

the TROUBLE *with*
TEXTBOOKS

*Distorting
History and
Religion*

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“Gary A. Tobin and Dennis R. Ybarra have produced a work of incomparable value. They have exposed an extraordinary pattern of errors, distortions and falsehoods in public school textbooks, teacher training and supplemental materials. More frightening is the stunning extent to which our children are being indoctrinated. Every parent, educator, and policy-maker should read this book.”

Kenneth L. Marcus, Lillie and Nathan Ackerman Chair in Equality and Justice in America, City University of New York, former staff director, United States Commission on Civil Rights

“*The Trouble with Textbooks* is a very important book not only for Jews but for the entire Christian community. This volume is an excellent tool for anyone who is interested in balanced information that is fair and reliable concerning Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.”

Rev. John J. Keane, SA, general council member and ecumenical officer, Franciscan Friars of the Atonement

“One of my greatest challenges in the university classroom is to teach critical thinking. Most undergraduates, though, consider the course textbook revealed truth and refuse to question it. *The Trouble With Textbooks* reveals that what passes for academic writing must be challenged.”

Marc Dollinger, Richard and Rhoda Goldman Chair in Jewish Studies and Social Responsibility, San Francisco State University

“This book is a must read for anyone who cares what American school children are learning about history and religion. I was dismayed to learn just how much our nation’s school systems and the publishing industry ‘dumb down’ vital information about religion and how wrong it is.”

Carolivia Herron, president, PAUSE Creative Writing Program, in partnership with Washington, D.C. Public Schools

“*The Trouble with Textbooks* should shock and concern everyone in the educational establishment. This groundbreaking study unflinchingly exposes the dissemination of inaccurate history and demonstrates that parents and responsible educators must steadfastly demand accuracy in social studies textbooks.”

Ephraim Isaac, director, Institute of Semitic Studies, Princeton, New Jersey

Summary The Trouble with Textbooks

by Gary A. Tobin, Ph.D. and Dennis R. Ybarra, M.B.A.
The Institute for Jewish and Community Research

The Trouble with Textbooks sounds the alarm about how textbooks disparage some groups and teach historical distortions. Our schools are supposed to instill young people with American values and provide students with the knowledge necessary for good citizenship. Instead, textbooks are filled with mistakes and misrepresentations.

Introduction

Textbooks around the world are blatantly used as tools for propaganda. It is shocking to discover that history and geography textbooks widely used in America’s elementary and secondary classrooms contain some of the very same inaccuracies about Christianity, Judaism, and the Middle East as those in Iran and the Arab world.

Assessing how textbooks treat these topics provides telling insight into how textbooks approach complex subjects. What do students learn about Jews, Jewish history, and Judaism’s relationship to Christianity? How does the ongoing challenging relationship between Jews and Muslims in the Middle East show up in the textbooks? What about the triangulation between Jews, Christians, and Muslims?

The 500 problematic passages about Judaism, Christianity, Islam and the Middle East we uncovered in our analysis of the 28 most widely used textbooks in public schools should evoke considerable concern on the part of Americans.

History and religion are being distorted in schools in every one of the 50 states. (See Appendix A for the list of reviewed textbooks.)

Textbooks include negative stereotypes of Jews, Judaism, and Israel. For example, textbooks tend to discredit the ties between Jews and the land of Israel. Israel is blamed for starting wars in the region and being colonialist. Jews are charged with deicide in the killing of Jesus. All in all, there are repeated misrepresentations that cross the line into bigotry.

The textbook publishing process suffers from systemic ills. Developing a textbook and getting it adopted in the major states of Texas and California is so expensive that only those competitors with the deepest pockets stand a chance to succeed. Only three mega-publishers (down from nine in less than twenty years) control the K-12 textbook market, meaning that more and more titles are concentrated in fewer hands. Errors in one book now stand a greater chance of replicating themselves across other books because they may originate from the same source.

Special interest groups make their influence felt in textbook content through the state adoption process and local district textbook selection. Publishers' reluctance to offend any group results in the dumbing down of textbook lessons to the lowest common denominator.

Teachers also turn to supplemental materials (provided at little or no cost by special interest advocacy groups) including outside readings, DVDs, CDs, exercises, posters, brochures, or other non-textbook (and non-primary) sources. In some situations, these supplemental materials

have become nearly as ubiquitous as the textbooks themselves, yet no one can vouch for their factuality and objectivity. They are rarely examined by anyone other than the teacher who uses them. Supplemental materials are often more inaccurate and biased than the textbooks themselves.

Methodology

We analyzed thousands of pages of social studies textbooks. We also looked at related supplemental materials and professional development teacher trainings. The textbooks we examined included teacher, student, and advanced placement editions. We performed a detailed content analysis of student materials, including student textbooks, websites, and handouts, and of teacher materials, including teacher's editions of textbooks, curricula, lesson plans, teacher training materials, websites, and more. The content analysis of the textbooks focused on four subject areas:

- Jewish history, theology, and religion
- The relationship between Judaism and Christianity
- The relationship between Judaism and Islam
- The history, geography, and politics of the Middle East

Major Findings

Textbook Writers Often Do Not Know Much About Their Subjects

Sometimes, the well-credentialed scholars whose names appear as authors of the textbooks have little if anything to do with the actual writing or content of the book.

Prestigious names may have been at one point associated with the publisher. They may have provided an initial outline, provided a cursory read of the material, perhaps an edit, or they may simply have used their scholarly reputation to lend legitimacy to the textbooks. The workhorses, whether in-house writers or employees of a textbook development agency, who actually write the text may have a great deal or little expertise in their area of responsibility.

Publishers Use “Chop-Shops” to Write Books

Publishers sometimes hand over a section or an entire book to a textbook development agency, known in the industry as a “chop shop.” Staffed mainly with educational specialists and writers, the textbook agencies follow the standards and guidelines supplied by the publishers (to meet state standards) to create pedagogically and statutorily correct textbooks. Subject matter experts in history, religion, civics, and so on can be notably absent from many of the chop shops.

Information Can Be Out of Date

There are reasonable explanations for obsolete passages to appear in textbooks: it is prohibitively expensive to publish constant updates; there are no simple channels to distribute updates to the thousands of classrooms that may be using any given textbook; and the trend toward electronic publishing creates a disincentive for costly reprints. Nonetheless, millions of schoolchildren are given facts that may be out of date.

Low Quality Scholarship Is Not Uncommon

Regardless of who authors a given passage, plain shoddy scholarship also plays a role: the inclusion of false “facts,” inaccurate generalizations, and imprecise conclusions. Editors and publishers are simply not as vigilant as they should be.

American Textbooks are “Dumbed Down”

When a complex subject is simplified and the text that could explain the difficulties in controversial passages is instead replaced by brightly colored illustrations or amusing-but-not-edifying sidebars, the resulting lesson becomes weakened simply by the omissions. The responsibility for the eviscerated lessons lies in several places. The pictures, sidebars, and exercises that abound in many history textbooks—and not just those for elementary and middle school children but for high school students as well—have squeezed out cogent writing about history and religion.

Politically Motivated Propaganda Wheedles its Way into Textbooks

Biased scholarship contains political or religious untruths. Biased scholarship means errors or misinformation in textbooks that denigrate one group in order to elevate another. We have no evidence that authors intentionally introduce their own prejudices into the writing, nor that editors are choosing one version of history over another because of personal bigotry. We can say that certain themes emerge in many textbooks that collectively comprise a bias. We do not believe that textbook publishers are “out to get” anybody or any group. They are subject to all kinds of external pressures so that the higher pursuit of truth and accuracy can be sacrificed to narrow interests.

Various Interest Groups Influence Social Studies

Interest group involvement is not *a priori* a negative influence on the quality of textbooks. It becomes problematic when some groups are represented in the discussion while others are not and when the groups involved are more committed to promoting a particular agenda, particularly concerning Islam, than to promoting accurate historical information. The material provided by some groups is incorporated by publishers into their product with little change while contributions on other subjects are rigorously critiqued and edited.

Organizations Like the Council on Islamic Education Have Wide Influence

Arab and Muslim interest groups attempt to whitewash and glorify all things Islamic and promote Islam as a religion. The organizations promote a pro-Arab, pro-Palestinian agenda in textbook's lessons on the Middle East augmented by unregulated supplemental materials. For example, the Council on Islamic Education has weighed in during adoption processes to oppose the direct and unconditional use of the term "Israel" for the Israelite monarchy in textbooks, lest anyone make the connection between modern Jews' claims to Israel and the kingdom that existed in the same location 3,000 years ago.

The Result Is Textbooks That Are Anti-Christian, Anti-Semitic and Anti-Israel

The textbooks tend to be critical of Jews and Israel, and sometimes disrespectful about Christianity. Moreover textbooks tend to glorify Islam rather than represent it in an objective way, particularly by their use of certain terminologies and word choices. Textbook publishers hold Christians

and Jews to one standard, while the Muslim groups who insisted that their religion be presented in an uncritical fashion seem to have their narrative included without modification.

What Should Be Done?

- Publishers need to make more effective use of the in-house fact checkers that they all employ. Publishers, on their own, need to institute better systems for uncovering and fixing inaccuracies in their material.
- Publishers need to apply a uniform standard of evaluation for any person or agency contributing content to their products.
- States and school districts must improve their vetting process for unregulated supplemental materials produced by advocacy groups. In order to gain entry into the classroom, these materials should conform to standards and curricular guidelines to ensure they are free of bias.
- Publishers should work more with organizations trying to promote accuracy and honesty in classroom materials. It is a much smoother process to work with publishers in the earlier stages of the development of a social studies textbook.
- Parents, teachers, school officials, and elected officials should demand more accountability on what goes into textbooks and supplemental materials used in the classroom.

Data Analysis

Negative Stereotypes of Jews Appear in Textbooks

The problematic passages in some textbooks' coverage of Jewish origins contain stereotypes of Jews that have often been used to foster classical anti-Semitism. Jews are described as legalistic and Judaism is portrayed as merely an overlong list of arcane rules, devoid of any spirituality. Jews are depicted as intolerant of non-Jews and as looking down upon others with an attitude of superiority.

- Textbooks teach that Jews and Judaism are legalistic. Jews care only about the letter of the law and ignore its spirit.
- The Jewish God is presented as stern and warlike. God's compassionate qualities, highlighted in lessons about other religions, are missing when Judaism is discussed.
- Sixty-four percent of textbooks use unscholarly and disparaging "Old Testament" terminology for the Jewish scriptures when discussing the origins of Judaism. At the point in history when Judaism was founded, there was not yet a "New Testament" in existence.

Misrepresenting the Relationship between Christians and Jews

Textbook treatment of Jews and Christianity has to be examined within the context of contemporary multiculturalism and the increased sensitivity to the place of minorities in our society. Racial and religious tolerance are now accepted norms in many societies today, particularly in the West (but of course not all). Textbooks pride themselves on sensitive treatment of minorities. The relationship between Christians and Jews is not treated with the same care.

- Several textbooks describe Judaism as only a precursor to Christianity, not a faith of intrinsic value that stands on its own.
- Textbooks come dangerously close to perpetuating the idea that Jews caused the crucifixion of Jesus and are guilty as a group of deicide, "the killing of God."

Glorifying Islam Compared to Christianity and Judaism

The wording used to describe the content of the Hebrew scriptures in some textbooks is unusually conditional in ways not applied to the sacred writings of Christianity and especially of Islam. Most often the words "stories" or "legends" or even "tales" appear which give the reader the impression that the Jewish biblical content being described is akin to fable. The same effect is achieved by an indefinite passive voice such as "it is told that . . ." or "the Israelites are said to..." This approach would be less problematic if it were taken across the board in discussing other religions, but it is not. Either all religions should be framed this way or none.

Islam is treated with a devotional tone in some textbooks, less detached and analytical than it ought to be. Muslim beliefs are described in several instances as fact, without any clear qualifier such as "Muslims believe . . ."

This is in remarkable contrast to the much more critical treatment of Judaism compared to the treatment of other major religions. In effect, many textbooks serve as apologists for Islam in a way that they do not for Christianity, Judaism, or any other major religion. No religion should be presented in history textbooks as absolute truth, either on its own or compared to any other, or they all should be. Supplemental

materials go even further in their unqualified praise for all things Islamic.

- Textbooks use devotional language to describe Muslim beliefs, but use qualifiers for beliefs of Judaism and Christianity. (See Appendix B.)
- The Islamic empire was a time of unqualified glory without blemishes.
- Islam and Muslims in history always tolerated Jews, unlike Christianity's treatment of Jews.

Denying the Jewish Connection to the Land of Israel

The coverage of Middle East history and the Arab–Israeli dispute in textbooks and supplemental materials contains significant elements of the Arab narrative, which frames the conflict from Arab and Palestinian points of view. It encompasses a view of ancient Middle Eastern history as well as interpretations of more modern history.

Many of the textbooks we examined, regardless of how well they might deal with the origins of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, usually discard reasonable scholarship when they present the Israeli–Arab conflict. Indeed, some textbooks have adopted wholesale the Arab narrative about the modern Middle East.

- The name “Palestine” is used liberally and inappropriately prior to the Roman suppression of the Jewish revolts and the Romans’ renaming of the land at that time as a punishment for the revolts.

- “Palestine” is the location of Jesus’ ministry even though the word is unknown in Christian sources.
- Jesus was a Palestinian, not a Jew.

Blaming Israel for All the Wars in the Middle East

There are three major themes in textbooks presenting Israel’s founding in 1948: 1) Israeli Jews, a majority of whom have roots in Middle Eastern countries, are called European colonists even though they are a multi-ethnic Semitic people with historical ties to Israel; 2) the longstanding Arab hostility to Israel that has been expressed in warfare against the Jewish state is soft pedaled; and 3) textbooks reference mainly Palestinian refugees and fail to mention the Jewish refugees from Arab lands that found new homes in Israel. Some textbooks obfuscate who started the wars waged on Israel by Arab countries and lay all the blame for the failures of the peace process on Israel. Some supplemental materials are inflammatory. They posit that Israeli Jews are white European colonialists in the same unsavory category as the imperialist European countries.

- The Arab nations never attacked Israel. Arab-Israeli wars “just broke out,” or Israel started them.
- Arabs nations want peace but Israel does not.
- Israel expelled all Palestinian refugees.
- Israel put the Palestinians in refugee camps in Arab lands, not Arab governments.

- Books perpetuate the propagandistic “camps” terminology for communities with established infrastructure and permanent housing.
- Jewish refugees forced out of Arab lands by the backlash against the creation of Israel are never mentioned, as if they do not exist.

Making Excuses for Arab and Muslim Terrorism

Many textbooks and some supplemental materials consistently reflect the Arab narrative that seeks to push the widespread use of terrorism by the Palestinians against Israel far into the background. The PLO, founded to destroy Israel (as called for in its charter until its modification in the 1990s), is recast in a more benign light as merely an advocate for a Palestinian state.

Textbook lessons on the Palestinian intifadas (uprisings) against Israeli presence in the West Bank and Gaza are one-dimensional presentations of a complex reality. A wide variety of often violent Palestinian actions are reduced to “civil disobedience.” Textbook publishers often want to maximize the visual depiction of Palestinian school age children, peers of their student readers, wherever possible, fighting against tanks and soldiers, as if it were a children’s revolt.

- Palestinian terrorism is nonexistent or minimal.
- Israel is not a victim of terrorism or terrorism against Israel is justified.
- U.S. support of Israel causes terrorism, including 9/11.
- The intifadas were children’s revolts not involving adults or terrorism.

Conclusion

Public schools are our streets, our towns, our countryside. They are our civic institutions and our community halls. They are America. The selection of certain facts and omission of others, the explicit or implicit support for one set of values over another, is more than merely an intellectual exercise, or a difference of opinion among well-intentioned people. The textbooks that result are the product of a dysfunctional system. They distort the teaching of religion with lessons that betray an anti-Christian, anti-Semitic, and anti-Israel bias.

In our increasingly interconnected world and at a time when global conflicts are drawn along religious, ethnic, and cultural lines, rather than by national boundaries, the United States has an undeniable moral responsibility to create an informed citizenry. We wield a power unequal to any other nation in the history of the planet, yet our citizens know surprisingly little about other peoples and not that much more about themselves. And, as we have seen, what they do learn may be wrong.

Discovering in our schools a pervasive set of erroneous beliefs about such a vital topic should alarm every taxpayer, every parent, and every public official. To allow biased textbooks and outright propaganda in supplemental materials into the schools is to pervert the very purpose of public education and a misuse of our democratic system.

Appendix A

Textbooks Reviewed by Publisher Parent Company

Education Media and Publishing Group Limited (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt)

1. Arreola, Daniel. D., Marci Smith Deal, James F. Peterson, and Rickie Sanders. *World Geography*. California teacher's ed. Evanston, IL: McDougal Littell, 2006.
2. Beck, Roger B., Linda Black, Larry S. Krieger, Phillip C. Naylor, and Dahia Ibo Shabaka. *Modern World History: Patterns of Interaction*. Teacher's ed. Evanston, IL: McDougal Littell, 2005.
3. Beck, Roger B., Linda Black, Larry S. Krieger, Phillip C. Naylor, and Dahia Ibo Shabaka. *Ancient World History: Patterns of Interaction*. Teacher's ed. Evanston, IL: McDougal Littell, 2005.
4. Beck, Roger B., Linda Black, Larry S. Krieger, Phillip C. Naylor, and Dahia Ibo Shabaka. *World History: Patterns of Interaction*. Student ed. Evanston, IL: McDougal Littell, 2003.
5. Bednarz, Sarah W., Ines M. Miyares, Mark C. Schug, and Charles S. White. *World Cultures and Geography: Eastern Hemisphere and Europe*. Teacher's ed. Evanston, IL: McDougal Littell, 2005.
6. Berson, Michael J., ed. *World History*. (Harcourt Horizons). Teacher's ed. Orlando: Harcourt, 2005.
7. Boehm, Richard G., Claudia Hoone, Thomas M. McGowan, Mabel C. McKinney-Browning, Ofelia B. Miramontes, and Priscilla H. Porter. *Ancient Civilizations*. (Harcourt Brace Social Studies). Teacher's ed. Orlando: Harcourt Brace, 2002.
8. Bulliet, Richard W., Pamela Kyle Crossley, Daniel R. Headrick, Steven W. Hirsch, Lyman L. Johnson, and David Northrup. *The Earth and Its Peoples: A Global History*. Advanced placement ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005.
9. Carrington, Laurel, Mattie P. Collins, Kira Iriye, Rudy J. Martinez, and Peter N. Stearns, eds. *World History: The Human Journey*. Student ed. Austin: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 2003.
10. Carrington, Laurel, Mattie P. Collins, Kira Iriye, Rudy J. Martinez, and Peter N. Stearns, eds. *World History: The Human Journey, Modern World*. Teacher's ed. Austin: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 2005.
11. Hanes, William T. III, ed. *World History: Continuity & Change*. Annotated teacher's ed. Austin: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1999.
12. Harcourt Horizons, ed., *The World*. (Harcourt Horizons). Teacher's ed. Orlando: Harcourt, 2003.
13. Helgren, David M., Robert J. Sager, and Alison S. Brooks. *People, Places, and Change*. Teacher's ed. Austin: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 2005.
14. Sager, Robert J., and David M. Helgren. *World Geography Today*. Teacher's ed. Austin: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 2005.

McGraw-Hill

15. Bentley, Jerry H. and Herbert F. Ziegler. *Traditions and Encounters: A Global Perspective on the Past*. Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2006.
16. Boehm, Richard G., David G. Armstrong, Francis P. Hunkins, Dennis Reinhartz, and Merry Lobrecht. *The World and Its People*. Teacher's ed. New York, McGraw-Hill / Glencoe, 2005.

17. Farah, Mounir A., and Andrea Berens Karls. *World History: The Human Experience*. Student ed. New York: McGraw-Hill/Glencoe, 2001.
18. Greenblatt, Miriam and Peter S. Lemmo. *Human Heritage: A World History*. Teacher's ed. New York: McGraw-Hill/Glencoe, 2006.
19. Lamm, Robert C. *The Humanities in Western Culture*. Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1996.
20. Spielvogel, Jackson J. *Glencoe World History*. Teacher's ed. New York: McGraw-Hill/Glencoe, 2005.

Pearson Education

21. Ahmad, Iftikhar, Herbert Brodsky, Marylee Susan Crofts, and Elisabeth Gaynor Ellis. *World Cultures: A Global Mosaic*. Teacher's ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2004.
22. Boyd, Candy D., Geneva Gay, Rita Geiger, James B. Kracht, Valerie O. Pang, C. Frederick Risinger, Sara M. Sanchez. *The World*. (Scott Foresman Social Studies). Teacher's ed. Glenview, IL: Pearson/Scott Foresman, 2005.
23. Ellis, Elisabeth G., and Anthony Esler. *World History: Connections to Today*. Student ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2001.
24. Jacob, Heidi H., and Michal L. LeVasseur. *Medieval Times to Today*. (World Studies). Teacher's ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2005.
25. Jacob, Heidi H., and Michal L. LeVasseur. *The Ancient World*. (World Studies). Teacher's ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2005.

26. Stearns, Peter N., Michael Adas, Stuart B. Schwartz, and Marc Jason Gilbert. *World Civilizations: The Global Experience*. 4th ed., Advanced placement ed. New York: Pearson/Longman, 2006.

Thomson

27. Adler, Philip J., and Randall L. Pouwels. *World Civilizations*. 4th ed., Instructor's ed. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson, 2006.
28. Upshur, Jiu-Hwa L., Janice J. Terry, James P. Holoka, Richard D. Goff, and George H. Cassar. *World History Since 1500: The Age of Global Integration*. vol. 2. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2002.

Appendix B

The comparison of devotional language used about Muslim beliefs with the qualifiers used for Judaism and Christianity is shown in the following table.

Table 5.1: Comparison of Language Used for Beliefs of the Three Major Religions in Selected Textbooks

Textbook	Judaism	Christianity	Islam
<i>The World</i> (Scott Foresman) (PE)	Caption to a picture of a seder plate: "Foods on the seder plate are symbolic of an ancient Hebrew <i>story</i> ."		"The pilgrimage, or hajj (haj), to Mecca is an essential part of Islam, the religion <i>revealed</i> to Muhammad. . . ."
<i>World History: Continuity and Change</i> (RE)	Glossary entry: "Ten Commandments Moral laws Moses <i>claimed</i> to have received from the Hebrew God Yahweh on Mount Sinai."		Glossary entry: "Qur'an Holy Book of Islam containing <i>revelations received by Muhammad from God</i> ."
<i>World Civilizations: The Global Experience</i> (PE)		Glossary entry: "Jesus of Nazareth" reads in part, "prophet and teacher among the Jews; <i>believed</i> by Christians to be the Messiah . . ."	Glossary entry: "Muhammad Prophet of Islam . . . ; <i>received revelations from Allah</i> in 610 C.E. and thereafter. . . ."
<i>Modern World History: Patterns of Interaction</i> (McDougal Littell)		"According to the <i>New Testament</i> , Jesus of Nazareth was born around 6 to 4 B.C." "According to <i>Jesus' followers</i> , he rose from the dead. . . ."	"Muhammad's teachings, which <i>are the revealed word of God</i> . . . , are found in the holy book called the Qur'an."
<i>World Cultures and Geography—Eastern Hemisphere</i> (McDougal Littell)	Teacher's Planning Guide: "[Section] Overview: Key Ideas Birthplace of Three Religions . . . Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all share common traits."		
	"Judaism is a <i>story</i> of exile."	"Christians <i>believe</i> that Jesus was the promised Messiah."	"The Qur'an is the collection of <i>God's revelations</i> to Muhammad"
<i>Glencoe World History</i> (MH)	"Then, because of drought, the Israelites migrated to Egypt, where they were enslaved until Moses led them out of Egypt. . . . Some interpretations of recent archaeological evidence <i>contradict</i> details of the biblical account."		