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Representing European religious diversity in textbooks for history education

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Introduction

When watching and listening to societal and political debates and media news coverage, one often gets the impression that religion and religious diversity are perceived in a negative way, in that they are linked to conflict, exclusion, violence, acts of aggression and even war. Recent research among 17,401 people aged between sixteen and sixty-four years, conducted via interviews in twenty-three countries worldwide, confirms this impression (Ipsos 2017). Overall, half of the participants in this study stated that they were convinced that religion does more harm than good in the world. At the same time, however, about three-quarters of them said that they felt completely comfortable being around people who had religious beliefs different from their own. These apparently contradictory positions suggest that people today have mixed opinions about (different aspects of) religious diversity.

Research shows that our perceptions of phenomena in the present are often influenced (among other factors) by social representations of the past (see e.g. Wertsch 1997, 2004; Borries 1994). It would therefore be interesting to try to gain a precise picture of how religious diversity in the past is represented today. Such research can focus on all kinds of 'carriers' of social representations: statues, historical films, popular stories, museums and so on. This chapter focuses on one specific medium: history textbooks for secondary education. These are interesting forms of social representation which are worth analysing because they are an important source of information for many (young) people who study history, a compulsory subject in many countries. History textbooks are therefore important producers of societal knowledge, and have the potential to influence many young people's ideas and perceptions, in this case on religion(s) and religious diversity in the past (Van Nieuwenhuyse 2019a: 1–15).

Using a comparative approach across various European countries, this chapter examines the social representations of religious diversity in the past that are presented in history textbooks for secondary education and disseminated among young people across Europe today. Our analysis will focus in particular on the representation of a selected number of interreligious contacts over the course of history and we will

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be asking the following questions: How are the contacts represented (in a positive, negative or neutral way; as peaceful or violent encounters etc.)? What particular historical events are addressed within each contact? To what extent are these contacts in the past connected to the present? To whom is agency attributed in these contacts, and from whose perspective(s) are they described? These questions offer an in-depth view of the social representations of historical interreligious contacts. The textbooks we analysed are used in a broad range of eight European countries: Austria, Belgium, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Spain, Switzerland and the UK. This research will offer insights into both the outlook and the how and why of (possibly differing) social representations, and their connection with specific religious, national, sociopolitical and cultural contexts.

With this in mind, we will begin by offering a brief introduction to existing international research. We will then go on to describe the research questions, data collection and the methodology we applied and explain how we selected the interreligious contacts and the textbooks for analysis. We also describe our diachronic and synchronic analysis of the content and narrative. The chapter ends with the presentation and discussion of the results of our research.

Textbook analysis research on interreligious contacts in the past

A great deal of research has been done on textbooks, exploring, for example, what is a textbook? How is it best defined or classified? Without going into excessive detail, in general, researchers regard textbooks as commercial products (which must therefore take into account the expectations of their primary users, i.e. teachers), pedagogical tools (part of teaching and learning processes) and cultural artefacts. As regards the latter, many researchers regard secondary-school textbooks as concrete manifestations of the (historical) culture(s) in a society (Klerides 2010: 31–54). Three research traditions exist with regards to the analysis of (particularly history) textbooks as cultural artefacts (Van Nieuwenhuyse 2014: 79–100; Bock 2018: 57–70; Štimac 2018: 251–65): (1) 'checking scholars', who investigate history and religion textbooks in search of revanchism, polarization, superiority feelings and so on, and examine the extent to which new research results have found their way into them, (2) 'representational scholars', who concentrate their research on the representation of a specific (interreligious) event, development, or agent in the textbooks, and link it with existing collective memories and social representations within society and (3) scholars who perform 'narrative analysis' of textbooks, a method that focuses on the narrative underlying the textbook as a whole, and considers specific parts of the textbooks and specific representations (and their significance) in the light of that whole.

Scholars from all three traditions have conducted a great deal of research (mainly via content and discourse analyses) on social representations of religion(s) and their past in textbooks, particularly in the last decades, because of the growing recognition of the role of textbooks as producers of knowledge about religion(s) (Andreassen 2015: 7–9).

As Štimac (2018) explains, studies in this field tend to focus on the social representation of one religion in the past and/or present, from a national or international comparative perspective (see e.g. Douglass 2015; Gottschalk 2019: 284–95; Hock et al. 2012; Liepach and Sadowski 2014; Linkenbach 2015: 23–44). In particular, they examine, for instance, the (evolving) representation of the doctrine, practices and symbols of a specific religion, or the extent (also evolving) of generalizing and polarizing tendencies in the attributions of characteristics to specific religions and religious people. Most of them concentrate on social representations of the major world religions of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism, although since the 2000s, indigenous religious beliefs and non-religious world views have also entered the frame. Another striking recent tendency is that since the 1990s – in line with societal debates worldwide – the representation of Islam and Muslims has become the subject of a large, increasing body of research (see e.g. Härenstam 2009; Spielhaus 2018; Berglund 2018; Karaca and Schmitz 2018; Kröhnert-Othman 2015).

One area of history textbooks that has been subject to much less scrutiny is the social representation of interreligious contacts, by which we mean contacts between religions and their leaders and followers. While some research focuses on how religion textbooks try to instigate interreligious dialogue, or on mutual representations of a religious 'other', the mere representation in textbooks of the what, how and why of past and present contacts between religions and religious people has been largely neglected in textbook research (Lähnemann 2013: 15–25). Such research does exist, however, with regards to the representation of intercultural contacts in the past. One example is the study by Van Nieuwenhuyse (2018) who, based on a framework proposed by the sinologist Nicolas Standaert (2002), examined the representation of intercultural contacts during the Imperial Era in Belgian history textbooks since 1945. The categories involved in this analysis were, among others, agency (Who were mentioned as agents and who appeared as passive entities?), positive or negative connotations attributed to these agents/entities (including stereotypes), any opinions or judgements expressed by the authors, the assessment of the relations between the different agents, the possible use of 'us' versus 'them' and the (origin of the) historical sources included in the textbooks. Several of these categories could also be applied in the analysis of the representation of interreligious contacts over the course of history.

This is definitely true of agency, which can be defined as 'the ability to act on decisions in order to bring about desired goals (whether those involve changing aspects of society or conserving them)' (Barton 2012: 132). The concept of agency therefore addresses the question of who has the individual or social potential to act purposefully and to effectuate change in society. This is an important question to examine in history textbooks, not only as a means of analyzing what kind of insights they offer students about the course of history, but also because of the pedagogical implications of how agency is represented. Scholars argue that teaching young people about agency could influence their civic behaviour. Reflection on the various agents in the past and how they contributed to changes in society can indeed make students aware of their own role in society today (Harris 2011; Peck, Poyntz and Seixas 2011; Wilke, Depaepe and Van Nieuwenhuyse 2019). Research on this issue shows, however, that textbooks ascribe agency mostly to non-human agents, powerful individuals ('great men') and groups.

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Ordinary agents, ordinary individuals or groups of people who are not specifically in a position of power are rarely attributed agency; they are predominantly presented as passive. Women also are rarely portrayed as agents. Furthermore, previous research also shows that historical agents are often homogenized in history textbooks, with the result that the differences that exist within particular groups tend to be ignored. Another important finding was that not all the historical agents who played a role in historical events are ascribed agency. In the modern imperial context, for instance, often only Western agents are represented as active agents, while the indigenous peoples, by contrast, are depicted as passive victims of European profit-seeking and violence. This is the case in history textbooks in Belgium, England, France, Italy, Portugal and Spain, in which very little attention is paid, for example, to the indigenous groups who rebelled against European rule (Barton 2012; Van Nieuwenhuyse 2019b; Štimac 2015; see also Van Nieuwenhuyse and Pires Valentim 2018).

Research question, data collection, methodology

The main research question addressed in this chapter is as follows: What social representations of interreligious contacts in the past are being constructed and disseminated among young people across Europe today in history textbooks for secondary education (generally from seventh till twelfth grade, aimed at young people between twelve and eighteen years old)?[2] To this end we analysed textbooks from eight countries: Austria, Belgium (Flanders), Estonia, Finland, Germany (from the states/Länder of Bavaria, Brandenburg, Hessen and Nord Rhine-Westphalia), Spain, Switzerland (German-speaking areas) and the UK (England). These countries were selected for several reasons. They are representative of all the different parts of Europe (North, East, South, West and Centre) and of a range of different religious backgrounds and traditions. Some of these countries are steeped in the Catholic tradition (e.g. Austria, Spain and Belgium), while others are characterized by (various) Protestant traditions (e.g. Finland and England), or are home to several different major religious traditions (e.g. Germany and Switzerland). One of them (Estonia) was ruled by a communist regime under which religion was at best very tacitly tolerated in the margins, or at worst actively repressed. These countries also vary in terms of the extent to which they have evolved into lay, secular states. Some of the countries involved are also home to a significant group of people who adhere to Islam or Judaism, while in others these religions are much less prominent among the population. Finally, the selected countries had different ways of dealing with interreligious contacts in the past, in terms of type, size, depth and nature. The analysis particularly seeks to identify major similarities and differences in the way these contacts are described in history textbooks from this diverse range of countries.

For each country, we analysed one secondary school history textbook per grade, although in some cases the same textbook was used over two grades. Preference was given to textbooks that were widely and frequently used in each of the countries involved. The availability of textbooks (in many cases via the library of the Georg

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Eckert Institute for International Textbook Research) was also a factor in this decision. For Germany, textbooks from multiple federal states/Länder were examined.[3] All analysed textbooks date from 2010 onwards. In order to keep the analysis of some fifty textbook volumes feasible, we focused on six specific interreligious contacts in the past: (1) between Christians and Roman polytheistic believers during the Roman Empire (first–fifth century CE); (2) between Jews and Christians in Medieval Europe (sixth –fifteenth century CE); (3) between Muslims and other religions during the Middle Ages (seventh–fifteenth century CE); (4) between Catholics and Protestants in the Early Modern Period (sixteenth–eighteenth century CE); (5) between those in favour of secularism and those who wanted religion to have a strong position within society (eighteenth–nineteenth century CE); (6) between Muslims and other (non-) religious groups in the present, since 1989 (post–Cold War era). Several criteria were used to select these specific interreligious contacts. We wanted, first, for the contacts to cover different historical eras, and, second, to involve a diverse range of religions within Europe. Finally, we wanted them to constitute important, influential and significant developments in European history with long-lasting consequences. This last criterion was particularly important as it made it more likely that the contact was actually addressed in history textbooks. A preliminary check was carried out to make sure the interreligious contacts we had selected were covered in the textbooks. As a result of that check, we decided to exclude one of the contacts, namely the interreligious contact during the pre-modern and modern imperial encounter. A quick analysis of the textbooks examined here revealed that many of them addressed imperialism and colonialism in political, socio-economic and cultural terms, while glossing over their interreligious dimension. It was therefore decided to exclude the colonial encounter from our list of contacts.

In terms of operationalized and concrete (sub-)research questions, for each of these interreligious contacts in the past, we examined what kind of events are mentioned, what the geographical focus is, how they are represented (in terms of peace and violence, tolerance and intolerance, coexistence or not), from which perspective they are looked at, in what societal context they are framed (political, economic, cultural, religious, social), which groups are treated as agents, which actors are named, how the contacts are framed, what connotations (positive, negative or neutral) are attributed to them, what historical sources are mentioned and included, whether attention is paid to mutual representations of the agents involved, and to what extent and how past and present are related to each other. On the basis of these issues, and partly in line with similar (abovementioned) research into the representation of intercultural contacts during the modern imperial past, an analysis scheme was designed, establishing a system of categories and subcategories in order to carry out a fine-grained analysis of the textbook accounts. This involved diachronic and synchronic analysis of both the content and the narrative, as our main objective was to understand educational representations in context. We began by analyzing each textbook according to this procedure, and once we had acquired a precise picture of the social representations of these contacts in each book, we then performed an international comparative analysis of the textbooks from the different countries. In this way we sought to obtain a Europe-wide view of the way interreligious contacts are represented in history

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textbooks, as well as an assessment of the most important similarities and differences between them.

Research results

In this section, we will begin with an international comparative perspective, instead of first reporting country per country. The various research questions will be addressed in the following order: (1) the specific content of each interreligious contact; (2) the geographical and societal focus; (3) the attribution of agency; (4) the context within which each contact is framed and (5) possible connections between past and present.

Which events are mentioned in the different accounts of each interreligious contact?

When comparing the different accounts of each interreligious contact in history textbooks from eight countries, the first thing we observed was the remarkable similarity between them, at least in their description of the most important aspects of each contact. If we start, for example, with the interreligious contact between Christians and Roman polytheistic believers during the Roman Empire (first–fifth century CE), all the textbooks mention the birth of Christianity in the first century CE, and then go on to describe the persecution of the Christians by the Romans. They then proceed to the successful spread of Christianity, almost all mentioning the Edict of Milan issued in 313 by Constantine I, and sketching out the process through which Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire.

If we move on to the contact between Jews and Christians in Medieval Europe (sixth–fifteenth century CE), the specific issues mentioned by the textbooks include the fact that during the High and Late Middle Ages (particularly from the eleventh to the fifteenth century) Christians and Jews lived together in European towns where, initially, the Jews enjoyed some privileges, but were later the subject of persecution. They tend to focus on pogroms against Jews, particularly during the Crusades (the murder of Jews in Jerusalem in 1099 is often cited as an example) and the crises caused by the Black Death. Some textbooks highlight the contrast, here, with the tolerance Muslims showed towards Jews and Christians in al-Andalus during the same period.

As regards the interreligious contacts between Muslims and other religions during the Middle Ages (seventh–fifteenth century CE), all the textbooks describe the birth, spread and expansion of Islam, focusing on the Crusades, and on the cultural influence that Islam had on science (medicine, mathematics, geography etc.) and arts in Europe – most often with reference to al-Andalus, which in Spain receives its own separate chapter. The internal division of Islam between Sunnites and Shiites is not always addressed in the textbooks across Europe.

The interreligious contact between Catholics and Protestants in the Early Modern Period (sixteenth–eighteenth century CE) receives a lot of attention in most textbooks. The crisis within the Catholic Church, the reaction of Martin Luther with

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the publication of his Ninety-Five Theses in 1517, the spread of Protestantism and the Reformation throughout Europe (different denominations such as Calvinism, Anabaptism and Anglicanism are mentioned), religious wars, the Peace of Augsburg in 1555, the Council of Trent and the Counter-Reformation, the Thirty Years' War and sometimes also the Eighty Years' War, and the Peace of Westphalia were all mentioned and briefly described. The only markedly different account appears in the English textbook, which will be discussed in more detail below. The accounts of the contacts between those in favour of secularism and those in favour of religion having a strong position within society (eighteenth–nineteenth century CE) also show many similarities with a focus on Enlightened philosophers and their books (such as Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws* from 1748, Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality* from 1754 and *The Social Contract* from 1762, and Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* from 1781), the translation of Enlightened ideas into a policy of religious toleration within society, and the growing opposition between scientific and religious world views (often illustrated via Charles Darwin and his theory of evolution).

Finally, as regards the interreligious contacts between Muslims and other (non-) religious groups in the present day since 1989 (post–Cold War era), the events most frequently addressed in the textbooks include the tension between Israel and Palestine (focusing on the peace talks and Oslo Accords of 1993, the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin in 1995, and the First and Second Intifada (1987–93 and 2000–5, respectively)), Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism (with the attacks of 9/11 as the most frequently cited example), the wars in Yugoslavia and Afghanistan, and the Arab Spring from 2010.

Overall, it would seem that the history textbooks across Europe offer quite similar accounts of the most important aspects of each interreligious contact and of the specific events and agents involved. To a certain extent, one could almost venture to speak of an implicit European historical canon, at least on a general level. However, certain differences were also observed between the different countries, regarding the depth and detail with which certain contacts were addressed, and also with regards to the regional, national and local focus. If we look, for instance, at the interreligious contact between Catholics and Protestants in the Early Modern Period (sixteenth–eighteenth century CE), it is striking to note how the Flemish history textbook went into great detail about the Eighty Years' War in the Low Countries, while Swiss textbooks focused mainly on events in the Holy Roman Empire and on wars on Swiss soil. English textbooks adopted an even more nationally oriented outlook on the interreligious contact between Catholics and Protestants, by focusing almost exclusively on events in England and Scotland (such as the English Revolution and Civil War), and on Anglicanism. Furthermore, while English history textbooks addressed the interreligious tensions accompanying the rise of Protestantism in the colonies of Northern America, and Spanish history textbooks emphasized the spread of Catholicism (among others via Jesuit education) into the Southern American colonies, other textbooks chose not to mention these issues. Some (like the Estonian, Flemish and German textbooks) nevertheless mentioned confessional migration flows within Europe, such as the migration of Protestants from the Southern to the Northern Netherlands during the Eighty Years' War.

What is the geographical and societal focus in the accounts of the selected interreligious contacts?

As explained in the previous section, we observed that while history textbooks across Europe address more or less the same main themes, they each have their own particular geographical focus. The Austrian, English, Swiss and Spanish textbooks are, for instance, mainly nationally centred in that their accounts of each of the interreligious contacts being studied, except for that between Christians and Roman polytheistic believers during the Roman Empire (first–fifth century CE), were mostly (or in the English case almost exclusively) centred on events that took place on the same soil as the present-day state. History textbooks in Belgium (Flanders), Estonia, Finland and Germany, on the other hand, took a broader geographical perspective, addressing a wider (Western and Central) European situation.

As regards the societal contexts in which the interreligious encounters are situated, it is interesting to note that they are never addressed from a purely religious perspective; all the textbooks situate and analyse the various interreligious contacts in a broader societal context, and relate them with other political, cultural, social and often economic issues. In fact, the links between these different societal domains are often made explicit. If we look, for example, at their accounts of the Crusades (within the interreligious contacts between Muslims and other religions during the Middle Ages), multiple religious, economic, political, social and cultural causes are discussed, as well as the connections between them. The same applies to the Reformation. In explaining the persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire, the Flemish textbook explains that because of its monotheistic character, adherents of Christianity refused to make offerings to the traditional Roman gods or to the emperor, which made them dangerous, as by acting in this way they undermined the emperor's position and the social order (Bering 2014). In this way, the textbook interweaves political, religious and social aspects of this question, while the German textbook even added a socio-economic dimension, pointing to the divide between the poor who supported Christianity and their rich and powerful enemies, during the early centuries of Christianity (Sauer et al. 2015: 138–9).

Of course, this is not to say that the religious dimension is ignored. Religious issues and doctrines are mentioned for each of the contacts (in line with a finding in Chapter 6), but the general focus is much broader and goes beyond purely religious aspects.

Who is attributed agency in the interreligious contacts?

In line with previous research on the attribution of agency in history textbooks, we found that, in textbooks across Europe, the agents most frequently cited in accounts of interreligious contacts in the past are powerful individuals, groups (not always powerful) and non-human agents. Powerful individuals are often religious leaders (like Pope Urban II, Ignatius of Loyola, Muhammad, Martin Luther or John Calvin), kings and emperors (like Constantine the Great, Saladin or Henry VIII), terrorist leaders (like Osama Bin Laden), intellectual leaders (like Rousseau or Voltaire as Enlightened

philosophers) or political and military leaders (like Charles Martel, Yasser Arafat, Yitzhak Rabin or George Bush Jr.). Ordinary individuals are almost never mentioned, nor are women, although some ordinary social groups, such as peasants, merchants and (poor) townsmen are referred to on occasions. Powerful groups in society, such as the clerical and social elite, the knights, the Jesuit Order or the rich bourgeoisie, are mentioned more often. Non-human agents, such as the state, the church, and specific religions such as Anglicanism, Zoroastrianism, Islam or Christianity are also portrayed as agents.

As can be deduced from this overview, and in parallel with the various societal contexts within which interreligious contacts are situated, these agents are not only described in religious terms (such as a 'group of Christians') but also in national, social, political and economic terms, with references, for example, to German Lutherans, Dutch Calvinists, Bavarian Catholics, French Protestants, peasant Protestants, or poor and rich Christians; the ethnic term 'Arabs' is often used interchangeably with the religious term 'Muslims', as are national terms such as 'Turks' or 'Ottomans'.

Another striking finding is that agents are very often (except for some eleventh and twelfth grade textbooks) homogenized in the accounts about interreligious contacts. Quite different parties involved in certain historical events are often represented as one homogeneous entity. Textbook authors across Europe commonly refer, for example, to 'the Christians', 'the Muslims' and so on, disregarding the differences within these groups. As mentioned earlier, there is often no clear distinction made between Sunnites and Shiites, nor between Scandinavian and German Lutherans. In so doing, textbook authors seem to create the impression that within a certain interreligious contact everyone involved within a specific group thought and acted in the same way. Of course, in historical reality this was not the case: people belonging to one party (e.g. 'the Christians', 'the Romans', 'the Enlightened thinkers', 'the Muslims' etc.) thought differently from one another, took different stances and acted in different ways. These differences, however, are often blurred or ironed out in the textbooks. The only instance in which all textbook authors are consistent in not homogenizing these groups is when they address the contacts between Muslims and other (non-)religious groups since 1989. In these accounts, the authors emphasize the important differences between moderate and extreme Muslims (including terrorists). A clear and explicit distinction is made between Islam and Islamist religious extremists. One textbook in Flanders even goes a step further. Under the heading 'Us and Them?', it explicitly deconstructs us-them mechanisms, explaining, for instance, why representations such as 'Turkish devils' and 'Christian dogs' had been created during the Crusades and had persisted long afterwards (Berings 2016). However, this effort was not taken to a higher level in terms of the general deconstruction of stereotypes, and in terms of recognizing their own homogenizing descriptions of the agents in historical phenomena.

An important question with regards to agency is to establish which of the various parties within a specific interreligious contact are treated as active agents. Is agency attributed to various parties and agents involved in the contact or to just one? The analysis clearly shows that in almost all the textbooks studied in this research, agency is attributed to various different parties in each interreligious contact. In the interreligious contact between Christians and Roman polytheistic believers during the Roman

Empire (first–fifth century CE), for instance, both the Romans and the Christians are represented as active agents; the Romans because they persecuted the Christians, and the Christians because they refused to worship Roman gods. In the contact between Muslims and other religions during the Middle Ages (seventh–fifteenth century CE) members of both religions were considered agents, as they fought each other. The same applies to the contact between those in favour of secularism and those in favour of religion having a strong position within society (eighteenth–nineteenth century CE). Enlightened philosophers are represented as active agents because they spread new ideas, while members of the Catholic Church were also active agents in that they tried to suppress these new ideas. In the contact between Muslims and other (non-)religious groups in the present day since 1989, radicalized Islamist religious extremists are attributed agency, as they carried out terrorist attacks, while the United States is also considered an active agent, as it retaliated against the terrorist groups and their supporters.

However, the fact that different parties in an interreligious contact are attributed agency does not mean that it is attributed in a balanced way. Some parties are often attributed more agency than others. In the Spanish textbook's description of the contact between Catholics and Protestants in the Early Modern Period (sixteenth–eighteenth century CE), for instance, Catholics are attributed more agency than Protestants, while in Finnish, Estonian and many German textbooks, quite the opposite is true. In almost all the textbooks covered in this research, Enlightened philosophers and thinkers are ascribed more agency than the Catholic Church in the contact between those in favour of secularism and those in favour of religion having a strong position within society (eighteenth–nineteenth century CE).

The attribution of 'mixed' agency is also reflected in the fact that many textbooks highlight the reciprocal influence that the different parties involved in the interreligious contacts had on each other. They state, for instance, that Romans and Christians influenced each other and their cult; they also refer to the reciprocal influence in the contacts between Muslims and other religions during the Middle Ages (seventh–fifteenth century CE), stressing above all the Muslim influence on Western Christian Medieval society. The same applies to the historical sources cited by the textbooks. For each of the interreligious contacts, almost all the history textbooks present historical sources from the different parties involved in the contact, although not in a balanced way.

In one of the interreligious contacts, however, one of the parties involved is almost never treated as an agent. In the contact between Jews and Christians in Medieval Europe (sixth–fifteenth century CE), it is very striking to find that Jews are mostly portrayed as passive victims who suffered as they were assaulted, hunted, attacked and murdered. Exceptions are the Austrian and, to a lesser extent, Estonian and German, textbooks in which Jews are briefly represented as active agents who lent money, traded and worked as doctors.

How are the interreligious contacts framed?

Although the selection of specific events and the attribution of agency within each of the interreligious contacts under study has already thrown up various clues, the

question still remains as to how the history textbook authors frame these interreligious contacts: in a positive, neutral or negative way?

Our analysis suggests that the language used by textbook authors is mostly neutral. They avoid using words or terms with a specific (positive or negative) connotation. The only exception is extremist behaviour, which is described in an explicitly negative way and condemned as a serious threat to peace in the world. History textbooks in Estonia and England, for instance, openly condemn terrorist attacks executed in the past two decades by religious extremists, which are clearly described as problematic and as hostile to world peace (Nutt and Vahtre 2014: 181; Bates et al. 2015b: 120–3).

Although the language they use is generally neutral, history textbooks do not always present the interreligious contacts themselves in a neutral way. In fact, the analysis reveals that they almost always present them in a negative way, as conflict-provoking and violent. This links in well to the central thesis of theologian William Cavanaugh, who argues that religion, particularly in Western societies, is widely yet wrongly considered to be a cause or promoter of violence – an idea he believes to be one of the foundational legitimating myths of Western society (Cavanaugh 2009). The interreligious contact between Christians and Roman polytheistic believers during the Roman Empire (first–fifth century CE), for instance, is always introduced within a context of hostilities, with an emphasis on persecutions. The reign of Constantine I and especially the Edict of Milan are normally presented as bright spots, although they are immediately followed by the remark that once Christianity became the state religion, intolerance began to appear again. The contact between Jews and Christians in Medieval Europe (sixth–fifteenth century CE) is also framed within a context of intolerance leading to violence and massacres. A Flemish history textbook has this to say: 'Medieval society was very intolerant towards people who were different or behaved differently.' (Berings 2016: 101). At the same time, this textbook offers an example of religious toleration. One of the historical sources cited by this textbook tells the story of a German bishop who invited Jews to his town (Speyer) so that they could live there in peace. Some German textbooks also offer examples of toleration, mentioning toleration and protection of Jews by Holy Roman emperors and German princes. As regards the rise of Protestantism and the interreligious contact between Catholics and Protestants in the Early Modern Period (sixteenth–eighteenth century CE), English, Spanish and Flemish history textbooks explicitly state that religious differences and problems were a cause of conflict. The only events with a positive slant appear in the Swiss textbook, which discusses at length the existence of biconfessional towns in Switzerland at the time, in which peaceful coexistence was possible (Weiß et al. 2011: 216–51). The general focus in the textbook accounts is, however, on conflict, violence and wars. Even the Peace of Augsburg (1555) is mentioned in a negative way in the Austrian, Estonian and Swiss textbooks; the authors claim that this Peace did not endure and had negative consequences, as it did not include Calvinists, and it fragmented Germany and led to the Thirty Years' War. German textbooks, by contrast, tend to emphasize the positive aspects of this Peace. All the textbooks mention the Treaty of Westphalia in a positive way, while framing it in a political rather than a religious context. The same general finding applies to the contact between those in favour of secularism and those in favour of religion having a strong position within

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society (eighteenth–nineteenth century CE). All the textbooks state that religion and church are a source of conflict, and that the demand for religious toleration came from the non-religious side. The fact that both secularism and toleration had profound religious roots in Christianity is largely ignored by the authors of these textbooks.

Similarly, the very recent interreligious contacts between Muslims and other (non-) religious groups since 1989 (post–Cold War era) are normally framed within a context of war, conflict and terrorism. The Oslo Accords of 1993 are a brief exception. The Flemish textbook even goes so far as to state: 'Conflicts, such as the chaos in Iraq and Syria, can only be fully explained from that ethnic and religious diversity.' (Geuens et al. 2015b: 226). The implicit message seems to be that religious diversity intrinsically carries with it the seeds of conflict.

Only one interreligious contact, namely that between Muslims and other religions during the Middle Ages (seventh–fifteenth century CE), is framed in a somewhat different manner. All the textbooks address the violent side of that encounter, as manifested in the expansion of Islam and the Crusades while, at the same time, highlighting the peaceful and enriching cultural exchange that took place within this contact. One of the English textbooks focuses exclusively on this aspect of the contact with a lengthy discussion of Medieval medicine and cultural exchanges (Cloake and Wilkes 2016: 12–5). In this case, however, the focus is not so much on tolerant and peaceful interreligious coexistence, but on beneficial cultural exchange. The Estonian and Flemish textbooks, furthermore, state that this was an exception which did not last that long. In other words, in their opinion, the default situation for interreligious contacts is conflict, not peaceful exchange. The contact between Muslims and other religions in that period inspired one history textbook (from Bavaria, Germany) to reflect on how this encounter is represented, raising the question as to why Islamic-Christian interreligious contacts are mostly described through conflicts and wars, while peaceful coexistence is often neglected (Brückner et al 2011: 53). Such a reflective stance on interreligious contacts is, however, very exceptional in the textbooks we analysed, which tend to represent religion and religious encounters as sources of conflict.

To what extent and how are the past and present related to each other in the interreligious contacts?

Very few textbooks establish connections between the past and present in their accounts of the interreligious contacts. In the very few instances in which such connections are made, it normally involves a comparison between the past and present. In the chapter on the interreligious contact between Christians and Roman polytheistic believers during the Roman Empire (first–fifth century CE) one of the German textbooks asks, for instance, whether the role of religion in society is smaller today than it was in Antiquity; it also asks students to compare the policy of Emperor Theodosius with that applied in Germany today (Gawatz et al. 2018: 181). Similar comparative questions can occasionally be found in Austrian, Flemish, Finnish and Spanish textbooks as well. A second way of connecting past to present, which is seldom applied, involves a postmodern approach in which current representations of specific interreligious contacts in the past are discussed and students are asked to reflect on them. This

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approach is applied in the representation of the Crusades in Estonian, Flemish and German history textbooks.

Despite the fact that few connections are made between the past and present in the history textbooks we analysed, the present nevertheless exerts a clear influence on representations of the past, particularly on those accounts about interreligious contacts in which Islam and Muslims are involved. As mentioned earlier, almost all of these textbooks make a clear and explicit distinction between Islam and Islamist religious extremists in the present, and state that the latter are problematic and hostile to world peace, while Islam is not. The authors seem to want to pass on a similar message via their account of the interreligious contact between Muslims and other religions during the Middle Ages (seventh–fifteenth century CE), almost always emphasizing the positive contribution made by Islam and Muslims to societies in the West, and state that most Muslims are peace-loving. It would seem that they are aware of the negative perception of Muslims and Islam within large parts of society, and aim to provide young people with a more positive, more nuanced picture. One Swiss history textbook does so very explicitly in its introductory text. It states that it is very important to understand the Islamic world in a peaceful way, particularly after the 9/11 events in the United States. In this respect, the textbook continues, studying the past is very important. Further references are made to al-Andalus and the Muslim contribution to the advancement of science in the Middle Ages, after which the textbook invites students to think about Islamic scientific discoveries that are still important today (Weiß et al. 2011: 78–9).

Conclusion and discussion

The aim of this chapter was to examine the social representations of religious diversity in the past that are being constructed and disseminated among young people across Europe today, from a comparative European perspective. To this end, we selected various important interreligious contacts over the course of history and examined the way they are represented in history textbooks used in secondary schools in a broad range of eight European countries: Austria, Belgium, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Spain, Switzerland and the UK. We also sought to identify major similarities and differences between the different countries.

When discussing our findings and drawing conclusions, caution is required. This study has a number of limitations. Although we have examined textbooks from a range of European countries, many others were not included. We were also only able to analyse a limited number of textbooks per country. There are a lot more textbooks on the market in each country. The focus of the analysis was on six interreligious contacts, while obviously many more could have been chosen. The result is that the analysis presented in this chapter cannot paint a complete picture of social representations of religious diversity in the past. A more extensive analysis might perhaps reveal slightly different or more nuanced conclusions. It might also identify additional silences, on top of the interreligious dimension of the colonial encounter, for example.

Nevertheless, on the basis of our analysis of some fifty textbooks, we can draw some firm conclusions and then go on to discuss them. The first conclusion we can

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come to is that the accounts are actually quite similar across the range of textbooks from different countries, especially in terms of the people, events, developments and agents they choose to focus on when describing these interreligious contacts. This seems to indicate the existence of an implicit European historical canon. At the same time, however, a national emphasis could be observed in the textbook accounts from various countries (especially England). Despite this, it is clear that textbook history has evolved a great deal in recent decades, especially since the end of the Second World War, from taking a predominantly or exclusively nation-centred approach to a broader vision centred on their part of Europe (Western, Southern or Central) or on Europe as a whole (see Erdmann, Maier and Popp 2006; Cajani, Lässig and Grever 2019). This is also reflected in the geographical focus of their accounts of these contacts.

Our second main conclusion was that all the textbooks embed interreligious contacts within a broad historical and societal (political, socio-economic and cultural) context. The religious context itself is also described. This is another sign of the evolution of textbooks, again particularly since the end of the Second World War, from a predominant focus on political and military history to a broader, more diversified coverage of various societal domains.

Our third conclusion, in relation to the attribution of agency, is in itself hardly surprising in that it confirms previous research which found that those most likely to be considered as agents in historical events were above all powerful individuals and groups, and other non-human agents. Ordinary individuals are almost never mentioned; neither are women. As regards the latter, we found that none of the books apply a gender perspective in their accounts of the interreligious contacts we studied. Another interesting finding is that humbler social groups, such as peasants, merchants and (poor) townsmen are referred to on occasions in these books, while in previous research on other subjects, such as the Cold War or the colonial encounter, these groups were rarely mentioned (Van Nieuwenhuyse 2019b; Van Nieuwenhuyse and Pires Valentim 2018). Another aspect worth noting is that, even if agency is not always attributed in a balanced way, the various parties involved in the interreligious contacts are all assigned some degree of agency. This suggests that the textbook authors wanted (to some extent) to explain these events from a range of perspectives.

Fourth, and also in line with previous research, we found that a great deal of homogenization took place in the textbook accounts of interreligious contacts. This may partly be due to the particular characteristics of the textbook genre, in which the past is approached in a very abstract, structural, 'social science' way. Textbooks focus particularly on the broad outlines and the processes of change in the past, and tend to overlook the micro-history, the individual human being of flesh and blood, and the nuances and differences within the parties involved in a historical phenomenon (Van Nieuwenhuyse and Bentrovato 2017). Within this analysis it is also worth noting that the textbook authors (except for some eleventh and twelfth grade textbooks) usually pay little attention to differences within the different parties involved in interreligious contacts. Instead, they give the impression that all those within each party thought and acted in the same way. The only case in which this observation is not entirely valid is in the contacts involving Muslims, in which the authors distinguish between moderate Muslims and radical Islamists. In so doing, they seem to want to tackle the persistent,

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generalized, negative views and prejudices in Western society today about Muslims in general.

Fifth, the same concern for the present can also be discerned in the interreligious contact between Muslims and other religions during the Middle Ages (seventh–fifteenth century CE), where the positive contribution of Islam and Muslims to societies in the West, and the fact that most Muslims were peace-loving, tends to be emphasized. This appears to be the only instance in which the influence of the present is clearly recognizable. Other than that, the textbooks are mainly past-oriented, in the sense that the past is treated completely independently of the present (Wils et al. 2011). We found very few examples of authors relating the past with the present. When they did, this mainly involved questions of comparison, and very occasionally offered a postmodern-inspired reflection on how the present deals with the past. Likewise, there were few traces of presentism, in the sense of projecting our contemporary frames of reference and values onto the past, and judging the past according to modern-day logic, rather than trying to understand it from its own perspective. It seems as if the textbook authors wanted above all to report on the past itself.

A sixth conclusion is that most of these authors offered a one-sided, negative representation of interreligious contact in the past, as a source of conflict, violence and even war. Although many of these contacts did indeed result in conflict, this was not always the case, which means that other stories could also be told. These contacts also led to peaceful coexistence and mutual understanding. Historians have also shown, for example, that secularism (treated positively by the textbook authors) has profound religious roots in Christianity. This side of the coin, however, is largely ignored in the history textbooks. As mentioned earlier, the message young people are receiving is that interreligious contacts generally have negative outcomes. This is clearly incorrect and unacceptable on various levels. As regards, for example, students' understanding of the past, this will inevitably be limited and one-sided; Cavanaugh, as mentioned earlier, went so far as to argue that history textbooks adopt this approach as a way of maintaining the myth that religion has a dangerous tendency to promote violence (Cavanaugh 2009). The result is that young people are not shown or taught the full richness and complexity of the past, and are therefore unaware that many of the agents in these interreligious contacts could and did make choices. Instead, the impression they receive is that conflict, violence and war were somehow inevitable, unavoidable outcomes of these contacts (Bermudez 2019). This annuls people's agency and ignores the contingent nature of the past.

Another result is that young people's view of interreligious contacts in the present can be tarred by the social representation of such contacts in the past. Some textbook authors seem to be aware of this possibility when they make clear that Islam cannot be equated with Islamist religious extremists, and that not all Muslims are extremists. However, they do not extend this awareness of the need to present a nuanced picture of the past to correct their own one-sided approaches to interreligious contacts, thereby giving students the impression that these contacts are bad by definition because they are a source of conflict and violence. This does not help young people to think about and deal with their own religious beliefs and those of others, nor about (their position in) society today.

Of course, this does not mean that history textbooks should cast a veil over interreligious contacts in the past. On the contrary, as the UNESCO highlighted in a guide to intercultural education, 'it is fundamentally important that democratic societies address interreligious issues through education' (UNESCO 2006: 14). For a good understanding of interreligious contacts, it is important to understand both the past and the present, as societies become increasingly religiously diverse (Patrick, Gulayets and Peck 2017). In history education, it is more important to build a good understanding of different religions and interreligious contacts than to develop religious understanding (i.e. an initiation into a religious way of life) (Jackson 2014).

So, how can a good understanding of interreligious contacts be acquired? First of all, students should be provided with accurate, nuanced and balanced information (Patrick 2015; Patrick, Gulayets and Peck 2017). This means that the different aspects and sides of interreligious contacts need to be addressed: the positive as well as the negative, the peaceful together with the violent. It is also important to not view religion only in relation to political developments (which often mean conflict). Interreligious contacts are much broader and richer than that. The various actors and parties involved should also be portrayed in all their diversity, that is, without homogenizing them into a single uniform group. Second, when studying these issues, students' critical skills need to be sharpened. It is important that they learn to critically analyse historical sources and to recognize perspectives. They should also be able to understand mutual representations (of any kind) within their context and deconstruct them, and develop a nuanced understanding of agency. Third and finally, the ability to take an open-minded approach and to engage in honest dialogue must also be strengthened.

These three goals can be pursued in textbooks through the application of didactic methods such as the interpretive approach and the dialogical approach (Jackson 2014). The interpretive approach concentrates on the representation of religions and interreligious contacts by others and on how students interpret them. It also encourages students to reflect upon these issues amongst themselves. The dialogical approach develops students' acceptance of diversity and difference, encouraging them to explore and understand these issues, and to discuss them openly. In so doing, history education can help young people become critical and constructive, open-minded citizens. It also develops important skills, such as understanding 'the other' and problematizing the 'othering' of different religious individuals and groups, adopting an open world view, avoiding stereotyping, and the ability to situate controversial issues within their past and present contexts, and to approach them from multiple perspectives.

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