are conceived as ideas or as human practice (Jackson 2011). It is interesting that "understandings of the term religion, or its equivalent in the languages of the project partners, were teased out" in the REDCo project (Jackson 2011, 196). In that context however, this was a necessity of international and interdisciplinary work. In our research, the conception of religion forms a part of the analytical construct to describe different religions rather than a research assumption applied across them all.

In a similar vein, our distinction resembles Cox's understanding religion/religious understanding (Cox 1983) but goes in a very different direction. His article investigates the grammar of making religious ideas the learning object in Religious Education classes. We are observing when that happens rather than how. We leave aside the question of how viable it is to teach pupils religious understanding in neutral textbooks, and rather contrast truth claims that stand alone with those that are attached to believers. In other words, Cox studies exclusively where ideas are made the object of learning, but we identify shifts in the object of learning between ideas and the people that have them.

We are not aiming at exegetical accuracy or loyalty to established positions in religious education, but rather best fit to the data. Idea-religion can be more than phenomenology, it includes history. People-religion does not have to refer to concrete practice. The nature of our

divergence from previous theory will become evident from our analytical constructs, to which we now turn.

Coding

How is this distinction measurable? We stipulated a set of indicators or analytical constructs that formed a codebook (Neuendorf 2002, 118-33). To be clear: these are simply operationalisations of the distinction in hand. We are not aiming at a description of the world, but at a heuristic definition by which to sort out material.

In coding the texts, we followed consistent rules for categorising words, including tense, subject matter, textual and historic context. Each of Smart's dimensions (Smart 1998, 11-22) can be bifurcated.

When it comes to *doctrine*, we categorised the text differently if the religious ideas were justified or attributed. Sometimes the point was the social group formed around a belief, sometimes a development in the history of ideas. So when textbooks explicitly introduced doctrine by the phrase 'religious people believe…' we coded it as people. There were four main alternatives to this approach, all of them coded as idea:

1. 'religious doctrine says': we noted a difference between phrases such as 'hindus believe…' and 'Hinduism teaches…'. The first was coded as people, the second as idea. Sometimes the textbook would itself contrast the two: 'Buddha's premise was that all people were equal irrespective of race, gender, or social status. But current reality in many Buddhist countries is marked by a series of discriminating situations and regular breaches of basic human rights.' (Kvamme, Steineger, and Lindhardt 2013, 203, our translation)

2. 'authorities say': the doctrine is justified by classic texts and authorities that have stated it. This distinction is striking in the textbooks' treatment of Christian denominations. Whilst the 3901 words about the Church of Norway mentioned Luther (without "Lutheranism") 18 times, each reference to an accepted doctrinal authority in the 6775 words treating other churches was a bible reference moderated with such words as "they refer to…" (there were also two references to the 1st Vatican council's acceptance of papal authority). The textbooks implied divergent degrees of logical consistency in adherence to authority.

3. 'the world is such…': when doctrine was given as a description of the world (rather as a religious phenomenon) then we coded it as idea. This alternated at times in a short piece of text:

   'Therefore few Christians will claim that every bit of the Bible is equally relevant. There is a long Christian tradition for distinguishing what is important from what is unimportant. When life experience is also considered, a space opens up for the individual's judgment.' (Kvamme, Steineger, and Lindhardt 2013, 91, our translation)

4. 'this means…': when the meaning of words was given as current terminology ('this is taken to mean…') then it was coded as people. Words were usually defined etymologically however, and we took that as an indicator for religion as idea.

The *mythology* and history of a religion also raised ambiguities. Where historical events were presented as the results of ancient causes, or developments of religious origins, they were categorised as idea. Where offered as background for current religious practice or demography, we coded them as people. Sometimes the literary context answered this question.

Tense and aspect often made the distinction clear cut. Where the present tense or the perfect aspect mark continuity to the present, history could be coded as people. One of the textbooks, (Heiene et al. 2014) mentioned the Middle Ages both as church history and as background to the Roman Catholic church. The former mostly used the simple past tense and historic present ('the Pope's religious authority was challenged towards the end of the Middle Ages'(p.209) idea) but the latter used exclusively the perfect ('monasteries have played a role since the Middle Ages,' (p.230) people).

Ethics resembled doctrine in distribution. Those sections coded as idea contained the normative content, whereas specific applied casuistry was connected to particular communities. So where issues were discussed in terms of 'some Buddhists think… but others…' or 'one particular contemporary Hindu has said…' they were coded as people. Where historical role models and principles were described such as material from the Hadiths, they were coded as idea. Issues raised by contemporary situations and debated, were coded as people, for example debates concerning headwear in Muslim communities and gay priests in Christian.

Descriptions of *rituals* were almost always people-religion rather than idea-religion in our data. It is conceivable that discussions of seven day weeks or the anthropological necessities of agricultural years and life cycles be discussed in a textbook context, but this option was not taken by even the most people-inclined textbooks.

Two exceptions occurred: first, when discussing the status of sacraments, the textbooks at times went from personal beliefs to logical explanations. They did not always say 'Christians believe…' when discussing sacraments. Secondly, when rituals were described in classic texts, the context given was sometimes historical rather than contemporary.

Texts were almost always treated as idea. In some cases, however, texts were related to religious *experience*. Sufi texts were quoted, and stock prayers and formulae were given. When these were placed in an historic context, they were coded as idea, but when in a liturgical context, either private or collective, as people. A good example was the three jewels of Buddhism: where the refuge of 'sangha' illustrated the historical context of early Buddhist monasticism, it was teaching antiquarian history and therefore idea-religion; where it illustrated contemporary liturgical practice and social organisation, it was teaching people-religion.

Institutions were most often part of teaching about people. When details of religious demography were given, they illustrated actual networks amongst religious people. Maps could teach either ancient history or contemporary religion, but in our material, statistics were always used to teach about religious people, there were no historical statistics (compare Thobro 2008, 2014).

Not all religious groups were necessarily taught as people, often groups were contrasted with each other by both history and thought. Sunni and Shia Muslims were described by geographical distribution (people), as well as by the history of the first Caliphs (idea).

Finally, the *material* dimension could also be ambiguous. The rule we followed was that if art was placed in a religious context, it was coded as people because it answered the question what kind of aesthetic production was developed by religious communities. The date of production was less important than the current use. If the artefact has been moved to a museum or gallery, its current context is secular, so it was categorised as idea. So for example the Hagia Sofia was coded as idea, whereas the art of the Sistine chapel – which is still in use for papal ceremonies – as people, regardless of the text interpreting it.

Although images usually spoke for themselves, literary context could still be relevant for coding the material dimension. Especially when categorising architecture we had to determine whether the structures were teaching early stages of religious history, the context for worship in contemporary religious communities. The context was always able to disambiguate.

Findings
We found systematic differences across the board between the results given by words, images and questions. Questions tended to emphasise idea-religion (average 64% idea) and images tended to prefer people (average 70% people), with the word count usually landing somewhere just behind the questions (average 57% idea).

We would have expected the word count to come out in favour of ideas because religious texts tend to be idea. Many words were taken up with lengthy quotations of texts for various reasons:

- Texts are mentioned in the syllabus;
- Texts are important to several of the religions;
- Text interpretation is an obvious academic skill in religious education (particularly in Lutheran countries).

Why should that have effected the questions though? There is no obvious reason why there should be more questions about ideas than about people. It appears that they are simpler to set. Typical questions required structured analyses of texts, or discussion of doctrinal ideas, whereas more people questions required analyses of self-portrayals on the internet or demographic information.

Images favoured religion as people. As a genre, textbooks can more naturally provide primary sources of religious ideas than people, but images allow the inclusion of photos of religious objects and actors. The iconoclasm of parts of Judaism, Christianity and Islam also governed the move away from historical artistic expressions, which was the major category of image coded as idea. Judaism and Islam had a mere 10% and 25% respectively images coded as idea on average.

There were however two striking exceptions to these tendencies. In one textbook (Heiene et al. 2014) only 42% of the questions given in the Islam chapter were coded as idea, less than the word count (53%) but still more than images (34%). This is particularly striking because the average for questions otherwise in this textbook was 64% idea. The two other textbooks

had 73% and 56% respectively of their questions about Islam coded as idea. This special treatment of Islam as people rather than idea needs further explanation.

The second exception is that in one textbook (Aronsen, Bomann-Larsen, and Notaker 2008), the percentage of images in Christianity that were coded as idea (67%) was greater than the questions (54%). Although the tendency for images favoured people in general, Christianity was the systematic exception: each textbook had a majority of images coded as idea. Hypothetical mechanisms include the greater emphasis on the history of religion in the syllabus and the weaker iconoclasm in the religion, leading to a more prolific tradition of religious art in the West. This begs the question, of course, as to why Buddhism and Hinduism were still dominated by images of religious practice rather than historic art. A more likely mechanism is the secularisation of religious art in the Christian tradition. Many images were coded as idea because they were divorced from their religious context by removal to galleries and museums. Other religions' art tended to remain in their liturgical context and so were coded as people.

In short, results concerning individual religions need to be seen in the context of the general trends specific to images, questions and words. For this reason, it is relevant to give the percentage points by which they diverge from the mean for each kind of result:

[Fig. 1 here]

Discussion
The pattern is striking, but is it justified by the very nature of the task? Before discussing implications we need to discount trivial mechanisms that might explain our findings.

The contrast between Buddhism and Islam
Let us focus on Buddhism and Islam, as they are the two religions treated by every textbook (Judaism only appears in one, Hinduism in two of the three) and the syllabus treats them identically.

The trend recurred in each individual textbook: Islam's ideas featured consistently less than Buddhism's. It was more visible in some than in others. One textbook (Heiene et al. 2014) devoted 81% of its pupil questions in Buddhism to ideas, whereas only 42% in the Islam chapter. Another (Aronsen, Bomann-Larsen, and Notaker 2008) devoted 69% of its words about Buddhism to idea-religion, but only 49% of its words about Islam. Images in the same book's Buddhism chapter portrayed religious people 63% of the time, whereas 85% of the time in the Islam chapter.

Is this contrast justified? Justifying it by reference to the religions' diverging emphasis on texts doesn't help. If anything, we would expect Islam – with its well-defined categories of scripture in the Koran and Hadiths and its long traditions of commentaries throughout the Middle Ages – to have a greater idea-religion word count than Buddhism, whose textual tradition is less defined (Thobro 2008, 67f). Similarly, the appeal to history of origins is greater in Islam than in Buddhism. Mohammed's historical context is well defined, and the differences between Sunni and Shia derive almost entirely from historical events. By contrast, Siddhartha emerges from a vague and shifting historical context (Smart 1998, 57f; Batchelor 2010, 184f), and the historical origins of the split between for example Theravada and Mahayana forms of Buddhism are ill defined and opaque to the historian.

Novel facts from intrareligious groups

Intrareligious groups also have parallel status in the syllabus. Christianity for example was presented in general, and then individual denominations treated individually, including the majority form of Norwegian Lutheranism. Every textbook chose to focus on Roman Catholicism and Norwegian Lutheranism; two also chose Pentecostalism, and one chose Orthodoxy.

On average, this section of the textbooks covered under 15% of the entire chapter, so the data concerning images and questions was negligible. The word count was still interesting however:

[Fig. 2 here]

The pattern is again clear, and represented in each textbook: the highest proportion allocated ideas in a non-Lutheran denomination is 17%; the lowest proportion allocated Norwegian Lutheran ideas is 38%. They were treated completely differently (cf. the illustration given above about Luther's doctrine).

Again, the contrast is difficult to justify. Pentecostalism in Norway is at least as text-oriented as Lutheranism (Leirvik 2006), and although Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism lay a greater emphasis on ritual, they also accept more written authorities in the form of creeds, councils and deutero-canonical literature. One might expect that the status of the magisterium compensate for Lutheranism's doctrine of *sola scriptura* when it comes to attention to and availability of text

The Christianity trend

Let us return to the pattern taken by Christianity in general. Whereas Hinduism, Islam and Judaism all had word counts, questions, and images devoted to people-religion more than idea-religion, Christianity consistently came out as above average an idea religion. This trend could be justified in a number of ways:

1. Is Christianity a more textual religion? This would explain the difference between Christianity and the Eastern religions. It would also predict a higher idea word count in Islam though, whereas more words are devoted proportionally to Hinduism than to Islam on average, so we can reject this mechanism.
2. Does Christianity have a longer history of co-existence with secular society? This would doubtless explain the image data, where we saw the decisive role of secular galleries. It cannot explain the trend in questions and words, which can also be found amongst the individual denominations of Christianity, all of which have lived alongside secularism for the same duration of time. Similarly, Judaism has had an equally long contact with Western secularism, but was primarily treated as a people religion.
3. Christianity's unique place in the syllabus only underwrites certain differences:
    a. Firstly, the two differences in the syllabus apply to church history and reflection on ethics, and both those aspects could theoretically be coded both ways. History can be deployed to teach pupils current religious practice (and therefore people) as well as religious origins (and therefore idea). Ethics can reflect originating norms (and therefore idea) or current debates and conflicts (and therefore people). Christianity chapters chose largely to treat these topics

in terms of ideas, and that decision itself needs justifying, because other chapters chose differently.

b.　Secondly, if the trend is purely a matter of syllabus, we still need an explanation for why Buddhism acts similarly. Indeed, the questions data gave us a greater proportion devoted to ideas in Buddhism than in Christianity. The syllabus does not explain the counter-fact of Buddhist ideas.

Although we cannot justify this textbook behaviour here, we can at least require of any future explanation that it be resistant to the above objections. It should also take some account of the tendency of Buddhism to be described in its European form (Jackson et al. 2010, 209), which likely allies it to the demographically dominant Christianity in our data.

Implications

There is a danger in giving names to stipulated distinctions. We need to take care to restrict our discussion to implications of religious ideas as we have defined them in this article. Religious people here should not be associated with ideas about the human condition or selfhood, but with textbook portrayals of religious people, more specifically in terms of how they act, eat, tell stories and live religion in visible ways that can be taken up in classrooms. Academic rigour does not permit us to slide away from our definitions simply because we are considering wider implications.

What use are our findings? RS teachers outside Norway wishing to present any one religion in a balanced way can compensate for their textbooks' leanings. Where the ideas of Buddhism are well covered, a teacher might want to make up for the relative invisibility of religious communities in learning materials. Similarly, if the everyday life of contemporary Muslims is prominent in a textbook, a teacher might make extra use of philosophical discussion in the classroom so that all pupils have their ideas taken seriously, as indeed previous textbook investigations have suggested is a common request (Härenstam 1993, 19).

Unless there is a balance between religions, undesirable forms of asymmetry may appear in the classroom:

1.　Asymmetric academic agency: where religions are treated as people, pupils belonging to them act as informants for the real academic work others do of anthropological analysis, rather than as philosophical participants in the shared discussion of ideas (cf. similar problems noted in Vestøl et al. 2016, 12).
2.　Asymmetric moral agency: in the pursuit of 'Mutual tolerance across the differences in religion and views on life' and 'peaceful co-existence in a multicultural and multi-religious society' (Norwegian Syllabus 2006) pupils need both good attitudes to social cohesion and a familiarity with specific religious communities. Where attitudes come from one religion and difficult social situations from another, moral agency is distributed unequally, with one group playing the part of the active tolerant subject, and the other that of the passive tolerable object (Badiou 2001, ch. 1; Conroy et al. 2013, 120f).
3.　Asymmetric pedagogical agency: where the distribution of viable ideas about the world, history, and morality is unequal, religions have differing contributions to the classroom 'safe space' of interest, enthusiasm and contact between pupils (Europe 2014, ch. 5). If that platform for dialogue is not neutral, it enables and disables groups

of pupils to make unequal educational contributions and achievements against that background.

Are our findings transferable to other sets of data? There is no indication that these trends are specific to the sixth form syllabus, so we would expect to find them replicated in Norwegian textbooks at other levels. As to applications further afield, it is possible the patterns we have found are a further example of the tendency concerning religious conflict discovered by the *Does Religious Education Work?* project when they noted that 'where such hostility existed, a different model of RE could often be observed, which involved treating the study of all religions as a study of the beliefs of others' (Conroy et al. 2013, 124). If there is indeed a correlation between conflict and the treatment of religions as functions of human behaviour, we would expect patterns to differ with social context. In Italy for example, Catholicism rather than Protestantism would receive a more idea-heavy treatment. It has already been noted that Coptic Christianity is studied with 'no information about dogma' in Egypt (Olsson 2009, 211) and Buddhism is treated particularly as a locus of pupil reflection in the UK (Jackson et al. 2010, 6, 47, 99, 110f). More research is needed before these findings can be applied in the classroom.

Conclusion

We found that the approach to religion as idea and as people was distributed in systematic ways between individual religions. Christianity and Buddhism tended to be treated as sets of ideas, whereas Islam, Hinduism and Judaism as religious people.

We have discounted various explanations of this asymmetric distribution based in the nature of the religion itself and the relevant syllabus. Certainly more research is needed to support or write off the hypothetical link between conflict and treating religion as human behaviour. We would however suggest where explanations might be found. Perhaps the most surprising finding was that Buddhism behaved similarly to Christianity in a country where Christianity has had a unique status and function for centuries. Any explanation should either identify a similar but unique feature of Buddhism or some characteristic they both have in common.

Thobro observes that Buddhist ideas are well received in the Norwegian culture (Thobro 2008, 59). Similarly Iversen has noted that Buddhism can function as a Religious Education teacher's second religion (Iversen 2012, 118). It is possible that a form of cultural status is related to teaching a religion as a set of ideas rather than as people. Again, further research could explore this relationship, not least by identifying ways to measure a religion's cultural status, whatever that may imply. The main result of this article is perhaps not its findings but its analytical tools, which may be applied to lessons and websites as much as to textbooks.

Neither the universal application of idea-religion or people-religion is a panacea for religious education. Nonetheless, as long as individual religions have restricted access to social, moral, and philosophical discussion, while others have privileges, then religious education will continue to accept and perhaps even contribute to inequality and division.

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Fig 1. Percentage points divergent from mean for each type of result, sorted by religion.

Fig 2: percentages of words coded as idea and people, sorted by Christian denomination