Religion, Education, and the 'East'

Addressing Orientalism and Interculturality in Religious Education Through Japanese and East Asian Religions

Giovanni Lapis

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Abstract

This work addresses the theme of Japanese religions in order to rethink theories and practices pertaining to the field of Religious Education. Through an interdisciplinary framework that combines the study of religions, didactics and intercultural education, this book puts the case study of Religious Education in England in front of two 'challenges' in order to reveal hidden spots, tackle unquestioned assumptions and highlight problematic areas. These 'challenges', while focusing primarily on Japanese religions, are addressed within the wider contexts of other East Asian traditions and of the modern historical exchanges with the Euro-American societies. As result, a model for teaching Japanese and other East Asian religions is discussed and proposed in order to fruitfully engage issues such as orientalism, occidentalism, interculturality and critical thinking.

Keywords Japanese religions. Religious education. East Asian religions. Study of religions. Didactics. Intercultural education.

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This book is indeed the result of a long journey that started well before the years of the doctorate with this strange idea of teaching the study of religions in public schools. While travelling, I met and worked with different persons which, in one way or another, contributed to pushing me forward. Among them, I must mention the U.V.A. group from Rome: Beatrice Nuti, Giulia Nardini, Paolo Pascucci and all the others. Also, I cannot forget my former colleagues at Padua University, with whom we founded our Laboratorio di Scienze delle Religioni: Francesca L'Altrelli, Maria Giuliana Rizzuto, Maria Bombardieri and Emanuele Barro. A special mention is due to all those persons with whom I worked in the years of the two EU-funded projects devoted to the teaching of the study of religions in schools. The list is long, but I wish to thank at least Tim Jensen, Isabelle Saint-Martin, Susanne Popp, Valentina Zangrando, Giulia Taccetti, Béatrice Héraud, Elena Nonveiller and all the teams from Denmark, France, Spain, Germany, Venice and Florence.
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Keywords Japanese religions. Religious education. East Asian religions. Study of religions. Didactics. Intercultural education.

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Religion, Education, and the 'East'

Addressing Orientalism and Interculturality in Religious Education Through Japanese and East Asian Religions

1 Framing The Issue: Research Aims, Topics, Methods

Summary 1.1 Hypothesis, Problems and Research Aims. – 1.2 The Usage, Meanings and Reasons for Addressing 'Japanese and Other Asian Religious Traditions'. – 1.3 Logic and Structure of the Argument. – 1.3.1 The Three Theoretical Baselines. – 1.3.2. Synopsis of the Next Chapters.

1.1 Hypothesis, Problems and Research Aims

It is widely acknowledged that the religious traditions of Japan, as well as other East and South-Asian[1] religious traditions, have been subjected to different exotic and orientalist appropriations for a long time by Europeans who studied them (Faure 1993; Clarke 1997; Paramore 2016b).

Consequently, a more critical and self-aware study of these religions, informed notably by post-colonial and post-modern critiques, contributed to the rethinking (cf. Turner, Salemink 2015; King 2017b)

1 For the sake of readability, I will often replace the wording 'South and East-Asian' with 'Asian' or 'East-Asian'. The latter choice meant to highlight that this work has a strong focus on the Eastern part of Asia, notably Japan, but also to acknowledge the relationships between South and South-East-Asian religious traditions with the East-Asian ones, especially in the modern period. Indeed, the former are often labelled in everyday discourses as 'Eastern' or 'Oriental' religions. Cf. *infra* this chapter and § 3.3.

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of the study of religion\s[2] itself, in its essentializing assumptions, categories and concepts. Scholars engaging with these traditions reached conclusions that go as far as rejecting the term 'religion' itself as a meaningful category. They consider it instead to be a construction peculiar to the modern Euro-American cultural sphere, which, nonetheless, has been enshrined as a universal constant.[3] At the same time, many studies in these areas have fruitfully identified and analyzed the genealogies of these colonial, orientalists and even self-orientalist former interpretations of East/South-Asian religions in relation to developments in Euro-American cultural history, especially in the field of the study of religion\s.[4]

The above cited works show that the study of Japanese and other East/South-Asian religions has the following, strong characteristics: first, it urges to rethink Christian-centric concepts such as 'religion', 'faith', 'beliefs', '(exclusive) belonging' and to avoid their uncritical application. Secondly, it carries on a critical analysis of orientalist and colonialist epistemologies which are based on modern pretensions of universality. Thirdly, it entails a keen focus on the dynamics of self- and hetero-representations of identities which are influent to the modern and contemporary global relevance of East-Asian religions.

In other words, it seems that the theme of Japanese and other Asian religious traditions can play a peculiar – albeit, I want to stress, not exclusive – illuminative role regarding the study and understanding of the broad, complex and sensitive topic of 'religion'. Therefore, the present work wants to probe the idea that addressing the same theme can also be a productive move to reveal hidden spots, tackle unquestioned assumptions, highlight problematic areas and offer useful insights for the field generally called 'Religious Education' (hereafter RE). It must be noted, however, the field I am particularly referring to should be specified as non-confessional RE; and in this regard the theme of Japanese and other Asian religious traditions is offered as a way to strengthen the critical and intercultural educational potential of such RE.

Indeed, when talking about RE, one should always be mindful that RE "comes in various shapes and each shape, besides, comes in various shades" (Jensen 2017b, 205). As a matter of fact, 'Religious Education' is a very generic term that covers all kinds of ways, often

2 In this study I adopt the wording 'religion\s', as employed in other important publications (Stausberg 2010; Stausberg, Engler 2016) to foreground the fact that, apart from studying what is typically referred to as 'religions' or 'religious', debates in this academic field frequently address theoretical questions regarding how to relate the variety of religions with the singular 'religion' as the conceptual point of reference.

3 Fitzgerald 2000; Masuzawa 2005; Josephson 2015; Horii 2018.

4 King 1999; Snodgrass 2003; Keppens, Bloch, Hegde 2010; App 2010; Dressler, Mandair 2011.

starkly different, of teaching religion and religions at school. From a certain point of view, we may say that there is a specific kind of RE for each country; since the relationship between school and religion runs parallel to the various configuration of relationships between states and religions institutions, RE may change accordingly. We may have, therefore, a RE which is confessionally oriented or not, compulsory or not, addressed to all or only to certain pupils, and so on. The most basic distinction is between confessional RE and non-confessional RE. The former entails the teaching of specific religious tradition(s) and is managed by the concerned – and, authorized – religious community/ies, often in cooperation with the state.[5] The latter entails provisions for teaching matters concerning religions from an external perspective and under management of the state, albeit not necessarily excluding the cooperation of religious communities (Ferrari 2013).[6] Furthermore, it should be noted that in various cases of non-confessional RE, institutional documents often explicitly attribute a special status to Christianity, especially in terms of cultural heritage.[7]

This last observation shows how a classification from an institutional perspective does not depict entirely the differences or exhaust the peculiarities of the various types of RE. Shifting the criteria, for example, from the legal framework to baseline educational aims, curricular contents or actual practices, we can have different classifications of RE, which also highlights the reasons why even supposedly non-confessional RE should be critically reconsidered.

One of the most used classifications (originally proposed in Grimmitt 1973, cf. *inter alia* Giorda, Saggioro 2011, 131-2, 178-9) refers to the basic educational strategy of RE, which may be divided into three main orientations: 'learning into religion', 'learning from religion'

5 In the context of Europe, for example, this is the case of Portugal, the Netherlands, Poland, Austria, Belgium, Spain, Latvia, Luxembourg, and Italy. In these cases, there is often one or a few more historically predominant traditions actually taught in schools, e.g. Catholicism in Italy, Spain and Poland, while other institutionally recognized religions may be taught upon various conditions depending on the country (official request, number of applicants, willingness of the religious community to cover expenses, etc.). In historically bi-confessional countries, such as Germany, the two predominant trends of Catholicism and Protestantism are often taught in an ecumenical modality (Willaime 2007, 60; Ferrari 2013, 101).

6 This is the case of England and Northern European protestant countries such as Sweden and Denmark (Willaime 2007, 61; Ferrari 2013, 100). A notable exception is represented by the German Land of Brandenburg (Alberts 2007, 337 ff.) and recently also by Switzerland.

7 Concerning England, cf. *infra*, ch. 4; concerning Sweden cf. Alberts 2007, 211 ff. and Berglund, 2013. For Denmark cf. Jensen, Kjeldsen 2013, and Andreassen 2013 for Norway.

and 'learning about religion'.[8] The first one often overlaps with the confessional institutional framework and aims to introduce the pupils to the self-understanding of a religious tradition, focusing on doctrinal matters and employing a theological perspective. With 'learning about religion' the aim is instead to have the pupils develope a factual knowledge of a certain tradition, usually from an academic, non-confessional perspective. 'Learning from religion' is a more ambiguous concept, that will be often critically discussed in this work, and can be generally understood as enabling pupils to personally reflect, especially for what concerns existential, metaphysical or ethical questions, on the basis of various issues brought forth by the doctrines or practices of the religious traditions under examination.

Indeed, Frank and Bochinger (2008) delineate more starkly the critical ambiguity of having a 'middle term' between confessional and non-confessional RE approach. On the base of their fieldwork in Switzerland, they distinguish three main forms of RE practice: "dogma-related RE", "life-world-related RE" and "Culture studies-related RE". In the first case, an object of teaching-learning (e.g. the concept of 'God') has none or little 'framing', in the sense that the idea of 'God' is engaged with a nearly univocal and exclusive frame, i.e. the context of Christian tradition or even a narrower context of Protestant tradition, so that pupils have little possibility of thinking about the concept of 'God' from other perspectives. Actors in this kind of teaching-learning process tend to speak from a "we-position"; which is reflected in the fact that ultimately pupils are supposed to repeat a dogmatic interpretation which is considered valid for all pupils, hence ('we'). In "life-world-related RE" the objects of teaching-learning are framed within the pupils' life-world[9] experiences and/or in some anthropological universalistic assumptions such as the postulation of a 'common religiousness' in every human being. In this case discourses employ a 'you-position' (I would add also an 'I-position') in the sense that the pupils are personally engaged and asked, for example, to express their idea of 'God' through words or drawings. Here, differently to the first form, the object is distinguished from its framings (which differs from pupil to pupil). However, pupils work only with their frames or at least they are presented with just their classmates' frames. Frank and Bochinger observe

8 It must be noted that these three ideal types do not have to be mutually exclusive: as we will see in ch. 4, English RE has always been trying to balance between 'learning about' and 'learning from'. Also, even instances of institutionally confessional-RE may aim to offer knowledge about other religions, albeit with the high risk of applying theological filters.

9 Frank and Bochinger (2009, 198 fn. 21) draw this concept from Alfred Schütz's (1899-1959) theory of Lebenswelt in the sense of a pre-theoretical, naïve or everyday apprehension of the world that shapes our "natural attitude to it"; cf. Dreher 2011.

that there are, nonetheless, some similarities to the "dogma-related RE" practices, since very often teachers that employ the "life-world-related RE" approach presuppose that all humans have a basic religious orientation. In other words, they assume that every religious symbol can be meaningfully linked to the inner-world of pupils, who can thus express themselves through these symbols. Therefore, for Frank and Bochinger, the first two forms are more akin one to another and pertain to more general religious teaching (*religiöser Unterricht*). What pertains instead to the teaching of knowledge about religions (*religionskudlichler Unterricht*) is the last "Culture studies-related RE" form, in which the discourses employ a 'they-position'. This entails, among other things, that not every religious object is meaningful for everyone. Instead, by comparing, for example, different narratives from religious traditions or different lifestyles of religious persons, teachers guide pupils to create a more general framing, such as the analytical concept of "the theory of cosmogony and anthropogony" (202). Alternatively, teachers may offer the social or historical context as frames to be inserted or studied, e.g. the relevance of a religious building.

Jensen and Kjeldsen (2013) cast an even more suspicious eye on REs that institutionally self-define themselves as non-confessional and propose two classifications: "Capital-C Confessional RE" and "small-c confessional RE". While the first is rather self-explanatory, and refers to standard denominational teachings, the latter indicates those REs which, albeit formally dissociated from specific religious traditions, continue to be based on a "religious understanding of religion", in the sense of "having the explicit or implicit aim of promoting (some kind of) religion, or religion-based values in general" (Jensen, Kjeldsen 2013, 188). For example, they detect this kind of RE within the Danish curricula and syllabi of the *Folkeskole* (compulsory schooling from the age of 6 to 16). They show how there is a clear influence of "Christian theological philosophy-of-life traditions" or of cultural-national essentialist discourses which posit the Danish version of Lutheranism as compatible with a secular democratic state because it is primarily made up of 'morals', 'faith', 'culture' or 'cultural heritage'. Furthermore, this Lutheranism is positively contrasted with other 'less modern' traditions, notably Islam (195-200).

Jensen is equally skeptical of another prominent type of RE (2017a, 54-8). He calls it "interreligious (or Intercultural or Multicultural) RE", which presents itself as "a special kind of response to the changes in or towards new kinds of religious pluralism" (54). As a matter of fact, this 'dimension' or 'function' of RE is highly stressed especially in those various supranational projects and recommendations published since 09/11 which promote educational policies aimed at fostering mutual tolerance, respect and understanding between different religions and beliefs in an increasingly plural world (cf. Jack-

son 2008a). In general, from the point of view of contents and educational aims, in this "Interreligious/Intercultural/Multicultural" modality of RE, religions are seen as a pivotal element in the definition of the identities of the pupils. This kind of RE is supposed to support the development of said identities within a framework of respect for human rights, and to foster the social/cultural inclusion of various cultural and religious groups (and the individuals therein). Therefore, the common educational strategies of this kind of RE include not only exposing pupils to a variety of various religious traditions, but also developing 'dialogical' skills, so that pupils may not only learn *about* different religions, but also learn *from* different religions, possibly directly from classmates and possibly in relation to themes of public interest such as justice or world peace. One example of this RE is the so-called 'Hamburg Model' in Germany, which focuses on having pupils debate between different religious/ideological positions, with the aim of constructively comparing and contrasting different views, especially concerning themes such as social justice, peace and human rights (cf. Jackson 2004, 114-17; Alberts 2007, 332-5). The degree in which such "Interreligious/Intercultural/Multicultural" may be classified as secular, or as "Capital-C Confessional RE" or as "small-c confessional RE", depends on the actual practices and contents (Jensen 2017a, 54). At any rate, it must be noted that in prominent examples of this kind of RE, such as the above-mentioned Hamburg Model, while it is acknowledged that "there will be different claims to truth which cannot be reduced simplistically to 'common ground'" and "situations of unsettled differences" (Jackson 2004, 117), this supposedly neutral intercultural/interreligious model easily slips into a theological frame that assumes that "all religions are 'incomplete'" and that "all people are children of God" (116), thus indicating that this RE falls under the "small-c confessional RE" or even "Capital-C Confessional RE".

This blurring between confessional and non-confessional RE can be sided with the fact that, at least in the European situation, confessional RE is still predominant. A quick glance at the work of Davis, Miroshnikova and Mudd (2013) reveal that 16 out of the 22 European countries examined belong to the confessional category. This fact considerably effects the educational research in RE in general, including the allegedly non-confessional ones. Both in individual national contexts, as well as in comparative and transnational perspectives, many studies explore topics that do not eschew theological, or generally religious agenda in education. Some examples are the formation of religious identities in pupils and their agency in this regard (Smyth, Lyons, Darmody 2013), or the role of interreligious dialogue in showing how the

> creeds and holy books of the world's religions teach about spiritual systems that reject violence and the individualistic pursuit of economic and political gain, and call their followers to compassion for every human being. (Engebretson et al. 2010, V)

In general, scholars justify their interest in approaching in such ways the 'religious', 'moral' and 'spiritual' dimensions of education by claiming that

> it has emerged a strong and vital interest in human religiosity, spirituality and values, and many are searching for meaning both within and without religious traditions today to seek answers to ethical and moral questions that have been generated by the knowledge and technological explosion. (De Souza et al. 2009, XV)

The present work begs to differ from such approaches to RE and inscribe itself in the fairly novel field of RE studies based on the academic study of religion\s (hereafter SoR). Interestingly enough, the academic study of religion\s only recently began to inquire into the field of RE. In the European context, within the EASR (European Association for the Study of Religions)[10] the Working Group on Religion in Public Education was established in 2007. This relatively new subfield distinguishes itself "from other existing networks and organisations dealing with religious education (RE) in Europe at various levels and in various ways",[11] and is devoted to two strands of research. The first one is a more customary descriptive approach, i.e. aimed at reaching conclusions of interpretative, historical, or taxonomical nature. Their scopes, however, are quite variegated: studies in this regards concern e.g. politics of identitarian discourses in RE (Jensen, Kjeldsen 2013), socio-historical contextualization of RE (Giorda 2015), representations of religions in textbooks (Andreassen, Lewis 2014) or RE and minority religions (Berglund 2017). A good deal of research focuses on historical development and classification of various RE models, both from the point of view of institutional frameworks (Pajer 2014; 2017) and of actual practices (Frank, Bochinger 2008) or both (Jensen 2017a).

Along with these more descriptive works, the second strand comprises works that have an explicit normative bend and push forward

10 Cf. `http://easr.info/easr-working-groups/public-education/`.

11 `https://www.easr.eu/easr-working-groups/public-education/about-the-group/`. These other groups are, for example, the European Network for Religious Education in Europe through Contextual Approaches (ENRECA), the European Forum for Teachers of Religious Education (EFTRE) and European Forum for Religious Education in Schools (EuFRES).

the conceptualization and development of SoR-based RE didactics.[12] These SoR-based normative works represent quite a novelty in the gamut of similar research in RE, and differ from the other, not SoR-based approaches. First, they adopt an explicit a-religious stance, in the sense that they are not pro- nor anti-religions, also in the sense that they address every type of learner, irrespectively of their possible religious belonging, anti-religious attitude or indifference. Second, they have a painstakingly problematic approach to the concept of religion in itself. For example, the focus on the inner, moral, 'spiritual' dimension of religion is considered too limited and too tied to a modern, Protestant view of religion. Therefore, this kind of research, instead of focusing on the development of the religious identity of the learners, is more interested in providing knowledge and critical tools in order to cope with the present-day situation of religious and cultural plurality.

This is the perspective that I adopt in the present work and that will be developed and discussed in depth throughout the chapters. The present work aims in fact to investigate the topic of how to teach Japanese and other Asian religious traditions in the context of non-confessional RE as a state-managed subject in public schools. This means asking which developments, adjustments or enrichments may be recommended to former research and models, especially the established non-confessional RE. More in detail, this work aims to produce a baseline theoretical framework which systematically analyses and develops the various relevant implications that the theme of Japanese and other Asian religious traditions, as approached from the perspective of the study of religion\s, may bring to the scholarly debate over non-confessional RE.

As stated at the onset of this chapter, the present-day global relevance of Japanese and other Asian religious traditions is inextricable from the historical dynamics of the constructions of self- and hetero-representations of cultural identities among different social groups and civilizations. Such dynamics developed especially during the construction of the modern international order, in which practices, discourses and politics of religion played a remarkable role. In other words, the value in the study of Japanese and other Asian religious traditions does not necessarily limit itself to the epistemological reconsideration on how to study religions, but can contribute to the RE debate in general, and to the SoR-based RE in particular, also within the dimension of intercultural and citizenship education. As a matter of fact, the SoR-based RE proposes itself first and fore-

12 Alberts 2007; 2008; 2017b; Jensen 2008; 2019; 2020; Giorda, Saggioro 2011; Giorda 2012; Frank 2013; 2016; Frank, Bleish 2017; Meylan 2015; Kjeldsen 2019; Denish, Cush 2020. It goes without saying that often the conclusions of normative studies are grounded and substantiated by accompanying descriptive analyses.

most as being the most neutral and self-critical perspective possible in a society characterized by increasing religious, anti-religious and a-religious plurality. Therefore, the issue of how to communicate, understand and coexist with persons with different horizons of reference, at various levels of communities (local, national, global), becomes logically a primary issue for this kind of RE. Intercultural and citizenship education is not only acknowledged in the field of SoR-based RE (cf. Alberts 2007, 74-83, 355-66; Giorda, Saggioro 2011, 170 ff.), but is a key topic also in non-confessional RE in general (cf. Jackson 2003; 2004).

Furthermore, the importance of the relationships between RE, intercultural dialogue and intercultural education is highlighted in several studies and recommendations from a supranational/institutional level. The influential *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue*, issued in 2008 by the Council of Europe (hereafter, CoE), states that the teaching of "religious and convictional facts", along with history and language education, are perhaps among the most relevant subjects in the intercultural field, so that one may "understand religions and beliefs and avoid prejudice" (CoE 2008a, 30-1). It recommends that

> appreciation of our diverse cultural backgrounds should include knowledge and understanding of the major world religions and nonreligious convictions and their role in society. (43)

Similarly, the *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools* (OSCE/ODIHR 2007) justifies its recommendations on the grounds that teaching about religions and beliefs is an "essential part of a quality education", that "fosters democratic citizenship", "promotes understanding of societal diversity", and helps in "broadening one's cultural horizons and in deepening one's insight into the complexities of past and present" (76). Along these lines, other studies and practical guidelines have been published by the CoE, such as *Religious Diversity and Intercultural Education: A Reference Book for Schools* (CoE 2007) and *Signposts: Policy and Practice for Teaching about Religions and Non-Religious Worldviews in Intercultural Education* (CoE 2014). Accordingly, I will explore the relevance of the theme Japan and other Asian religious traditions in RE with particular consideration of those educational aims characterizable as critical, intercultural (UNESCO 2013) and democratic culture education (CoE 2018a).

In summary, this study would like to contribute also to the incipient SoR-based RE normative studies, as it further corroborates their underlying principles, focuses more in detail on their aims, and adds new perspectives, while being receptive of supra-national recommendations and discourses concerning the general topic of interculturality and critical thinking.

To date, an attempt to build a comprehensive and systematic approach to the teaching of East-Asian religions (not to mention Japanese religions in particular) in public schools, from the standpoint of the academic study of religion\s, and with the aim of fostering intercultural and citizenship competence, is still somehow missing. A number of works offering guidance on teaching Asian religions have been published, but they refer to university and college level (e.g. Richey 2008; Lewis, De Angelis 2017). While providing insightful clues and practical examples, they are nonetheless limited by being collections of individual essays which focus on very particular and specific contexts, sometimes tangential to the overall field of the study of religion\s, such as teaching Buddhism as philosophy (Siderits 2017) or, even more specifically, teaching Yogācāra Buddhism using cognitive science (Waldron 2017). Certain essays, while focused on a certain topic, are surely of relevance for a more general discussion on teaching East-Asian religions. For example, they argue for the need to rethink the teaching of Zen Buddhism (Heine 2017) given its relevance in contemporary common culture, or engage with the general question of whether or not Confucianism is a religion (Berthrong, Richey 2008). Others focus on too specific topics, such as the Mencius-Xunzi debate in early Confucian ethics (Stalnaker 2008). On the other hand, there have been contributions also about the actual practice of teaching East-Asian religions in public school (and in higher education as well). However, they consist of insightful but not systematic articles which provide practical tips, hints, and example of good practices in disparate and very specific topics, which often refer to global history classes and rarely deal with intercultural issues. The only work in my knowledge that argues that the topic of East-Asian religions should be engaged in RE with the precise aim of overcoming outdated, reified and Eurocentric treatment of the topic of religion is the essay by Cush and Robinson (2020). It is very aligned with the perspective of this work, as it critically asks whether the concept of religion in popular, academic and adherents' usage is helpful when applied to East-Asian traditions. Problems include the homogenization of diversity, unnatural separations between traditions and the influence of modern Euro-American thought and power. However, its limited space does not explore in detail the practical implications in a didactic and educational sense.

1.2 The Usage, Meanings and Reasons for Addressing 'Japanese and Other Asian Religious Traditions'

In strong continuity with the critical and interculturally-sensitive scholarly background above illustrated, in the present work the use of terms such as 'Japanese', 'Chinese' or more in general 'East and South-Asian religious traditions' is to be better understood as the religious traditions which *historically* originated in a more or less circumscribed spatial region, be it Japan or the eastern parts of the Asian continent. This is meant to imply several issues worth discussing before continuing.

First, I want to avoid a distinction between a 'Western' world, characterized only by three Abrahamic monotheisms, and an 'Eastern' world in which these latter traditions never took hold (which is historically inaccurate). In other words, I acknowledge the historical presence and cultural rooting of the monotheisms in Asia (cf. e.g. Csordas, Kurian 2015; Wormser 2015; Chong, Goh 2015) but it will not be my focus.

Secondly, I use the term 'tradition' as an interpretive category that implies a complex of "power, agency, authority, rhetoric, ideology, community, temporality, memory, continuity, innovation, identity" (Engler 2005, 358). I do not imply therefore a dichotomy and contrast with 'modernity', but I use the term 'tradition' as a heuristic shorthand to indicate a (complex) process of selectively and creatively handing down to the next generation a "repertoire of resources" that are "variously used by individuals negotiating their lives" (Adler 2014, 11; Campany 2003, 317 ff.). Thirdly, by using both particular (Japan, China or India) and general (East/South Asia) geo-spatial indication, I want to emphasize the transcultural dynamics of religious traditions. In other words, albeit their initial point of diffusion or development can be pinpointed to certain historical and geographical coordinates, one should also consider the cultural fluxes throughout the whole Asian region (e.g. the transmission of tantric practices, cf. *infra*, § 3.2.3). This prevents us from assigning to the religious traditions nowadays present in modern national states a peculiar character exclusive only to those states. When considering e.g. Japanese or Chinese religions, especially in pre-modern context, I am referring to cultural phenomena originating from or taking place in regions which today are defined by certain national borders. However, I do this without assuming any essential or immutable links that bind the character of those traditions to their regions of origins, nor to the regions of their historical presence.

Lastly, by referring to these traditions as 'historically originated', I emphasize the importance of the dynamics of global spreading and acculturation of these religions in various parts of the worlds, especially Europe and North America.

These last two points necessitate I explain the choice of the theme of 'Japanese *and* other Asian religious traditions'. While Japan will be a privileged case study among Asian traditions, it cannot be considered as irrelated or as a seemingly exceptional case from its larger geographical and historical context. In other words, it would be misleading to examine Japan without considering not only other traditions pertaining to its supposed area of belonging, i.e. East-Asia (with China and Korea), but also traditions said to pertain to South Asia (India, Sri Lanka, etc.) and even to Southeast Asia (Myanmar, Thailandia, etc.). This holds especially true when investigating the modern and contemporary relationships between Japan and the Euro-American contexts concerning discourses and practices about 'religion'.

There are several reasons for adopting this approach. To start with, to focus exclusively on Japan implies a methodological nationalism and a subdivision of the world in supposedly homogeneous areas, which have been criticized under many aspects. From a theoretical point of view, to focus only on what happens within (modern) national border is to assume without support that a nation is a natural unit of analysis, and the contained culture and society are homogeneously enough to be considered as a whole (Wimmer, Schiller 2003). From a genealogical point of view, the subdivision in national or supranational areas such as East-Asia or Northern Africa reflects an idea of an international order born within Europe and then projected onto the 'rest' for purposes of both epistemological and political control (Sakai, Walker 2019). As Sakai and Walker argue, the articulation of the world as divided in commensurable (stable, homogenous, sovereign, mutually recognized) areas begin with the Treaty of Westphalia (1648). Being in the first phase of the colonial era, such articulation was predicated on the basic differentiation between Europe, which were now characterized by commensurable areas (i.e. embryos of modern nation-states), and the 'rest' which was not commensurable and thus open to (exotic) study, control and subjugation. Indeed, this heritage can be seen in the fact that a great deal of the postwar developments of the field called 'area studies', especially in the US, has been linked to the necessity of supporting a strategic political (and even military) positioning in the global landscape. The world is thus divided in national states belonging to certain areas, to be studied/surveilled and, when needed, recalled to commensurability with nation-building or military measures (Sakai, Walker 2019, 1-4, 11-19). At the same time, societies which were inserted in this international grid actively internalized its principles and sought to homogenize its internal characteristics (cultural and linguistic traits *in primis*) and define itself as different from both the 'West' and other neighbouring regions, as it has been in the case of Japan (cf. e.g. Morris-Suzuki 1998). This approach based on nation-states, in turn, greatly influenced and still linger in many historical accounts of Japan, of both autochthonous or foreign authorship,

> in which the main task of the historian is to rank the position of the nations on a scale of progress, development or power, and explain the reasons for their ranking. (Morris-Suzuki 2020, 200-18)

Methodological nationalism is thus rightly eschewed in more sound studies, which highlight the multi-lateral interaction of the area, focusing on what Barnes calls the "Yellow Sea Interaction Sphere" (Barnes 2015), also when a circumscribed theme and area are under scrutiny, such as Buddhism and other religions in Japan (cf. e.g. Deal, Ruppert 2015, 15-17; Deal 2019). However, one should not commit the opposite mistake of subsuming a region in its larger area of reference by postulating some important *shared* traits (e.g. rice culture, or, more in line with our discussion, Confucianism and Buddhism) as the *fundamental and constant* traits with the highest explicative power. In this way methodological nationalism simply expands and posits equally artificially, crated boundaries such as those separating Est Asia from South Asia or even Eastern Europe (Morris-Suzuki 2020, 13-14). To avoid essentializing and naturalizing both the 'nation' and the 'area', new approaches to area studies suggest that

> the determination of area depends on its relevance for the research theme chosen, and can have any size, location or temporality. (Houben 2017, 202)

Such input is especially welcomed when we need to consider the dynamics of self- and hetero-representations between Japan and Euro-America regions concerning discourses and practices related to 'religion'. In conformity with the fundamental euro-centric assumption dividing the 'West' and the 'East', Japanese religions have been historically engaged and interpreted by the 'West' within a context wider than China and Korea, including notably India and the Southeast regions, especially for what concerns *theravāda* Buddhism (cf. *infra*, § 3.3). Similarly, also Japanese religious leaders and thinkers, when confronting modern hegemonic discourses on 'religion', had to relate themselves with the putative areas of origin of their traditions. This is what Suzuki Daisetsu did when he entertained relations with Chinese Buddhism reformers and scholars (Li 2020). Several Buddhist monks and scholars went even beyond, and felt the need to reconnect their traditions to the 'original' Indian, Sanskrit/Pāli origin (Stortini 2015; 2020).

A last, more 'practical' reason to discuss Japanese religious traditions together with other Asian traditions lies in the fact that the examples of RE discussed and criticized in ch. 4 barely touch the topic of Japan and give more space to Hinduism or Buddhism in general. If I want to argue that the theme of Japanese religions represents a fruitful occasion for criticism and deconstruction of the approach

that such RE models adopt towards East-Asian traditions in general (and beyond), I cannot limit myself in addressing exclusively Japan. Not only would it be an implicit endorsement of the modern rhetoric of Japanese uniqueness, but, more importantly, I need to consider how themes and traits found in Japanese traditions resound and connect with other areas commonly referred to as 'the East', without positing a fundamental, immutable essence of such an area.

1.3 Logic and Structure of the Argument

1.3.1 The Three Theoretical Baselines

It should be clear by now that the present inquiry has a fairly interdisciplinary character, as it aims to weave together issues pertaining to those fields usually called 'educational sciences', 'area studies' and, of course, 'religious studies'. Concerning the latter, however, the present work will use the term 'study of religion\s' as it reflects better the contemporary self-definition of the field (Stausberg, Engler 2011; 2016) and also because of the inherent ambiguity of the term 'religious studies' which often encompasses research enterprises whose epistemic goals are not fully scientific nor neutral (cf. Weibe 2005). For what concerns the field of area studies, the previous section warns us of the dangers of assuming it as a bounded theoretical field on its own. Instead, one of the aims of this work is to show and exploit the fruitful connection between the theoretical study of religion\s and the study of religions in Japan and other Asian religions. What needs peculiar treatment is the field of educational sciences, which we will engage in two of its subfields, didactics and intercultural education. Thus, the three theoretical baselines of the present work become the following.

First, since we want to rethink RE by capitalizing on the rethinking process of the field of the study of religion\s, we need to start from the theoretical premises of this field. This latter is characterized by one, or rather two closely interrelated objects of research, which are expressed by the idiosyncratic use of the backlash in the term 'religion\s'. The first is 'religion' as a conceptually constructed object of theoretical reflection, the second is 'religions', i.e. those phenomena whose identification and scientific treatment is closely linked to the nature of the theoretical construct of reference (cf. Stausberg 2010). As it will be detailed in the next chapter, during its development this academic enterprise has taken pains, on one hand, to strip itself of explicit and implicit theological or religionist influences, such as the *sui generis* interpretation, i.e. that religion can be understood only from a unique and peculiar perspective. Instead, it critically reflected on the universal applicability of the term 'reli-

gion' and on the power implications of such use. On the other hand, it strived and is still striving to identify a research object, avoiding both a *sui generis* and mono-reductionist approach, so that this very enterprise can be justified as academic enquiry towards an important element of human culture, which is at the same time both elusive and taken for granted. Indeed, two main trends can be identified within it (Schilbrack 2018), to be best approached as the two ends of a single spectrum.

On the 'deconstructive' end, investigations into the history, genealogies and implications of the very idea of 'religion' undermined its understanding as a clear, distinct, if not altogether autonomous and universal sphere of human reality, separated from the domains of power or politics. On the ground that the present-day concept of 'religion' developed within a precise historical and geographical context – i.e. modern, Christian (Protestant) Europe – in the form of dialectical 'counterpart' to modern statecraft, scholars belonging to this trend criticize the naturalization of the idea of religion and its use as a universal category, in particular when it has been applied in extra-European regions as a way to assess their cultural backwardness and thereby justifying their colonial exploitation.

On the 'constructive' end, while recognizing the historical and non-universal character of the concept of 'religion', this is still considered to be a valid theoretical tool to identify and analyze different phenomena distant in time and space. This perspective is grounded on the awareness that it is fundamentally impossible to completely dispense with any kind of theory of reference. Not only when interpreting data, but also in order to identify the relevant data, one cannot help but to refer to some sort of theory, even implicitly. By employing different definitions and theoretical configurations, such as functional or substantial criteria, family-resemblance approaches or polythetic definitions, scholars of this trend highlight the intrinsic plurality and complexity of its object\s, and the need to review the theoretical and analytical tools of this field constantly and critically.

The present research is positioned somewhat in the middle of the spectrum. The concept of religion is not abandoned, but both its heuristic and problematic dimensions are emphasized. Starting from the idea that there is no epistemological perspective that is absolutely transcendental to its context, it argues that maintaining the concept of religion, with all its historical background (including the theoretical debates about it), can be useful in various ways, especially in conjunction with the other two theoretical baselines, which come from the fields of didactics and intercultural education.

Since we are engaging with the topic of RE as a school subject, this brings us to the topic of teaching-learning, which is the object of the field of didactics. This discipline combines investigations and reflec-

tions on what it is and what it means to teach and learn (descriptive approach), with research on what must be done in order to achieve it at its best (normative approach) (Perla 2013). Teaching-learning, as an object of research, is composite: it is a teaching-learning of something, to certain recipients, in certain contexts, in certain modalities, and with certain goals (Baldacci 2013). In the present work, we refer especially to the sub-field of disciplinary didactics, that is, the teaching of socially and institutionally recognized knowledge, or 'discipline'. Indeed, following the trend of SoR-based normative research, we posit as the object of RE's teaching-learning the above cited disciplinary field of the study of religion\s. In disciplinary didactics, a pivotal role is played by the theory of didactic transposition (Chevallard 1985). It features both theoretical and practical dimensions and has both descriptive and normative aims, investigating the contexts, the purposes, and the modalities in which a certain piece of knowledge is transformed first into knowledge *taught*, and then into knowledge *learned*. As Develay (1996) has argued, in any process of didactic transposition there is an axiological component. That is, the underlying reasons and aims of teaching something, as well as the social practices taken as reference when reflecting on the societal impact, in terms of knowledge and competences[13] fostered, of the knowledge taught in the form of a school subject. In other words, teaching-learning exceeds the limits of school environment in being also a step towards the formation of the person, not only within the horizon of values defined by society, but also in a prospect of an improvement of the latter.

This brings us to the issue of the third theoretical baseline, that is, the educational framework in the broad sense in which we posit our research endeavor. As hinted above, the chosen framework pertains to what I may preliminary and loosely label 'intercultural citizenship education'. As it will be demonstrated in the following chapters, I argue that this framework fruitfully combines with the themes and aims of a Sdr-based RE, especially when it tackles the topic of Japanese and other Asian religions. The starting motivation is, as anticipated above, that such a topic has revealed itself, in the field of the study of religion\s, as an useful chance to foreground complexities, mechanisms of mutual (self-)representations, dynamics of influences and differentiations in lieu of uniform explanations, simplistic and separating categorizations, and undue projection upon others of native concepts and ideals.

Indeed, with 'intercultural citizenship education' we identify composite bodies of theories and practices revolving around a common theme: coexistence, on a global as well as on a local scale. Despite

13 In this study I adopt the idiosyncratic use in plural form of this uncountable noun, as attested in widely disseminated studies and documents such as UNESCO 2013 and CoE 2018.

their heterogeneity, there are some shared key theoretical points, which are of interest to our discussion. Basically, it is assumed that people, material and symbolic goods, knowledge and technologies, and information have constantly been in motion, through space and time. Nowadays, technical progresses increasingly facilitate such exchanges. Consequently, it is more correct to apply a dynamic and complex concept of culture. Groups, individuals and their social, cultural, material productions are no longer considered to be separated elements, but they should be interpreted as 'nodes' within combined flows of knowledge, symbols, materials, technologies and people. Cultural phenomena, both on a small and large scale, are not born *ex vacuo* but are the result of shifts, transformations, adaptations, negotiations and re-elaborations. From a certain point of view, the human being is *naturaliter* intercultural (cf. e.g. Burke 2009). Barriers and boundaries, whether physical or symbolic, as well as identity dynamics, are considered equally mobile and fluid over time, but this does not make them any less effective in conditioning social, cultural and political environments. Interests and inequalities of power of various kinds (political, economic, epistemological) and at various levels (local, regional, global) are key influences on such flows, re-elaborations and the related constructions of barriers, boundaries and identity dynamics (cf. Hardy, Hussain 2017).

In this situation, intercultural education aims to 'steer' these intercultural dynamics towards positive results, such as peaceful coexistence, resolution or non-violent management of conflicts, mutual enrichment, elimination of inequalities, sharing and interest in issues of a global nature. By contrast, it aims to avoid unwanted outcomes such as: disinterest/ignorance/fear for what is perceived as different; construction of physical and symbolic boundaries; inequality; stereotypes; prejudice; hate speech, and so on. Practical measures to reach such goals range from *ad hoc* educational activities to broad general frameworks for implementing educational policies and practices. Often scholars and practitioners indicate sets of competences considered pivotal for understanding and acting in an inherently complex and intercultural world, as described above (cf. e.g. Portera 2013, 163-83). These competences are meant to work as goals and benchmarks to both educational practices and policies. Often, along with these competences, there is the identification of values/assumptions that can serve as a minimum common base for intercultural exchange. Usually, these values are identified in human rights, in other situations they are accompanied by values such as democracy and the rule of law. The problematic nature of this need for a minimum common denominator is recognized and connects with the basic intercultural education principle of cultural relativism, namely, that the values and norms of a given culture cannot be the basis from which to judge cultures. However, this does not imply a discourse of abso-

lute moral relativism or 'anything goes', but should instead be the starting point from which to seriously address the problematic tension between the preservation of diversity and a search for a common frame of reference, e.g. human rights.

1.3.2 Synopsis of the Next Chapters

The argument of this work will unfold in the following way: in ch. 2 we will develop and set up the theoretical and analytical framework which will guide the investigation in subsequent chapters. As already stated above, in order to rethink RE, one must define first the disciplinary fields of reference concerning the two key aspects of RE, that is, 'religion' and 'education'.

Concerning the former, both the 'constructive' and 'deconstructive' approaches to the study of religion will be examined in detail, dividing the discussion in three key aspects of 1) definitions of religion\s, 2) epistemologies of religion\s, and 3) representations of religion\s. I will argue that, for our purposes, both trends can be fruitfully adopted, also in the light of the fact that they still share many common points in their basic research methodology.

Concerning the 'education' aspect, after a sketchy exploration of the various layers of meaning of this word, framed in a sort of dichotomy between 'didactics' and 'pedagogy',[14] we will focus on the fields of disciplinary didactics and, in particular, of didactic transposition. This latter will be explored in its four dimensions, that of 1) epistemology, or how the knowledge is adapted; 2) teaching, or how it is transmitted; 3) learning, or how it is received; and 4) axiology, or which values govern such process. In connection to axiology, intercultural education will be discussed, focusing on how and why the above hinted concept of complex culture is operatively linked with other issues, such as intercultural interaction, aims of intercultural educations and the possible risk one runs when engaging discourses of 'interculturality' without a sufficiently critical stance.

In ch. 3 the theme of Japanese and East-Asian religious traditions will be engaged, following and deepening some key theoretical is-

14 As a terminological note, I will follow the continental distinction of didactics from pedagogy, in which the former may be defined as "a discourse consisting, on one hand, of reflections on devices, techniques, and artifacts that make teaching and learning activity effective, and, on the other hand, of reflection on normative values (i.e. on aims) that guide the choice towards those devices, techniques and artifacts" (Perla 2013, 8), while the latter is understood as a broader discipline focused on the upbringing of the individual as fulfilled person and member of society. The Anglo-Saxon usage tends to conflate both ideas under the single term 'pedagogy/pedagogies' or refer to didactics as 'pedagogy' and to pedagogy as 'educational theory' (cf. Hamilton 1999; Bertrand, Houssaye 1999).

sues delineated in ch. 2, especially those highlighted by the critical/deconstructive approach in the study of religion\s. I will focus on those aspects that represent a challenge in respect to certain commonsensical, ingrained ways of thinking about religion in general, and about Japanese and East-Asian religions in particular. More in detail, these challenges can be divided in two groups. The first refer to the heritage of Eurocentric/Christian-centric epistemologies of religions, i.e. the tendency to emphasize or select certain aspects, while neglecting others that would be equally – if not more – relevant to the conception and representation of the religious traditions under examination. The second group of challenges is linked to the previous ones but has a more historical perspective. It concerns the legacy of modernity and coloniality, and basically address the following key-problem: when addressing the present-day situation of Japanese and other East-Asian religious traditions, one cannot avoid considering the historical influence of modern Euro-American paradigms, which were built on binary oppositions such as secularity/religion, religious/superstitions, rational/irrational, spiritual/material, and so on. It was around these paradigms that a series of both hetero- and self-representations of East-Asian religions and cultures historically developed, intimately linked to self-representations of Euro-American societies themselves. I define these stratified representations as an impactful cultural repertoire that must be duly reckoned with.

Ch. 4 will be devoted to the analysis and evaluation of our case study in RE, which is represented by the English example, which, as will be shortly explained, is one of the most historically developed, influent and acknowledged examples in Europe of 'non-confessional' RE. More specifically, among the high number of different models and approaches of RE, six authors will be selected and analyzed in detail, whose works I have classified under three categories: 'Interpretative-dialogical', 'Rational-theological' and 'Existential-instrumental'. Through the application of an analytical grid set up by drawing insights from ch. 2, and by contrasting with the topics discussed in ch. 3, it will become clear why I put 'non-confessional' in inverted commas. Indeed, the various theories and practices of English RE, while presenting themselves as non-confessional, and generally acknowledging the role of the study of religion\s in the make-up of RE, will nonetheless show many elements falling outside the disciplinary scope of the academic study of religion\s. Moreover, in relation to the issue of Japanese and other East-Asian religions, many critical issues in both epistemological and educational terms will come to the fore.

In the conclusive ch. 5, we will get back to the insights gained in ch. 2 to lay out a framework in which to take stock, in a more systemic way, of what has been explored previously. I will discuss the insights from previous chapters together with the conclusion and recommendations concerning the development of SoR-based RE di-

dactics made by other scholars in the field. By doing so, the aim of this chapter will be twofold. The first will be to delineate the contours of the relevance of the theme of Japanese and East-Asian religions within the debate of non-confessional RE. This will further strengthen the claims of SoR-based RE scholars who argue that it is also necessary to keep being critically watchful in regard to putative 'non-confessional' RE. The second will be to produce a 'model' for the didactics of Japanese as well as other East-Asian religions. Such a 'model' is not meant to be a rigid operative scheme or a comprehensive theory. It aims to offer an orientational map of interconnected key points, both theoretical and practical, articulated at various levels: axiological/educative, epistemological, teaching-oriented and learning-oriented.

2 Setting Up The Theoretical/ Analytical Framework

Summary 2.1 The Study of Religion\s. Definitions, Epistemologies and Representations. – 2.1.1 Historical Contextualization. – 2.1.2 Constructive Definitions. Basic Conceptualizations. – 2.1.3 Deconstructive (Un)Definitions. Changing Point of View. – 2.1.4 Constructive Epistemology. Basic Theoretical Structure and Applications. – 2.1.5 Deconstructive Epistemology. Genealogy and Critique. – 2.1.6 Epistemological Commonalities: Methodology. – 2.1.7 Constructive Representations. Examples of Theory Building. – 2.1.8 Deconstructive Representations. Religion-Making Processes and Postcolonial Gaze. – 2.2 Education. Translating Knowledge in Educational Contexts. – 2.2.1 Discerning the Relevant Foci in Education. Didactics and Disciplinary Didactics. – 2.2.2 Didactic Transposition. Fundamental Structure. – 2.2.3 Didactic Transposition. Epistemological Dimension. – 2.2.4 Didactic Transposition. Teaching Dimension. – 2.2.5 Didactic Transposition. Learning Dimension. – 2.2.6 Didactic Transposition. Axiological Dimension. – 2.2.7 Intercultural Education. Context and Underlying Theory. – 2.2.8. Intercultural Education. Operational Indications. – 2.3 Conclusion.

2.1 The Study of Religion\s. Definitions, Epistemologies and Representations

2.1.1 Historical Contextualization

The 'constructive' and 'deconstructive' trends of the study of religion\s can be seen as two responses to a major development that took place in the history of the discipline, that is, the critique to the scholarly tradition of the 'phenomenology of religion'.

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Phenomenology of religion emerged in opposition to those scholarly approaches to religion of the first decades of the twentieth century, informed by positivism and evolutionism, i.e. the newborn psychology, sociology and anthropology. Religion was dealt with only as a part of these disciplines (albeit an important one), and a *function* of their general research object, being it psyche, society or culture. Moreover, the possibility of studying human nature similarly to the natural sciences was assumed (Filoramo 2004, 51-64). By contrast, the phenomenology of religion started to see its object as an autonomous entity, whose essence was concealed behind the multifarious empirical manifestations and could be reached by comparing these manifestations reduced to their 'ideal structure' by empathetically attuning with the believer's point of view. The underling method was the suspension of judgment, or *epochè*, typical of Edmund Husserl's phenomenological approach, whence the name of this approach.

It is in such context that the problematic relation with theology or a religionist approach in general appears more starkly.[1] The birth of the phenomenology of religion can be traced back to the late nineteenth century Netherlands, where it was introduced as the method of a newly established academic study of religion. However (cf. Molendijk 2005, 71 f.), it was more of a transformation of theology into the science of religion, with the implicit acceptance of the liberal-Protestant theological idea that "the more one knew about religion, the more Christianity would show itself to be the best and truest religion" (Streski 2015, 80).

Phenomenologists can be credited with establishing the study of religion\s as an academic enterprise on its own (cf. Cox 2006, 3-4). Indeed, they produced new conceptual terms to define religion as a *sui generis* phenomenon. The most famous of these is the 'sacred', which, through the famous *The Sacred* (1917) by the theologian Rudolf Otto (1869-1937), came to be addressed in experiential terms, thus putting the 'religious experience' as the basic premise and privileged data for the study of religion\s (Stausberg 2007, 303). The importance of the phenomenology of religion is undeniable for the development of the study of religion\s as an autonomous science first in Europe, then in other parts of the world, in the first decades after World War II (Stausberg 2009b, 265).

However, such an approach to religion as a *sui generis* phenomenon, deserving *sui generis* theory and method, progressively came to be criticized in two intertwined terms: on one hand, it was accused of being a crypto-theology in that it presupposed an a-historical, met-

1 It must not be assumed that in previous or subsequent historical developments of the study of religion\s such problems were absent. On the contrary, as it will be shown infra, to come up to terms with the Christian-Protestant origins of this discipline while eschewing being influenced by it is a recurrent and pivotal theme.

aphysical unity of all empirical manifestations of what we call religion; on the other hand, it failed to recognize religion as a historical reality, inextricably interconnected with all the other range of human social activities. The most (in)famous phenomenologist to be criticized in such terms is Mircea Eliade (1907-1986).[2]

From the 1970s onwards the rejection of phenomenology started to be the standard premise to any contemporary attempts at self-understanding within the field (Stausberg 2009b, 267). At the same time, a need was expressed for more explicit theoretical and methodological frameworks. Instead of dealing with metaphysical issues such as discerning "what true religion is" and "what is essential or inessential in religion" or promoting "sympathy and tolerant understanding between religions", it was argued that phenomena should be conceived as a creation and feature of human culture. That is, they must be studied as empirical and historical facts interwoven with other aspects of human culture without resorting to any "transcendental truth", and by adopting innovative social theories, models and methods (cf. Geertz, McCoutcheon 2000, 14-15).

At the same time, the development in the 1960s of theoretical approaches such as deconstructionism, discourse analysis and postcolonialism slowly began to influence the humanities and social sciences, triggering in them a profound reflexive turn. In this process, the theoretical turn of the study of religion\s was also deeply affected, especially by authors such as Michel Foucault and Edward Said.

Thus, in recent decades (roughly from the 1980s-90s onwards) a vast and influential body of scholarly literature critically has investigated the history, genealogies and implications of the very idea of 'religion' being understood as a clear, distinct, if not altogether autonomous, and universal sphere of human reality. The reason put forth is that the 'secular' and 'religion' are a sort of 'twin birth' from the Enlightenment in particular, and from the early modern European thought in general. In other words, the 'religious' has been created by the formation of, and separation from, the realm of the 'secular'. Consequently, the self-proclaimed secularist approach, i.e. that which is supposed to be outside, external and 'untainted', fails to live up to its ideals of objectivity. On the contrary, the supposed neutrality of the concept of 'religion' was (and somehow still is) instrumental for defining, and coping with modernity, self-representations and hetero-representations. In particular, when applied to extra-European regions, 'religions' were used as a sort of universal yardstick to gauge the level of civilizational progress of a given population. Unsurprisingly, the most developed one was always the Western, mod-

2 There is plenty of bibliography that critically examines these issues, most notably Smith 1978; Asad 1993; McCoutcheon 1997; Weibe 1999; Flood 1999; cf. also *infra*, § 2.1.5.

ern, protestant, secular people, who were thus granted the right to colonial exploitation of others (cf. e.g. King 2017a).

In summary, I just want to highlight how the study of religion\s is presented nowadays with a dilemma, with important consequences for the social relevance of the discipline, especially in relation to teaching and education. On one hand, the study of religion\s is expected to provide knowledge on what is perceived outside the academia as 'religion', both for the individual religious traditions and for 'religion' in a comparative sense. On the other hand, to critically reflect on its own past and present frameworks is among its duties, both inside and outside the academia, e.g. to investigate the various contexts and intentions behind the different ways of construing and using the 'religion' concept (cf. e.g. Schilibark 2018).

The solution suggested by Alberts (2017a, 260-3) is to continue the reflexive investigation within the discipline, which could also be considered its contribution to society in the form of an ideological critique of ideas and concepts usually naturalized and taken for granted by the society at large. At the same time, this should not prevent its role as provider of knowledge about the phenomena called 'religions'. That 'religion' or other related concepts has been denied universal validity does not mean that the discipline is left without any 'fact'. On the contrary, a huge number of empirical facts has been engaged by the study of religion\s. Indeed, even if 'religion' or 'religions' are realities construed by scholarly, and other human activities, just like 'money', 'laws' and 'governments', with these terms "we are comparing matters that are real enough" (Jensen 2014, 172). However, empirical facts have to be "necessarily selected, framed, contextualized and presented in particular ways. This is how narratives are created" (Alberts 2017a, 261). The study of religion\s offers, among many others, its own narratives and representations of religions. However, since it has become a major criterium of intellectual integrity to explicitly state one's own theorical and methodological presuppositions, this status of narratives is explicitly acknowledged. This is the occasion to take into due consideration the deconstructive critiques, and in case, to suggest new conceptualizations of 'religion' that could account for the empirical reality with the highest degree of coherence possible.

In what follows, we will explore the most relevant theoretical discussions and insight from both the 'constructive' and 'deconstructive' approach of the study of religion\s, dividing them into three different yet intertwined points of view. The first focuses on the issue of the definition of religion, in the sense of basic conceptualizations that delineate the subject matter, and the purposes that inform the adopted definitions. How 'religion' is defined and why are highly relevant issues for the modalities in which it can be theorized in more detail and subjected to a research methodology. In other words, the

way in which it is studied, i.e. the epistemology of religion. This is our second point of view. The third point of view shift towards what can be defined as the 'results' of definitions/conceptualizations and epistemology of religion. That is, the way in which 'religion' or 'religions' come to be described and narrated in relation to how they are studied. I call this the issue of 'representation'.

2.1.2 Constructive Definitions. Basic Conceptualizations

There can be two functions of definitions. The first is to delimit the subject under investigation; the second is to clarify and give meaning to the said subject. Ideally the two are placed at the start and at the end of a certain enquiry. In the process of research, the initial definition is also supposed to be tested against the empirical reality and therefore retooled and refined accordingly.

However, not all scholars felt the need to establish a starting definition. Among classical theorists, Max Weber (1864-1920) points out in his *The Sociology of Religion* (1920) that the definition of religion could be attempted only as the conclusive result of a study of religion\s (Weber 1993, 1). Others may object to the very need of definition, on the basis that, as we will see shortly in reference to the 'deconstructive' argument, there is no religion in the first place, since it can be reduced to other social, political and economic spheres, or should be primarily conceived as a creation of scholars. Similarly, defining religion could be seen as equivalent to colonial attempts to impose one's own worldview on others. On this point Berguner (2014, 253-5) argues that also these critical positions must inevitably refer, implicitly or explicitly, to an everyday understanding of religion because the use of the term 'religion' is not determined only by the scholar but by the whole linguistic community, especially in the present context of globalization.

Apart from acknowledging the unavoidability of, at least, an implicit definition of religion, it can be argued that there are several pragmatic reasons for defining religion. For example, in area such as law and politics, definitions of religion are quite important, since it is on the base of them that national states give recognition and other rights or benefits (such as tax exemption) to both institutions and individuals (cf. Schontal 2016). For study purposes, definitions enhance clarity and make one's own position explicit. By defining religion, we do not merely delimit the area of enquiry but also hint to the way in which we approach it.

There are various types of definition (not mutually exclusive) and at least two conceptions of definition (mutually exclusive). Concerning the latter, a definition can establish a relation of *equivalence* between the *definiens* and the *definiendum*. That is, the definition is

merely a 'linguistic variation', usually more complex, of the *definiendum*. The *definiens* can apply only to the *definiendum* and vice versa. The other conception of definition, *elucidation*, indicates instead a heuristic opening and clarification of the meaning(s) of the *definiendum*, to advance our understanding of it. However, since definitions are usually short sentences, this critical distinction between equivalence and elucidation is rarely explicit. Therefore, it is crucial to clarify it in advance to avoid misinterpretation (cf. Stausberg, Gardiner 2016, 12-13).[3]

Concerning the various types of definitions, especially until the 1960s, the definitions proposed by the study of religion\s can be considered *real*, i.e. they refer to an ontological existing reality, first discovered and then defined. In the context of religion, it would point to what all religions have in common, their essence. This is not only the case of the above-presented phenomenologists but applies also to definitions and theories reducing religion to other dimension of human existence. For example, the Marxist interpretation of religion as a reflection of distressful material conditions (cf. Day 2016, 162-3). The definition from Clifford Geertz (1966)[4] can be seen as a realist one, in that he individuates religion as an objectively specified sub-system of symbols within the larger symbolic system of 'Culture' (cf. Stausberg, Gardiner 2016, 16).

However, real definitions of religion\s, by their own nature, imply a certain idea of absolute specificity (*sui generis*). Since they seek to grasp the common essence beyond any particular case, if something does not conform to the definition, it cannot qualify as religion. There is a problematic issue of universality at work here. Given the self-critical turn in the study of religion\s, scholars tend to avoid this kind of definition, on the grounds that religions innovate and change through time (together with their self-understanding), that they feature synchronous multiplicity of forms and functions, and – most importantly – that religion is a concept of European origin (Stausberg, Gardiner 2016, 23; cf. also *infra*). However, scholars may still think about definition as an *interpreting strategy* for certain social patterns that exist in the world (cf. Schilbrack 2010, 1121-6), in other words,

3 If a definition claiming that, for example, "religion is a set of belief and practices concerning the non-empirical" is taken as an equivalence, it follows that whatever propositional attitudes and practices which refer to, e.g. the sense of justice ("I think it is right to help the poor and I behave accordingly"), are religious, which is quite controversial. If, conversely, the definition is elucidative, then counterexamples do not threaten the validity of the definition, which can be still seen as a useful tool for understanding, especially if contextualized.

4 "*(1) A system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long- lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the mood and motivations seem uniquely realistic*" (Geertz 1996, 4; italics in the original).

to avoid *real* and *equivalence* definitions and opt towards other types of *elucidative* definitions.

One of the most common types of definition used in these terms by the study of religion\s are the functional ones. With them scholars classify cultural phenomena as religions when these phenomena address a certain problem or need, which are thus deemed as pertaining to the 'religious' dimension. This may be the need of the individual in ranking his/her purpose in the world,[5] or the need of the society to build social cohesion.[6] There are nonetheless problems with this kind of approach. When an external observer defines the main function of a religion, it may be that this is not what the practitioner thinks about as the pragmatic effect of his/her religion. If this defined function is too specific, such definition may risk neglecting historical change (Stausberg, Gardiner 2016, 18). On the other hand, in their aim to cope with the vast empirical variety of functions performed by religions, functionalist definitions could end up being applicable also to other phenomena such as national ceremonies, sports events or even shopping (cf. Schilbrack 2013, 291-2, 295).

What is needed, then, is some distinctive criteria to sort out what we could properly define as religious from what we should not. This is what substantialist definition are intended to offer. They classify certain beliefs, practices or institutions as 'religious' on the base of the focal object. Edward B. Tylor (1832-1917), in his *Primitive Culture* (1871), for example, holds that the minimal definition of religion, i.e. its binding criterium, is "the belief in spiritual beings" (Tylor 2016, 424).[7]

The risk with substantial definitions, especially if they want to have elucidative power, is to appeal, as criteria, to vague and ambiguous terms that need further definition. This is the case of phenomenology with elusive concepts such as 'the holy' or 'the sacred'. Similarly, the difficulty in this kind of definition is to find criteria that are adaptable enough to stand up to counterexamples. Substantive definitions suffer the exact inverse problem of functionalist definitions, i.e. lack of flexibility, whereas the latter are too flexible.

5 For example, the definition of Paul Tillich (1963, 6): "Religion is the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, a concern which qualifies all other concerns as preliminary and which itself contains the answer to the question of the meaning of our life".

6 For example, the second half of Émile Durkheim's (1858-1917) definition in his *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912): "*A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices* which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them" (1995, 44; italics in the original).

7 Another example is from Edward Spiro (1966, 96): "An institution consisting of culturally patterned interactions with culturally postulated superhuman agents".

For this reason, another strategy would be to unite the two types. Indeed, many functionalist definitions contain in themselves some substantive criteria.[8] On the grounds that many beliefs, practices and institutions commonly called religious actually satisfy both kinds of definition, Schilbrack (2013, 313) offers his "dithetic" definition (i.e. that identify two necessary features for classifying religion): "Practices, beliefs, and institutions that recommend normative paths based on super-empirical realities".

This definition indicates what religions 'do' (elaborating norms that define ways of living), on the base of what is the "specific focus" of religions ("super-empirical realities"). Schilbrack explicitly uses this term to distinguish them from other non-empirical realities, such as values, aesthetics and morals, or mathematical realities, whose existence can nonetheless be attributed to human creation. Instead, religious communities are those "that hold that some nonempirical realities exist independent of empirical sources" (Schilbrack 2013, 313). In this sense, religious people are those who, for example, may hold that 'justice' exist independently from human judgment. In this way he purposely wants to exclude all forms of communal meaning-making, such as commitment and practices focused on reverence to the nation. The usefulness of his definition consists in providing a "bounded variety" (315-18).

With Schilibrack and more contemporary theorists, we progressively emphasize the fact that elucidative definitions are abstract analytic terms. Inevitably, fuzzy borders between defined concepts are easily found. This is the case, for example, of the distinction between 'magic' and 'religion'. Nonetheless, without these two very concepts, we will never be able to know that there are fuzzy cases at all, nor will we be able to ask ourselves why such borders were formerly divided or united (cf. e.g. Otto, Stausberg 2013). To appreciate such fuzziness scholars of religion have incorporated influential developments from the philosophy of language (notably Wittgenstein and his idea of "family resemblance") and from taxonomy of natural sciences (cf. Needham 1975) in the form of polythetic classifications and definitions. Instead of definitions that demand strict satisfaction of one or more necessary criteria, polythetic definitions feature more criteria but do not require that all have to be satisfied.

This is the case of Jensen (2014). First, his definition is explicitly offered as a stipulative one, i.e. that pragmatically intend to reflect as much consensus in the field as possible. It is a two-layered definition. The first part lays out some substantial criteria, which are then further expanded through a number of "elements and as-

8 In the case of Durkheim, we can recognize the criteria being a "unified system" and dealing with "things set apart and forbidden" (cf. Pace 2007, 16).

pects" that "religions at specific times may have any weighted combination" thereof (8).

> [Religions are] semantic and cognitive networks comprising ideas, behaviours and institutions in relation to counter-intuitive superhuman agents, objects and posits.
>
> Explanation.
>
> Typically religions include such elements or components as: explanations of the origin (cosmogony) and classifications of what makes up the world (cosmology); ideas about matters, objects and agents that are sacred, ultimate and inviolable; beliefs in spiritual beings such as superhuman agents; special powers and knowledge that such beings and agents have and which humans may gain access to; beliefs concerning human fate and life after death; ritual actions of various kinds (from silent prayer to bloody sacrifice) that ensure the communication with the sacred or 'other world'; institutions setting the limits and conditions for such communication and containing rules for human conduct in systems of purity, hierarchy and group relations; ethics and morality. (8)

Stausberg and Gardiner (2016, 19-22) argue that polythetic definition have the merit of avoiding essentialism, but at the cost of uncertainty and opacity: exactly how many criteria should be satisfied to qualify as a religion? For example, taking into consideration, from the above example, only "ethics and morality" and "hierarchy and group relations" may sound questionable. More importantly, what are the reasons for clustering certain elements and not others?

As a possible solution to these issues the same authors put forth the notion of a 'homeostatic' definition. It is similar to the polythetic one, but in this definition the set of criteria is clustered in such a way that the more the presence of some, the more likely others will appear. In other words, there could be a hierarchy or even a necessity of some of them, e.g. rituals have precedence over belief. However, this calls for an explanation of such hierarchical relationships between primary and secondary elements, which is the task of theory. Therefore, homeostatic definition may not be suited to delineating the subject matter prior to analysis and theorizing. For this task, polythetic definitions like Jensen's may be more adapt, especially if one aims to extensively overview this field of study (cf. Jensen 2014, 169).

2.1.3 Deconstructive (Un)Definitions. Changing Point of View

Stressing further the heuristic nature of a definition, another widely cited expression in this regard is the dictum of philosopher Alfred Korzybski (1879-1950) "map is not territory" (especially in Smith 1978,

309), which is a way to stress that the concept of religion is a kind of discursive map of those human activities that we classify as having to do with 'religion'. One of the most straightforward definitions in this sense is of Jonathan Z. Smith:

> [Religion] is a term created by scholars for their intellectual purposes [...] It is a second-order generic concept that plays the same role in establishing a disciplinary horizon that a concept such as 'language' plays in linguistics or 'culture' plays in anthropology. (Smith 1998, 281-2)

This definition by Smith brings us more towards the 'deconstructive' side of definitions and conceptualizations of religions. As mentioned above, the reflexive turn of the 1990s in the study of religion\s represented for the field a sort of 'Copernican Turn' (King 2017b). The fundamental idea of these developments is that religion is not a stable phenomenon out there, but is construed upon certain cultural frames and assumptions, so that scholars of religion are not united by a common object called 'religion', but by an "ongoing commitment to the reproduction of the language game of religion itself" (7). If we limited ourselves to these statements, such perspective would not differ greatly from the above-mentioned acknowledgement of definitions as a linguistic tool to preliminary locate the object of research. However, critical scholars highlight how the construed nature of the concept of religion, albeit acknowledged, does not stand in neutral grounds. Indeed, scholars such as McCutcheon (cf. 2003, 17-18) further expands Smith's insight on the active role of scholars and other stakeholders in defining religions through a Foucauldian lens. In this way, 'religion' is less a concept that indicates certain phenomena than it is a rhetorical and discursive device used to deploy social classifications and exert power through them:

> Whatever else religion may or may not be, then, it is at least a potent manner in which humans construct maps by which they negotiate not simply their way around the unpredictable natural world but also through which they defend and contest issues of social power and privilege in the here and the now. (McCutcheon 2001, 173)

In a sense, we should not look at the 'deconstructive' side of the study of religion\s in search for operative or starting definitions of religions in the same way we did for the 'constructive' one. Instead, there is a fundamental shift in approaching and conceptualizing religion\s. The starting assumptions become: 1) the nature of the linguistic construction of the signifier 'religion'; 2) the difficulty in locating the signified without a great degree of fuzziness (or in some cases the impossibility of locating it at all); and 3) the Foucauldian assumption that

defining something is an effective, power-related act that influences reality and is inevitably bound to the interest of those who define it (cf. e.g. Martin 2017, 1-19). Therefore, instead of trying to define religion, this approach focuses instead on "how the game of definition works" (18).

Therefore, the way in which the fundamental conceptualizations differ within the 'deconstructive' study of religion\s is a matter of scope or context. For example, within the European context, scholars have critically addressed Émile Durkheim's endeavor to retrieve the elementary forms of religions. Since his interest in this topic was born out of his worries for the increasing anomy and decline of solidarity in modern society (Royce 2015, 55-91), he decided to look at what was happening within the most possible primitive and simpler society. By doing so, he was employing 'religion' to hierarchically conceptualizing modernity and complex society from its supposed opposite (King 2017b, 17; Nye 2019, 18-19). Externally, 'religion' has been a useful category to configurate a constellation of ideas such as 'Europe', the 'West' and 'Christianity' in front of the 'rest'. Non-western cultures have been recognized, depending on times and contexts, as non-religious, therefore in need of moralizing Christianity, or, conversely, as hyper-religious. In this latter case, on one hand this interpretation allowed the establishment of some similarities (i.e. with Christianity) that permitted categorization and comparison. On the other hand, it differentiated between superior and inferior people/cultures precisely on the basis of the incapacity of the latter to separate religious (faith, relation with the transcendent, spirituality, etc.) and secular (laws, economy, social behavior, etc.) domains (Dressler, Mandair 2011, 14-15).

2.1.4 Constructive Epistemology. Basic Theoretical Structure and Applications

As stated above, definitions enhance clarity and explicit one's own position. The position of the enquirer about religion is so pivotal that Armin W. Geertz points out that the best answer to the question "what is religion?" is "who wants to know?" (Geertz 2004, 113). This is to say that the outcome of an enquiry largely depends on one own's stance, i.e. theories, paradigms, or approaches to religion. Even the most empiricist scholars draw on general theories at some point or another in their research, because data are always already theory-laden. The range of human behaviors that scholars of religion choose to work with must somehow have already been identified as something that is informative to call 'religion'. "Even when not constructing theories of religion, scholars operate with implicit theories of religion" (Stausberg, Engler 2016, 67). Due to the nature of the object

'religion' being a very theory-sensitive one, it follows that reference to the history of its studies is not an accessory move, just like history of philosophy is needed to do philosophy. At the same time these observations stress further the link between the study of religion\s and the emergence of modernity in the Euro-American world (Bell 2000; Jensen 2014, 13-14).

Stausberg and Engler (2016), referring mainly to the 'constructive' side of the study of religion\s, individuate five points that are typically addressed by theories about religion. The first one refers to the ontological status of religion. This could span from a totally realist position, endorsing religion as transhistorical essence common to all religions, to the conceptualization of it as a discursively construed idea with no external reference. In the middle, various degrees of realism and constructivism are possible (cf. e.g. Engler 2004).

The second point is the structure of religion, that is, what are its components and how they are held together. There could be a tendency to capture the empirical complexity by stating a list of dimensions or factors (e.g. belief, practice, knowledge, experience, belonging; cf. e.g. Pace 2007, 66), especially in order to support analytical investigation. Other theories, instead, may focus on more basic components in order to enable a more transcultural and transhistorical perspective.

The third point is the distinctiveness of religion. This question is not limited to the treatment of religion as *sui generis* phenomenon but concerns the question of if and how religion can be distinguished from other domains of human activity, such as economy or politics. It also entails asking if such distinction is reflected by the data taken into consideration as religious, or if it is a heuristic move by the scholar. In connection with the above discussion (§ 2.1.2) on substantive definitions, the distinctiveness of religion is often discussed in term of 'supernatural' or 'super-empirical' entities.

The fourth point is the condition for the emergence of religion. This should not be confused as the historical beginning or primordial evolutionary phase of religion. It refers instead to the factors or the mechanism by which the phenomenon 'religion' emerges. For example, a typical way of addressing the rise of religion is connecting it to the human need of "meaning-making" (Stausberg, Engler 2016, 62-3). However, it is a question much dependent on which kind of ontological status is attributed to religion. In case of religion as a modern discursive construct, for example, its conditions of emergence may well coincide with historical condition, such as state-church separation in modern Europe (cf. more *infra*).

The last point is one of the most addressed by theories of religion: the functions of religion, or better, how religion 'works' or 'contributes' towards other social facts, in the context of a larger system. It is important, in this regard, to distinguish functions of religion, i.e. its *raison d'être* within a system (such as the function of the heart as

blood pumper) from the effects or products of religion (such as the noise of the heart pumping blood) (Stausberg Engler 2016, 65). Whereas a well-known effect of religion is social stability, it would be naive to conceive this as its function since religions can stir also social upheaval. An example of function, instead, could be to compensate the inability of various sub-systems of society (science, arts, economy, politics) to cope with question of general and ultimate sense of the world (such as the case of Luhmann's theory, cf. Pace 2007, 38-40).

Theorizing about religion can take two approaches: top-down or bottom-up. The former kind of theories usually apply a conceptual apparatus (for instance, base and superstructure, modes of cognition, hegemony and subalternity) to the putative phenomenon of religion. Frequently these conceptual apparati refer to larger theoretical approaches, such as Marxism, cognitive sciences, post-colonialism, which inform also other disciplines and involve other subject matters apart from religion. Bottom-up theories, on the other hand, try to elaborate from the empirical study of putatively religious phenomena by creatively drawing from a wider set of conceptual tools.

Among top-down theoretical approaches, the cognitive science of religions (or CSR) is considered "a major breakthrough in the study of religion\s" (Jensen 2009, 129). A 2009 publication dealing with contemporary theories of religion, affirms that there is clearly an "increasing impact of the natural and behavioural sciences on contemporary theories of religion" (Stausberg 2009b, 9). CSR employs a top-down approach on the subject matter 'religion' by applying to the latter a precise 'theoretical object': the functioning of the mind and brain, with the precise intention of explaining religion on 'hard' scientific grounds. In a nutshell, what characterizes CSR's approach is the basic idea that the human mind has universal constrains that shape and filter information (White 2017, 107).

2.1.5 Deconstructive Epistemology. Genealogy and Critique

The 'deconstructive' side of the study of religion\s can be considered to be featuring a kind of top-down approach, too. As already hinted above, it is informed by a variety of theoretical frameworks (notably poststructuralism and post-colonialism) which did not originate or are necessarily related to the problem of religion. They are less concerned in defining what a religion\s are, do, came from or how they distinguish themselves, than they are on casting a skeptical eye to the 'constructive' theories. By doing this they try to unveil critical issues from theoretical and historical point of view.

To adopt the concept of 'religion' is problematic for at least two reasons. First, many uses and conceptualizations of the term actually changed and developed historically according to contexts. Sec-

ondly, the application of the term 'religion' in modalities still influent today is instead a non-neutral reflection of modern, Christian, Protestant, Euro-American presuppositions. Let us briefly delve into detail.

In ancient Rome the Latin term *religio* referred more to social obligations, civic oaths and family rituals, while it also included cultic observance to gods. In early Christianity, the only author who dealt with it extensively was Augustine of Hippo (354-430) in his *De vera religione* (390 CE). Here he understood it as 'worship', in the sense of praise. He thus contrasted the authentic worship, directed to God, in contrast to the ones towards other entities. However, he also acknowledged the normal Latin usage (Canavaugh 2009, 62-4).

In the Middle Ages *religio*, on one hand, still retained its sense of 'binding' or 'duty'. It was used in fact with reference to monastic rules, thus distinguishing the monastic orders, the *religious* ones, from the normal, *secular* clergy. On the other hand, it maintained the meaning of worship, with the addition of the subjective disposition of the worshipper (i.e. piety). As such, *religio* is treated as a virtue, a type of habitus, engendered by repetition of actions (Canavaugh 2009, 65-7). In neither of these ancient and medieval usages did Canavaugh individuate *religio* as a universal genus of which Christianity is a mere local kind. Indeed, this would have undermined the very pretension of Christianity to be the universal truth producer. Similarly, other modern features of the idea of religion, e.g. a system of proposition or a focus on individual interiority, are hard to attest (68).

Smith traces the first seeds of a universal conception of religion in the Renaissance Platonist, Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499). In his *De Christiana Religione* (1474), he wrote that *religio* was a divinely infuse faculty in all men to perceive and worship God. It is *christiana religio* when such faculty/instinct is directed to Christ and therefore is nearest to the (Platonic) ideal of worship to God (Smith 1963, 34-5). Similarly, shift towards universalization and interiorization of the concept of religion can be seen in Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464), who used *religio* to refer to the way in which God is worshipped by Jewish, Christian, and Arabic people, adding the novel idea of religion as a "universal, interior impulse that stands behind the multiplicity of rites" (Canavaugh 2009, 70).

This personalistic and inward-oriented concept of religion is further reaffirmed in protestant reformers such as Zwingli (1484-1531) and Calvin (1509-1564). The latter wrote the influential catechism *Christiane Religionis Institutio* in 1536, where *christiana religio* is identified as the subjective disposition, or *pietas*, that every true Christian should nurture. This work is also credited to have popularized the very term *christiana religio*" (Smith 1963, 35-7). This emphasis on the inner devotion of the individual as the true kernel of Christianity is observable in the increasing use, in protestant contexts, of the term 'faith' (Smith 1998, 271).

In the wake of reformation movements, and related political events, not only the existence of different confessions triggered the possibility to think of 'religions' in a plural way, but all these different confessions needed to polemically express and differentiate themselves from the others, in a clear and succinct way. Therefore, through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, we have a transition in which religions came to be based on factual statements/system of ideas and belief. In such a context, Edward Herbert of Cherbury (1583-1648) attempted to reach a concord among all known religions by identifying five essential beliefs of religion as such, which can be instinctively apprehended by the mind (Canavaugh 2009, 74-6).

In Herbert we can see an early appearance of the tendency of Enlightenment towards abstraction, schematization, and universalization, that brought forth the idea of 'natural religion', triggered also by the growing amount of information outside Europe. As 'natural religion' stressed further the idea of universality and innateness, differences were understood as a degeneration from a common point of departure, being it God, morality, rationality, or feeling (cf. Smith 1998, 272-3).

Together with universality, another key passage was the progressive shift of 'religion' to the private sphere and, consequently, towards a separation between the private and religious domain and public and secular one. Many scholars (Fitzgerald 2017, 450 ff.; Canavaugh 2009, 78 ff.; Nongbri 2013, 101 ff.) see a first turning point in in John Locke (1632-1704) and his *Letter on tolerance* (1689). For him, the care of souls cannot be a matter for the civil magistrate, because the true and saving religion ought to be a matter of inward persuasion of the individual, not of outward compulsion. He thus radically redefined the former medieval idea of 'church' into a "voluntary *libera* Society of Men, joining themselves together of their own accord" (Locke 1689, 6, cit. in Nongbri 2013, 102).

In these intellectual developments the issue of what was understood as religion outside Europe played a progressively important role. From the seventeenth to the end of eighteenth century, religious practices (along with the main regions of the world) were traditionally divided in four categories: Christians, Jews, Mohammedans, and the rest. The latter were variously termed as 'pagans' or 'heathens', but nonetheless all were charged with idolatry: wrongful ascription of supreme value to anything that was not the Perfect Being specified by Christianity (Masuzawa 2005, 47-51). Engaging with various religions within and outside Europe was not a mere study of exotic places or a first attempt to compare religions. In the case of Samuel Purchas (1577?-1626) and his *Purchas, His Pilgrimage, or Relations of the World and the Religions Observed in All Ages and Places Discovered* (1613), Fitzgerald concludes that works like this were instrumental in polemizing not only with Jews, Mohammedans and heathens, but also with the Catholic church and its practices, thus

establishing a superior Protestant position and developing a biblical interpretation of the world (Fitzgerald 2007, 218-19).

Similar lines of reasoning lasted till the beginning of nineteenth century. At that time, new categories such as monotheism and polytheism were adopted, as well as a new conceptualization of religion as a system of beliefs, rather than as practices typical of certain 'nations' or 'tribes'. Also, the 'heathens' came to be more sophisticatedly differentiated in Buddhist, Jainist, followers of the *Veda* or the *Poorana*, of the sects of China and Japan, etc. However, the aim was still to expose

> all possible forms of religious deviation, as measured from the standpoint of the spiritually chaste and temperate Protestantism. (Masuzawa 2005, 68; cf. also 64-7)

A point of departure from this situation is individuated by Masuzawa (2005) in the nineteenth century. Through developments in comparative theology, linguistics, and the newly established science of religion, religions other that Christianity, such as Buddhism and Islam, came to be recognized as 'universal religions' – as in the influential definition of Dutch scholar Cornelius P. Tiele (1830-1902) (Smith 1998, 279). By the early twentieth century, the old fourfold division of Christians, Jews, Mohammedans, and heathens came to be replaced with the so-called 'world religions paradigm'. It can span from a core of five (Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, and Hinduism) to roughly a dozen of well-distinct religions. The paradigm of 'world religions' is arguably the dominant one in contemporary discourses on religion both outside and even within academia, where it is still difficult to find alternatives, especially in didactic situations (Cotter, Robertson 2016, 10-13). The problem with the world religion paradigm is that it concurs to the rhetoric of universality of religion as natural entity.

This paradigm represents religious traditions (Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc.) as discrete systems, whose outer boundaries and inner structure are well-defined in terms of the contents of their beliefs and texts, the typology of their rituals, the structure of their organization and, above all, the exclusive affiliation of their members. At the same time, however, world religions are equated with each other following a common scheme modeled after Protestant Christianity (cf. Owen 2011; Cotter, Robertson 2016, 4-10). Often, such a scheme depicts each religion as having a quintessential 'core', which is as a private, inner, 'experiential' relation with 'God' or any other kind of transcendent entity. Doctrines and myths are auxiliary elements to this experiential 'core' in that they express how the individual relationship between the faithful and the transcendent entity should be structured. Often, modalities such as ineffable mystical experience are considered 'of higher level'. Doctrines are usually thought to be

derived from an enlightened founder and transmitted by a religious organization through texts and rituals. Finally, all these dimensions of human life which are characterized as 'religious' are separated, or even contrasted to what is deemed pertaining to the 'secular', such as society, science, politics, etc. (cf. Fitzgerald 2000, 3-33).

In this way, world religions are seen as 'actors' existing alongside each other, sometimes competing to attract followers, other times engaging in dialogue, other times battling over the monopoly of 'Truth'. This representation involves several problematic issues. First of all, it creates an idea of artificial wholes that obscures all the inner heterogeneity and contestation, historical changes, and the fuzzy boundaries between these traditions. This image of supposed homogeneity ultimately refers to the (often male) elite views and their scriptural practices. Secondly, by assuming the naturality of this paradigm, the historical construction and the deployment of a notion of religion are hidden. Thirdly, it creates a hierarchy of religions in which the world religions (the often cited 'Big Five': Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism) are separated, and elevated, from all those other traditions variously labeled as 'primitive', 'indigenous', 'illiterate', and so on (Masuzawa 2005, 42-6; Owen 2011, 256-7).

Phenomenology of religion is particularly blamed for having greatly contributed to the construction of the basic representation of the world religions as based on a quintessential 'core' of inner experience. As Flood (1999, 104-8) remarked, the application of the phenomenological method of *epochè*, i.e. the eidetic reduction and empathy, resulted in an overriding emphasis on subjective states and on the structure of religious consciousness, at the expenses of the historicity and intersubjectivity of religious phenomena. This move was grounded on the assumption of the

> universality of the rational subject […] which can, through objectification, have access to a truth external to any particular historical and cultural standpoint. (Flood 1999, 108)

By doing this, phenomenologists introduced a subtle bias: a postulated universal human experience at the core of all religion. Moreover, this core could be grasped only from the epistemically privileged position of the phenomenologists thanks to their combination of *epochè* and empathy. This latter, in particular, was ultimately recognized by many phenomenologists to correspond to the personal religious experience, necessary to replicate the religious consciousness of the subjects studied.

Such claims to the epistemic privilege granted by religious insight triggered further charges of having an implicit theological agenda, since theological thought was entangled with the development of phenomenology and the idea of inner sphere as the natural dimension of

all religions was developed throughout Christian modern thought. Weibe (1999, 141 ff.) accuses several past and contemporary exponents of the academic study of religion\s of a "failure of nerve" for not having resisted the pressure of ecumenical theological thinking, that is, for positing the existence of some sort of ultimate, mysterious reality, which is ontologically independent and to which all religions ultimately focus on. Further accusations of theological thinking towards the *sui generis* interpretation of religion are directed, for example, to Eliade, for setting forth the view that "by interpreting religion 'religiously', scholars contribute to the 'salvation' of 'modern man'" (Cox 2006, 218; cf. also Strenski 2015, 142-55).

2.1.6 Epistemological Commonalities: Methodology

While the fundamental perspectives of the 'constructive' and 'deconstructive' trends are clearly running on separate binaries, one more focused on theoretical construction and the other on genealogical de-construction, some points in common can be found in the general methodology.

Strictly speaking, in the present day there is not any single method unique to the study of religion\s.[9] There are many types of sources, written, oral, or material, as well as a variety of theories and approaches available. Such a situation requires various methods, varying from linguistic analysis, to fieldwork, to discourse analysis, and even experiments in cognitive science-based approaches. We cannot review them here (cf. Stausberg, Engler 2011). However, Alberts (2007, 43 ff.) individuates a cluster of mutually related 'meta-methods' which is useful to briefly address as the basic research procedures which are widely used (not exclusively) in the study of religion\s. They are the following: *comparison*, *classification*, *contextualization*, *understanding*, *explanation* and *description*.

Among these meta-methods, Stausberg (2011) attributes particular importance to *comparison*, as it can be conceived both as a particular method in itself and as a *modus operandi* intrinsic to almost any other research design. It is logically connected with the other meta-methods, in particular *classification*, which aims at giving a heuristic order among various phenomena. The creation of categories by which to classify data – i.e. grouping for structural similarities – is inevitably based on native concepts, which need to be abstracted and generalized. This is the case for the famous Weberian ideal types (Weber 2011, 90 ff.), that is the selection and exaggeration of certain elements deemed relevant. The next logical step is to assess the va-

9 In past, the privileged method has been the historical or philological one.

lidity of a certain category, and this implies that the phenomena under investigation must be *compared* in terms of similarity and difference with the said category. In other words, *comparison* is essential in the constant retooling of the modes of *classification*. Categories may change accordingly with data materials (bottom-up), thus enabling a review of the source materials with changed eyes (top-down) (Stausberg 2011, 28-30; Alberts 2007, 45). Apart from helping to build new classifications, comparison is also a key operation to illuminate hidden sides of a phenomenon by juxtaposing it with another different and/or better-known phenomenon.

For Stausberg (2011, 28-9) the main fault of phenomenological comparativism was its striving for a cross-religious synthesis rather than a reflection over similarities and differences, which overemphasized likeness at the expenses of heterogeneity. Also, comparison implies certain issues of generalization and reduction that not only hinder the scientific value of the research, but can (and indeed have) lead also to ideological and political problems. For example, there is the issue of the supposed neutrality of the position from which the comparison is to be carried out, or the issue of how differences are managed during comparison. Without attention to these aspects, there is the risk of creating hierarchy or subsuming/minimizing difference under a supposed universal idea of religion (Paden 2005, 209-12, 216-18).

This ended up engendering an excessive critique to a fundamental intellectual operation (cf. Stroumsa 2018). Indeed, comparison not only takes place in broad generalization, but also in analysis focused on specific elements in single religions. Here, in order to convey as best as possible foreign concepts to the readership, the researcher has to compare them with his/her own conceptual repertoire, in order to choose the most appropriate native (to the researcher) equivalent. Even in the attempt to criticize comparative approaches, such as the very deconstructive genealogies of key categories, one cannot avoid a comparative perspective, e.g. seeing the difference of how the term *religio* was used in different periods. To avoid simplistic generalization or reduction, *comparison* must be accompanied by a thorough *contextualization* (historical, social, cultural, even environmental) and a reasoned selection of the *tertium comparationis*.

The need of *contextualization* stems from the fact that any religious tradition shows different characteristics and changes accordingly to historical and socio-cultural contexts. In addition, since religions are not completely separated domains from other social spheres,[10] it is fundamental to know how they interact and blur boundaries. Anoth-

10 Such as economy (cf. e.g. Koch 2016), law (Schontal 2016), environmental issues (Ivakhiv 2016), science (Vollmer, Von Stuckrad 2016), medicine (Klassen 2016) and sport (Cusak 2016).

er relevant challenge to comparison, concerning *contextualization*, is the critique to the concept of religion itself which, as we have already seen, is inextricably tied to certain historical and geographical frames. This is the reason why its transfer and use in other contexts has been, and still is, very problematic. *Contextualization* also refers to the degree to which a study zooms in on the comparands, and the distance between them. These aspects are important to avoid unwarranted comparison, e.g. confusing micro-level with macro-levels, and the consequent risk of essentializing certain particular aspects as essential or general ones (Freiberger 2018b, 14).[11]

The selection of *tertium comparationis*, i.e. the "point or question with regard to which they are compared" (Freiberger 2018b, 8) is highly relevant and related to the research goal. An insightful choice of the *tertium* may put two traditions that 'on the surface' seem to be incomparable in a condition of sharing interesting common features worth investigating.[12] It is worth noting that the very assertion that two items deserve to be compared implies that a certain degree of comparison has already been implicitly carried out (cf. also Freiberger 2018a). Therefore, ensuring transparency in this operation is highly important. At the same time, it is important to distinguish between forms of transcultural behavior and their 'contents', i.e. specific functions and meaning for the insiders. This move allows broad comparison without downgrading the cultural specifics and differences.[13]

All these operations ultimately aim at reaching *understanding*, *explanation*, and *description* of a certain phenomenon. The first two terms are often found in mutually exclusive manner, the former being associated with the humanities and the latter with the natural sciences. However, this dichotomy is nowadays hardly feasible (Stueber 2012, 9-13) and epistemological discussions of the study of religion\s (e.g. Jensen 2011) feature both elements.

Understanding in our context would be better named as *interpretation*, in the sense of grasping a set of signs (texts, images, actions,

11 For example, comparing Daoism with another tradition but considering the former by analyzing only early texts such as the *Daodejing* or the *Zhuangzi*. On the reasons why this has occurred and may well occur in poorly considered comparisons, cf. *infra*, § 3.3.

12 For example, exorcistic practices may be found in Christianity, Buddhism and Daoism (cf. Paden 2005, 218-24).

13 In the case of religions, the example of periodic renewal rites shows how similar behaviors (collective gathering, interruption of normal activities, feasting, impressive performances) imply very different meanings to be recalled and re-enacted, be them the salvific power of the founder (Christian Easter) or the bonds with ancestors (Japanese O-bon). Moreover, in a given culture/society, such rites may bear different meaning according to the age, class or gender of participants or observers. Again, comparing renewal rites, which are scholarly or commonly defined as 'religious' with those which are not defined as such (e.g. civil observance) is a useful exercise to gauge how concepts of 'religion' or 'secular' shape the borders between phenomena (cf. Paden 2005, 223-4).

behaviors, etc.) in a meaningful way. In other words, 'hermeneutics', which is the most basic 'tool' in the study of religion\s, since any other method presuppose a degree of hermeneutical reflections (Flood 2016; Gilhus 2011). Hermeneutics basically entails a movement between the whole set of signs and the single element, so that 'totality' and 'parts' are mutually illuminating, without ignoring *contextual* elements.[14] *Interpretation* in human sciences cannot help but resort to a sort of 're-enactive empathy', i.e. a folk-psychological move of 'getting in the shoes' of someone else to appreciate how and why s/he acted in a certain way (Stueber 2012, 26-9). However, it has been pointed out (Gilhus 2011, 280-1) that this may entail a limited or idealized reading. A limited reading may occur when interpretations (especially with religious texts) reproduce only the view of a dominant fraction as representative of the entire whole. To avoid this, it is suggested employing a "hermeneutic of suspicion" instead of a "hermeneutic of faith" (cf. Josselson 2004),[15] asking whose interests are promoted, reading against the grain to discover possible hidden ideologies and bypass obvious meanings in order to draw less visible – or less pleasant – interpretations. Instead, in an idealized and over-empathetic reading, the interpreter may project uncritically naive assumptions on data. This is the case of the uncritical adoption of the Protestant prototype of religion.

Explanation can be defined as "disclosing how matters are causally connected or [as] 'making things clear'" (Jensen 2011a, 53; cf. also 44-8) and can be of various types. Intuitively, in the study of religion\s, it is difficult to find those explicative patterns commonly found in natural sciences,[16] which connect *explicandum* to the *explanans* by means of necessary natural laws. The most common types of explanation are instead those called 'positional' or 'contextual'. They aim to clarify something *unknown* by putting it in a context of something *known* and see how they 'hang together'. Instead of focusing on necessary causes, these explanations address the role, the place or the meaning of something in a context. To do this, a certain theory has to be adopted, or at least the presence of a un 'underlying mechanism' has to be assumed. For example, in attempts to *explain* the role of religion in contexts of conflict (as in the case of Pace 2004) religions are *theorized* and *interpreted* as providers of symbolic representation of collective identities or enemies. The explanatory process thus aims to produce a meaningful account or 'narration' of what is

14 Different contexts may imply different readings of certain texts or practices, such as the place and value of Buddhist meditation in, say, medieval Japan and contemporary Buddhist practices in US.

15 Terms named after Paul Ricœur's famous phrase "masters of suspicion" (Ricœur 1965).

16 An exception can be considered the cognitive science of religions, where religious behavior is explained on the basis of the material workings of the brain.

to be explained. This explanatory strategy shows that, especially in human and social sciences, *explanation* and *interpretation* should be seen as two sides of the same coin. A phenomenon is *explained* when inserted in a narrative considered meaningful on the basis of a certain theory or of implicit common sense, and the elements selected to build up such account are those *interpreted* as relevant.

Explanation and *interpretation* ultimately feed into the *description* of the variety of religious phenomena, to produce accounts as much comprehensive as possible. There are two important conceptual dyads in this regard: the insider-outsider and the emic-etic[17]couples. The 'outsider' is the scholarly observer of a religious phenomenon, whose actors are the 'insiders'. The emic perspective is applied when the outsider attempts to convey insiders' behaviors as faithfully as possible, especially in their own, native description of their religions. The etic perspective entails the organization, classification, comparison, etc. – in other words, re-description – of all the data 'emically' gathered, in the terms of a system germane to the scholars, e.g. with categories such as 'superhuman beings', 'religious specialists', 'sacred postulates', and so on (McCoutcheon 1999, 17).[18]

The existence between these two different perspectives has consequences for the insider-outsider relationship. If the study of religion\s limited itself to reporting statements or behavior of insiders, it would be a quite insignificant endeavor. By applying the etic perspective, on the other hand, there can be cases in which researcher's statements could create tension with the insider's perspective. Pye (2013) individuates a number of situations for this TWB (Tension With Believer) to arise. One of the most evident situations is the challenge of historical factuality, which is hardly necessary to address here in detail.[19] In other cases, the researcher is aware of parallels which may play no part in the self-understanding of the insider, especially when the ac-

17 The latter two terms are an invention of anthropologist Kenneth Pike (1967) who derived them from linguistic terms 'phonemic' and 'phonetic'. The former refers to any unit of significant sound in a particular language, that is the sound in themselves, while the latter refers to the system of cross-cultural notations devised by scholars in order to represent and compare these sounds.

18 Emic and etic perspectives should not be treated respectively as the point of view of the insider and the one of the outsider. Both etic and emic models are the creation of the outsider, because both of them are the results of second-order observations made by the researcher. Such observations are, in fact, reflexively aware of their framing themselves near (emic) or far (etic) in respect to the first-order observations of the insider (Mostowlansky, Rota 2016, 327 ff.).

19 Do the four Gospels report verbatim words by Jesus of Nazareth written down by eye-witnessing disciples? Contemporary scholarship, also of insider provenance, is quite skeptical (Carr, Conway, Colleen 2010, 233).

tual religious practices may contrast with official doctrinal positions.[20] Another TWB situation rises

> when believers are not aware of, or fail to draw attention to important factors in their religion which are relevant to an analytical understanding of it. (Pye 2013, 101)[21]

According to Pye, the TWB factor is likely to be high during the explanatory process, in which analysis, comparisons and contextualizations may give an account of a tradition which may not please an insider's point of view, especially when economic and power-related factors are included in the picture.

Given these chances of contrast between insiders and outsiders, it is also important to note that this dyad should not entail an epistemological rift, i.e. the idea that there is a privileged access to some kind of information only for a given individual or group (the insiders). However, this is what was surmised by certain past phenomenological approaches, which, as we have seen, considered those views of scholars able to re-live the subjective experience of the insider as the only authoritative views. For Jensen (2011b) adding the epistemological dimension to the above-mentioned methodological distinction between insider and outsider entails various problems, one of those being the issue of cultural essentialism.[22] In other words, it is common sense to presume that members of a given religious/social group share much more traits among each other than with the members of any other group. However, this must not lead us to think that any members of a given religious/cultural/social group share essential traits that makes them a species on their own, an incorrect idea which may fuel political and social tension. In this way cultural essentialism posits that, fundamentally, no exchange or understanding is possible between insiders and outsiders. It is true that there are stark and seemingly incompatible cultural differences, or contrasts between different modes of discourse with different regimes of truth (such as contemporary scientific discourse and religious discourse). However, the fact itself that we can sort out the differences demon-

20 For example, creating a parallel between, say, the idea of city patron saints in Catholicism with the example of city gods in Chinese popular religion (*chénghuángshén*, lit. 'spirit of wall and moat'; cf. Gossaert 2015, 6-19) may highlight some polytheistic features of Catholicism at odds with its self-understanding as monotheism.

21 For example, Zen Buddhist practitioners in US (cf. e.g. Seager 2000, 90-113) may feel at odds with, or even criticized as non-Buddhist, the common customs of Japanese families of registering as parishioner under Zen temples (esp. Sōtō) with little or no interest in meditative practice, and of relying on monks mainly for funerary rites (Deal, Ruppert 2015, chs 4 and 7).

22 On critique to cultural essentialism cf. *infra*, § 2.1.8 in relation to post-colonial and orientalism, and § 2.2.7 in relation to intercultural education.

strates a certain degree of commensurability, i.e. to individuate the common ground upon which we diverge. Therefore, it is more a matter of interpretation than of supposed epistemic privileges. Finally, the insider-outsider 'problem' can be seen as a variation of the philosophical problem of 'other minds', that is, we can have direct access only to our own mind, while those of others are available only in a mediated way. However, this intuitive idea does not consider the externalist position, i.e. the conception of the mind as a hybrid entity, an interface between the brain and the external world (Donald 2001, cit. in Jensen 2011b, 44). In this perspective even the most individual self-knowledge is mediated by language and other symbolic shared systems, as we learn to think with things outside and around us: concepts, signs, symbols, artefacts, and so on. Jensen therefore concludes that the insider-outsider distinction should refer only to a gradient, not a rift (31).[23]

2.1.7 Constructive Representations. Examples of Theory Building

Based on the previous starting definitions, concepts, theoretical and critical approaches, how are religious phenomena theoretically engaged, described, explained, contextualized or even deconstructed in actual scholarly practice? We will explore some relevant examples in order to further outline the characteristics of the 'constructive' and 'deconstructive' trends. Starting from the former, let us recall the two fundamental approaches in theory building: top-down, starting from a pre-definite theoretical apparatus, and bottom-up, starting from the empirical base.

As an example of the latter, the work of Thomas Tweed (2006) can be briefly presented. Tweed starts from the data of his fieldwork among Catholic Cuban refugees in Florida and tells us that he aims towards a conceptualization of religion which is empirical, in the sense that it is meant to give sense to what he observed among the Cubans, but at the same time stipulative, in the sense that it "might prove useful for interpreting practices in other times and places" (Tweed 2006, 54). His take on theory, similarly, is more of an attempt to find a flexible 'way of travel' to see things in movements (including the theoretician, who is not external) rather than a fixed scheme

23 Engaging the insider-outsider problem as an epistemological issue runs the risk of creating a veiling mystique with unwanted consequences also in teaching and learning contexts. For example, we will see in next chapters (cf. *infra*, chs 3 and 4), how the rhetoric of resorting to the 'inner dimension' in order to appreciate religions is actually a modern, colonialist projection which molds the representation of many East-Asian traditions in accord with Euro-American modern expectations.

from a vantage point. He begins from a starting definition which is basically the condensed form of his theory:

> *Religions are confluences of organic-cultural flows that intensify joy and confront suffering by drawing on human and suprahuman forces to make homes and cross boundaries.* (Tweed 2006, 54; italics in the original)

Tweed uses the term 'confluences' in two important senses; first, they are plural because no scholar will ever encounter 'religion', which is just the conceptual horizon of the scholar, but only religion*s*. Secondly, the trope 'confluences' underlines how religions are "not reified substances but complex processes" (59) of multiple elements, whose merging, however, has certain features that do not lend them to be reduced to other confluences, like 'economy' or 'politics'. The interaction and intercausality between 'confluences' are nevertheless considered (60). The multiple elements merging in religions are themselves qualified as 'flows', in the sense of being phenomena that cross time and space. These flows are, for example, generational transmission and development of certain practices, knowledge, artifacts or institutions, or the geographical expansion of those through missionary activities or diaspora of individuals. However, not only cultural traits are to be identified as the riverbed of such 'flows'. Drawing from recent research in cognitive sciences and evolutionary approach in religions, Tweed conceives the development of religious traditions to be the results of "reciprocally constructive" interaction between human biological constraints (neural, physiological, emotional, and cognitive) and cultural mediators (tropes, artifacts, practices, institutions) (64-8). In this sense, these are "cultural-organic flows", where "cultural-organic" stands also for "social-individual". These flows have three characteristics. First, they provide "lexicon, rules, and expression" (70) to manage in different ways human emotions, especially those related to positive frames such as birth, harvest, wonders in front of nature, etc., and those related to negative frames such as death, disease, loss, etc. In this sense they "intensify joy and confront suffering". With this, Tweed stresses that religions have emotional dimensions as much as cognitive ones, which allow religions to actually hold onto their practitioners. The second characteristic is the reference to superhuman forces (personal like gods and ancestors or impersonal like *karma*) which nonetheless can be embodied also in human beings, e.g. the idea of the embryo of Buddha-nature within men (73). The third characteristic refers to the two main modalities in which religions perform their tasks: 'making home' and 'crossing'. The first modality refers to the functions of situating the religious practitioners in space and time, starting from their individual bodies (by gendering them, by stating that they are made of im-

permanent bodies and permanent souls, etc.), to the whole cosmos (with various cosmologies). Between these two extremities, there are the various religious frames that inform ideas about household, society and homeland. The second modality indicates that religions are not only about the 'static' situation of the practitioner/s, but also deal with various 'crossings'. These may be across terrestrial borders (e.g. missionary expansion, pilgrimages), social borders (e.g. rites of passages), corporeal limits (e.g. ascetism), and cosmic limits (e.g. imaging afterlife) (73-7; more details in chs 4 and 5).

We can see how Tweed addresses the five constitutive points of a theory of religion\s. Concerning the questions of the ontological status and distinctiveness of religion, it is a fuzzy phenomenon, stipulated to be religious because of the typical feature such as reference to superhuman forces. Its function is to cope with emotions related to both positive and negative aspects of life, through an incredibly variety of effects and products. Its emergence is due to the reciprocal interaction of biological and cultural factors. The structure of religion can be somehow addressed through the previous two points. It has the 'internal' structure of a biological and cultural factor, and 'external' components under the label of 'crossing and dwelling'. These latter have been criticized for being so broad and all-inclusive that they are unhelpful in understanding religions (Huges 2009; Reader 2007). Indeed, when a theory is presented as an 'itinerary', it is plausible that it is intended to illuminate rather than explain what religion is on well-defined grounds (which could be falsified), and this is reinforced by Tweed's preference to use the adjective 'religious', rather than the substantive (Tweed 2006, 77-9).

A very different approach[24] in theorizing religion is offered by the cognitive sciences of religion (CSR), which are a thoroughly top-down approach starting from the fundamental theory that the basic functioning of the brains is more or less universal.[25]

Geertz (2016, 100) indicates six foundational explicative ideas that informed the development of this field from the 1990s onwards. The first one is the "epidemiology of representations" by Dan Sperber. According to Sperber, there are two types of representations: mental and public, and both have a material basis: mental representations are ultimately brain states, while public representations could be a vibration of air particles (oral expression), ink on pages (textual expression), movements of the limbs (bodily expression), etc. Due to the common material basis, the reproduction and distribution of rep-

24 We have just seen, nonetheless, that Tweed felt somehow compelled to take into account also of the CSR approach in his conceptualization of "organic-cultural flows".

25 I draw this rather sketchy account mainly from other summaries such as Geertz 2004; Martin 2006; Jensen 2009; Saler 2009; Engler, Gardiner 2009; Geertz 2016; White 2017; 2018; Terrin 2019.

resentation among individuals can be explained with causal chains: mental representations cause public representations that in turn are internalized as mental representations again. In each passage individual interpretations occur, just like a virus that mutates at each infection, and this accounts for cultural diversity. Cross-cultural similarity of representation, on the other hand, is explained by resorting to a certain theory of mind, according to which human cognition universally functions with differently specialized 'modules' or 'domains'. For example, a module is devoted to face recognition, or recognition of living entities. The spreading of a public representations depends on the extent to which it exploits or stimulates a certain human cognitive module (cf. Jensen 2009, 133-6).

The second foundational idea is "animism and anthropomorphism" by Stewart Guthrie. These two phenomena can be seen as products of a universal human strategy, for maximizing payoffs and minimizing risks. Since the world man lives in is ambiguous and in constant change, the best bet is to interpret it with the most significant possibilities at our disposal, i.e. that things are 'alive' and furthermore humanlike (cf. Saler 2009).

The previous idea resonates with the next one. Justin Barret, a developmental psychologist, hypothesizes that the human mind has developed an embedded "Hyperactive Agency Detection Device" (HADD) which compels humans to be constantly alert to detect agents, even when they are implausible. From an evolutionary perspective, this means:

> falsely detect an agent that is not there and the cost is a little extra anxiety and caution, fail to detect an agent that is there and you could become tiger feed. (Barret 2004, 406)

The fourth foundation of CSR is Pascal Boyer's "counterintuitive ideas". We find again the conceptualization of mind as a complex of innate cognitive 'modules' or 'templates'. Boyers builds on the theory that humans have a built-in intuitive physic, psychology, and biology, according to which they can intuitively differentiate objects under five domains: animal, person, plant, inanimate natural object, and artifact, on the basis of their proprieties. In other words, if we tell a child that something 'drinks' something else, that child will automatically know that this something also 'eats', 'lives', 'has offspring', and so on because "this is a rational way for the mind to work on minimal information" (Jensen 2009, 140). However, humans also have imagination, that allows for violation of the expected ontological proprieties, and these counter-intuitive ideas are indeed the building blocks for religious cosmologies, institutions, rituals, etc. Thus, there can be only a limited number of combinations of these counter-intuitive ideas, in that they must pertain to the five domains above cited, and

occur by breach or transfer of physical, biological, or psychological proprieties.[26] Counterintuitive ideas are, moreover, "cognitively salient" and "attention grabbing", due to their increased activation (i.e. breach or transfer) of cognitive templates, which explains their universal diffusion (Jensen 2009, 140-3).

The other two foundational CSR ideas deals with the way in which such counterintuitive ideas are transmitted and work in religions. With his concept of "two modes of religiosity", Harvey Whitehouse wants to explain on a natural basis what in ethnographic records of religions have been described as 'charismatic' and 'routinized' behaviors. He hypothesizes that the charismatic or 'imaginific' religiosity is caused by

> infrequent, but high-arousal rituals, which lead to intense cohesion of local groups, a diversity of religious representations due to spontaneous exegetical reflection, and subsequent lack of orthodoxy. (Geertz 2016, 103)

This religiosity stimulates a particular type of memory, called 'episodic', which may be incoherent or incomplete, but has strong and lasting effect. Conversely, repetitive rituals that stress the same religious teachings over time, overseen by a centralized authority that checks orthodoxy, trigger the "semantic memory" that stores systematic contents and allows a coherent transmission, which is a constitutive feature of large institutional traditions.

Lastly, the idea of "ritual representation", or "religion as superhuman agency", by Thomas Lawson and Robert McCauley explains religions as a specific way in which humans thinks of action, that is, the ritual. They argue that humans fundamentally conceive rituals as any other type of human action, because they depend on the same innate cognitive scheme involving an 'actor', an 'act', and a 'recipient of action'. What characterizes religious rituals is the culturally postulated presence of a superhuman agent, whose capacity is beyond human possibility, and the expectation of an effect by such ritual. This thus differentiates "religious from otherwise ordinary kinds of human behavior, while explaining the common cognitive basis of both" (Luther 2006, 477), and argues that based on cognitive constrains some degree of predictability can be reached (Engler, Gardiner 2009, 25).[27] Applying the five constitutive points of theory to this resumé of CSR

26 For example a spirit, since it has a mind, goes under the domain of person, but it breaches its normal physical proprieties by being invisible. A talking animal is an instance of psychological transfer from the person domain to the animal domain.

27 For example, when the superhuman agent is the actor of the ritual, such as in a wedding, this ritual will always prove more central to a religious system, require little or no repetitions, and is usually emotionally and visually salient. Instead, when the

foundational ideas, we can say that this approach broadly agrees, concerning the ontological status of religion, that

> there is no single entity that constitutes religion but there are discernible patterns of thought and behavior that can be called 'religion'. (White 2017, 100)

Concerning distinctiveness, CSR seem mainly interested in starting from previous theories of what is characteristic of religions (e.g. culturally postulated superhuman agents) and seeing afterwards if a distinct category of religion is meaningful (cf. White 2018, 38-9). Their strength is their explicative power in naturalistic terms of the origin or conditions for religious thought and behavior to arise. This has consequence, however, concerning the remaining two points, the 'components' and 'functions' of religion. CSR fractionate and reduce religion into meaningful units that recur cross-culturally, but such psychological universalism requires methodological individualism, since what matters in explicative sense ultimately is inside the head, the so-called "I(nternal)-religion", distinct from "E(xternal)-religion" (Jensen 2009, 131).

In other words, components and functions of religion are mainly addressed as emotions, representations, beliefs, intentions, etc., instead of texts, institutions, social practices, monuments, material culture, etc., a situation that results in very peculiar representations, i.e. the question of which phenomena and processes are picked up and studied as relevant.

However, this does not mean that endorsing CSR implies a total reductionist approach in explaining religion (not to say in interpreting it), since the E-religion dimension (in CSR terms, "contextual socio-cultural constrains") is still considered relevant as much as the panhuman cognitive constrains (White 2018, 42). Similarly, this does not mean that CSR findings cannot be incorporated in a different theoretical approach, as we saw in the case of Tweed.

Indeed, for Jensen, I-religion from E-religion is a useful distinction that simply marks two different domains of enquiry: out-of-head religions are objects of investigation for historian and social scientists (e.g. institutions, power, discourse, action, etc.), while inside-the-head religions are studied by psychologists and cognitive scientists (e.g. imagination, emotion regulation, cognitive governance, etc.). However, according to Searle's theory of construction of social reality, I-religion and E-religion are mutually constitutive, since social facts are mental facts objectified. That is, states of mind are ex-

superhuman agent serves other roles, such as the recipient of offering and sacrificies, these rituals are expected to be more routinely performed.

ternalized, i.e. become E-religion, through collective intentionality and constitutive rules. At the same time, E-religion is internalized (I-religion) through social acculturation by individuals (White 2014, 41-7). Indeed, recent research argues for a biocultural theory of religion, based on a concept of cognition which is not only (individually) embrained and embodied, but also "enculturated, extended and distributed" beyond the individual (Geertz 2010, 1). In other words, to put emphasis on E-religion or I-religion is not a question of which dimension better accounts for religion, but, as argued at the beginning of § 2.1.4, is merely a consequence of the 'theoretical lenses' one puts on.

2.1.8 Deconstructive Representations. Religion-Making Processes and Postcolonial Gaze

In a similar way, these theoretical (and epistemological) lenses just mentioned above may focus also on the problems, or even the unfeasibility, of the concept of religion itself, as well as on the unwanted ethical and political consequences, which is the case of the 'deconstructive' approach to the study of religion\s. Indeed, as a logical consequence of the various critical arguments brought about by the reflexive turn in the study of religion\s, new research perspectives and directions have been proposed, spanning from a quite vigorous deviation from the 'traditional' focus of the field to a continuation of the previous lines of research, albeit equipped with a strong self-critical reflection.[28]

One of the most adopted approaches consists in investigating the conditions for the emergence and the uses of the category of 'religion'. For example, analyzing how the fact that certain behaviors and social formations have been (hetero- or self-) determined as 'special', 'set apart', 'private', etc. has been instrumental to the interest of various groups, insiders as well as outsiders to these social formations (cf. McCoutcheon 2018).

28 As exponent of the first trend, Fitzgerald (2000) initially called for a dismissal of the use of the term 'religion' and suggested replacing it with 'salvation', 'ritual' and 'politics'. Lately (Fitzgerald 2017), his proposal of "critical religion" focuses mainly on critical and historical deconstruction of the very idea of religion and other related categories. Since for him the concept of religion is a modern invention, bringing into critical light this and correlated categories that unconsciously determine our understanding is tantamount to a critique of modern consciousness itself. Differently, King (1999, 201 ff.; 2005, 287; 2017, 16-18) still endorses the application of the term 'religion', insofar as it is coupled with the rethinking of the comparative study of religion\s. This new comparativism should activate a "discourse of heterogeneity" that historicizes and displaces the unconscious universality of modern paradigms (Christian/secular) and call for exploring "alternative ways of understanding and representing human diversity" (King 2005, 287).

Therefore, the most relevant object of analysis in this sense became the very separation between 'religion' and 'not-religion' (notably politics) as two natural, intuitive, and commonsensical entities. Such a process is addressed as peculiar to a certain historical and geographical context, and it is considered to be discursively construed mainly out of material and instrumental reasons. Dressler and Mandair call these "discourses of religion-making" (Dressler, Mandair 2011) and can be seen both in their developments within the Euro-American regions as well in close connection with the extra-European colonial territories.

If we start by looking at the pre-modern situation in Europe, Asad (1993) argues that, in medieval times, Christianity was far from being an essentially distinct form of culture, or mode of reasoning and feeling, but functioned as an authorizing discourse embracing a vast domain of practices, power- and violence-related ones included. Even in reformation times, nether Luther nor Calvin believed in a state in the modern sense as being essentially separate from a religion understood as Christian truth. Fitzgerald argues that at least till the end of the seventeenth century, even if state and church were clearly identifiable, the 'civil' dimension did not have the same nuance of the modern 'secular'. One example is what he calls the 'encompassing religion' in the case of England. What retrospectively we may call 'politics' were identifiable as an organic, 'sacred' or 'ritual' order in which everyone is born into a specific degree and vocation, in a fixed hierarchy established by God. By respecting one's own duty, serving the king or one's master, one was also serving for the divine well-being, in accord to God's Providence (Fitzgerald 2007, chs 5, 6 and 8).

It was with from Locke, and other seminal authors such William Penn (1644-1718, quaker, founder of Pennsylvania and writer of early liberal constitutions) that ideas opposing religion to civil society start being disseminated, employing dichotomization such as inner/outer dimension, other-worldly salvation *versus* this-worldly governance, the private realm of the soul and conscience *versus* the public realm of law and the magistrate (Fitzgerald 2017, 269-73). It is worth noting (Martin 2009) how the rhetoric of inner/outer division regarding the religious/secular dichotomy was also instrumental in assuring the continuation of Christian hegemony in early modern Europe, thanks to the creation of the private sphere. On one hand, the 'visible church', i.e. the temporal institutions, ceased to be seen as necessary to national identity or, conversely, as threats to state unity. On the other hand, the 'invisible church', i.e. the individual spiritual relationship to God, were still monopolized by the various protestant denominations which simply underwent a doctrinal transformation. This permitted the determination of the public welfare of the state and its citizens to be divorced, not from all Christian doctrine, but only from those doctrines that could be successfully categorized as

'inessential' (such as Baptism or the Eucharist). In fact, other tenets, such as holding belief and being moral were kept in such importance that atheism, in early modern times, was considered a crime.

In a similar vein, it is also important to note that England, as well as the rest of the continent, did not straightforwardly embrace religious toleration because of a growing enlightened *milieu* exemplified by Locke. Instead, it is wise, from a historical/materialistic point of view, to see a link between

> the rise of toleration and the failure of warfare to establish religious uniformity either in England or on the European continent. (Taves 2009, 96)

Moreover, at the beginning of this process only minority denominations (such as the Quakers) actually favored the defense of religious conscience from the interference of the civil magistrate, which was a radical idea for those times.[29]

According to historians, these new ideas endowed with pragmatic enlightened toleration and nonconformist protestant views eventually influenced the way in which modern separation of church and state became clarified in the American Constitution of 1789. It is Fitzgerald's argument (Fitzgerald 2007) that this modern idea of marginalizing religion as the private exercise of faith has been functional and fundamental in the shift from an organic (i.e. 'religious') government, based on hierarchical traditions and customs, to a constitutionalism grounded on unalterable principles of Enlightenment, rationality and rights of the individual. Many founding fathers professed a sort of deism, i.e. the idea of the existence of rational and natural laws and principles created by a transcendent and not-intervening divinity, which facilitated "an ideological reversal". The aura of sacredness (i.e. untouchability) of the private sphere was also reflected in the secular-political realm, as can be seen in the reverence to the founding fathers and to the Constitution (Fitzgerald 2007, 275-99).

From a similar yet different point of view, other scholars investigated the mutual interdependence of concepts such as the 'sacred' and the 'secular'. Talal Asad (2003, 21-67), exploring the use of the concept of 'myth' from early modern to contemporary times, reflected on how it did serve to separate the secular and religious spheres, but also to connect them. For example, the epistemological contrast between 'scientific'/skeptical epistemology and faith-based epistemology in modern Higher Biblical Criticism was resolved appealing to a 'mythical reading' of scriptures, in the sense that they were

29 Such an idea, nonetheless, was still theologically grounded on the doctrine of "divine inward revelation", which was believed to be authoritative both in front of reason and even scripture (Taves 2009, 96).

read as poetry by gifted men that offered humans powerful ideas, irrespectively of historical (in)authenticity. This romantic perspective was accepted by skeptics and believers alike. In contemporary times (twentieth century onwards) the myth is employed by writer such as T.S. Elliot as an explicit fictional ground for secular values that are sensed to be ultimately without foundations. Asad observes how political theorists argue that the liberal state and its public virtues of equality, tolerance, and liberty depend explicitly or implicitly on various myths, such as the myth of common human nature and reason, or of the redemption of the world by liberal values, similar to the Christian idea of redemption of the world.

The above-mentioned discourses have also greatly contributed to the formation of what Edward Said (1978) has termed as "Orientalist discourse"[30] and that functioned as cultural legitimation of the colonial. From nineteenth century onwards, the birth of the study of religion\s itself had a seminal role to play in the development of Euro-American conceptions of and attitudes towards the 'rest'. The very split of the two social sciences which focused on religion is telling: on one hand we have sociology, which was born to study modernity and its relationship with religion, which at those time was considered to be 'fading'. On the other, we have anthropology, which was born to study the others (the colonized), and which employed in its first decades an evolutionary paradigm, distinguishing between primitive or civilized/advanced religion. The study of religion\s further enforced this 'othering' as 'traditional people' in the sense of 'pre-' or 'anti-modern', by focusing mainly on the past and on the textual basis those phenomena classified as religions, neglecting the 'messiness' of contemporary situations (Nye 2019, 13-14).

Interpretations of the extra-European 'religious' landscape followed a recognizable pattern: European explorers routinely reported how local people's customs were mere idolatry prior to the coming of their conquers, i.e. they did not have religion because their devotion was directed to false gods. As such, they were less than human, and this legitimated their invasion. However, in the nineteenth century a logic of governability compelled colonial empires to classify various things (cultures, social groups, symbols and language) as pertaining to various categories, among which 'religious' and 'secular' were prominent, and, most importantly, now understood as universal.

30 I follow Manzalaoui (1980, 838) in referring to some key points of Said's critique: Orientalist discourse has exaggerated the differences between the 'West' and the 'rest', positioning them in an evolutive line between 'modern' and 'primitive', by focusing on the seemingly menacing, weird, or 'eccentric' elements. There has also occurred an 'homogenization' of the cultures of the 'rest', ignoring their great internal diversity. The 'Orient' is moreover seen as "eternal, uniform, and incapable of defining itself" (Said 1978, 301), that is not subject to historical social change.

In this way, a local people's 'religion' was construed following a prototypical Christian notion of religion which implies the following assumptions (King 2011, 49):

1. *Universality and distinctiveness*, that is, all societies have one or more 'religions' which is a particular example of a common genus 'religion', and can be clearly distinguished from other cultural phenomena such as 'science', 'politics', 'economics', and so on;
2. *Creedal emphasis*: all religions, especially the most 'evolved' ones, are primarily considered to be a set of well-defined 'beliefs' or 'propositions', expressing certain truth-claims, in which members are expected to have faith;
3. *Scripturalism*: these set of beliefs are supposed to be inscribed in a closed canon of sacred texts which are considered primarily for their cognitive value (instead of being treated as ritual artifacts), and are considered the authoritative reference for orthodoxy;
4. *Discreteness*: religions are, or should be, discrete entities with clear borders between each other. Any evidence of 'mixture between religions is seen as a contamination of their 'pure essences'.

This prototype helped to bring cultures into a "taxonomic system of equivalence" (Mandair 2016, 186) that permitted, on one hand, homogeneity, in the sense that sharing a certain 'religiosity' was seen as a possibility of comprehension on a common base. On the other hand, it established difference and hierarchy, since the 'others' differed in the progress first towards true religion (Christianity) and then towards secularity.

These processes of discursive 'religion-making' did not work only within the Euro-American context or unilaterally, from the center to the colonial periphery. For example, the construction of extra-European religions, especially those called today 'world religions', greatly affected the discourses on religion in general, on Christianity, and on the European identity itself. The case of Buddhism is telling, and relevant also for the overall argument of the present work.

Before the nineteenth century, those phenomena that later came to be recognized as Buddhism were included in paganism. The situation changed when discoveries in Nepal of a textual corpus in Sanskrit made it possible for the first philologists to reinterpret – or, more accurately, to construe – early Buddhism as a "system of metaphysical and social philosophy", which was assumed to have become subsequently corrupted by external superstitions in the lands in which it had expanded (Masuzawa 2005, 127-9). Two factors concurred in attributing to Buddhism a character of universal or 'world religion' which up to that point had been limited to Christianity): first, its being traceable to an extraordi-

nary yet historical founder, whose revolutionary spiritual vision challenged the previous Brahman priesthood, "just as Luther had rejected papal authority" (134). Secondly, the interpretation of Buddhism as a first forerunner of the modern ideals of the individual against the divine privileges, and then as an example of a teaching which transcended ethnic or national boundaries as it expanded outside India (137).

In this situation Christianity faced for the first time a hypothetical competitor, of older origins and possibly with more numerous faithful. Enthusiastic Europeans drawn towards Buddhism, like the members of the Theosophical Society (cf. *infra*, § 3.3.2), started thinking, in opposition to academicians, of Christianity as later derivation from an ancient esoteric wisdom to which Buddhism was much closer (cf. Lopez 2008, 177-92). Moreover, these kinds of anxieties over the positioning of Christianity, and therefore of Europe, in respect to the rest of mankind, were further heightened by philological discoveries of the families of Indo-European and Semitic languages. Indo-European was considered to be the language of civilization, due to its being the progenitor of the language of Greece, considered the ancient cradle of modern thought and science (Masuzawa 2005, 163-71). In this way, the newly discovered religion, Buddhism, was even more associated with the ideals of universality, reason and individuality (i.e. the self-representations of Europe), thanks to its affiliation with the Indo-European family – often termed 'Aryan' – through Sanskrit and Pāli.

At the same time, the Semitic family was discovered in relation to Hebraism, considered by the nineteenth century to be the other 'wing', apart from Hellenism, of European civilization, namely the moralizing force brought forth by monotheism. However, the Semitic languages were considered grammatically inferior to Indo-European, and, furthermore, were connected to Islam. This created a "fissure in the European past" (Masuzawa 2005, 145). This taxonomic conundrum was resolved by a conceptual maneuver that established the biblical and prophetic tradition of pre-rabbinic Judaism as an exception in the Semitic culture, which came in its full blossoming in Christianity only through mediation of Hellenistic (i.e. Indo-European) culture. In other words, what was "uniquely universal" was not Christianity, but European culture and its Aryan legacy. As Buddhism rose against the context of ethnic/national Brahmanism, so Christianity emerged out of ethnic/national Judaism, and again the Protestant reform re-enacted the humanistic, individualistic and rationalistic values of European essence. Such discourse on religions confirmed that the recently established new world order by European powers was natural and based on a universal, superior cultural traits (the Aryan ones) which came to its full blossoming in modern Europe (cf. Masuzawa 2005, 205-6).

Similarly, also in the colonial periphery, the religion-making processes did not amount to a simple 'epistemological imposition' from the outside. Instead,

> through colonialism, European cognitive maps have reconfigured the very territory that they are purported to represent. (King 2011, 45)

This took place through the dynamics of 'inner colonization' set forward by the native elites, which in turn rebound towards the center.

The foremost example of this is India. In the early period, the elites chosen as collaborators of colonizers and missionaries were those who seemed to fit into the European prototypical idea, such as brahmins and Muslim law-doctors. Those were religious specialists dealing with texts and holding views that strongly divided between Islam and other Indian traditions (Torri 2002).[31] Afterwards, subsequent elites were educated by Euro-American standards which further reinforced the internalization of Euro-American prototypical concept of religion.[32] These very elites and their views on religion, however, were also enabling factors in later religious and secular nationalist movements of independence and cultural pride that appropriated

> religious myths, stories and symbols as a way of mobilizing the masses and helping them to imagine the nebulous concept of nationhood. (Copland et al. 2012, 262)

Even without political or military colonization, similar processes took place in China and Japan, as we will see in detail in the next chapter. A common dynamic can be seen in the way in which natives responded to the orientalist discourses picturing 'eastern' people as incapable of going beyond the religious dimension and embracing modern secularism. Creatively applying the Euro-American paradigm of religion, native elites addressed their traditions discriminating between 'religions' and 'superstitions', and further 'rationalized' their doctrines and practices by focusing on the 'inner' dimension at the expenses of outer manifestations. More importantly, they actively contributed to an affirmative type of orientalist discourse in which their traditions were portrayed as spiritual remedies for a materialistic 'West' or, as we have just seen in the case of Buddhism, as repositories of an ancient wisdom which Europeans may have forgotten.

31 Whereas the previous native political elites of the Mughal Empire generally held pluralistic positions concerning the religious landscape and were aware of mutual influences traditions exerted on each other (cf. Copland et al. 2012, 104-41).

32 Arvind-Pal S. Mandair argues that in the creation of such ruling classes the paradigm adopted was that of "monotheism-monolinguism". That is, vernacular schools were established in which Hindi was taught to Hindus and Urdu to Muslims. Once the linguistic structure of the native mindset was reframed as monolingual, it became receptive to foreign categories such as religion and the secular. The prototypical concept of religion was thereby internalized by native elites (Mandair 2016, 187-8).

2.2 Education. Translating Knowledge in Educational Contexts

2.2.1 Discerning the Relevant Foci in Education. Didactics and Disciplinary Didactics

Like religion, also education does not lend itself to a simple definition, especially because, as Gert Biesta (2015, 256) points out, it is an "essentially contested concept" insofar it is ultimately a normative idea, strictly correlated with people's values and beliefs about what is to be considered as a good education. However, it is possible to further clarify this concept by articulating it in a constellation of related terms and ideas, also resorting to other languages.

A classic Latin distinction can be made between *educatio* and *eruditio*. The former is connected to morals, in relation to societal development or the general betterment of mankind. The latter, concerned with scholarly education and instruction, is related to the different areas of knowledge (Oelkers 2001, 4234-6).

Another widely used distinction (Biesta 2015, 256 ff.) comes from German, with the two terms *bildung* and *erziehung*. The latter indicates the activity of education, with a stress on the intention, on the side of the educator, to provide social standards and to make the individual fit for social interaction. Nonetheless, this conforming tendency is compensated by the aim of bringing a person to be educated as a subject on its own right, not as an object to be manipulated but as an individual to be empowered. *Bildung* is more about process than activity, and hints to the idea of education as cultivation and enculturation, in the sense of the process of development of human capacities through the engagement with society, culture, tradition. *Bildung* also has a strong connotation of active subjectivity, and opposes an upbringing conceived as conforming or obeying the older generation, upholding instead a dynamic engagement of the person within the social community with his/her individual inner drive and attitudes. In this sense this concept has been taken up by critical pedagogy, especially in connection with the Frankfurt School. In this perspective, *bildung* is not merely an introduction to existing culture, but it is also what enables the detection and the unveiling of power- and knowledge-related conditionings of society (Ødegaard, White 2018, 78).

These two sides of education are framed inside three generally recognized purposes of education (Biesta 2015, 257). The first is *qualification*, which refer to knowledge, skill, understanding, and often also dispositions and attitudes. These are what enable us to 'do something', both in very specific situations, such as a job, but also in very general terms as well, such as living in complex societies. Sec-

ondly, education is also the main gate to *socialization*, i.e. being initiated into and being part of the existing social, cultural, political and professional communities, along with their practices and traditions. Finally, education should be seen also as a means for *subjectification*, in the sense of becoming an autonomous subject of action and responsibility.

Moving into an Italian language context, these three purposes resonate somehow with the three key interrelated verbs of education individuated by Umberto Margiotta (2015). The first one is represented by the verb *educare* which, etymologically speaking, means 'to draw out', 'to lead through', 'to guide'. This word defines basically what humans need to feel themselves as such, i.e. being involved in a process of progressive 'humanization' articulated in various aspects: in family, as adolescents, as adults, towards different cultures, or more simply as general acceptable behavior.[33] Although general/universal in its aims, *educare* is always connotated by the contexts that promotes and manages it (Margiotta 2015, 17-18).

The second verb is *istruire*, in the sense of transmitting and providing someone not only with the basic knowledge to survive, but also with tools that enable to generate new knowledge. *Istruire* refers both to propositional knowledge, i.e. notions or values, and 'know-how', i.e. technical knowledge mastered through learning-by-doing. However, *istruire* has also a social/institutional aspect in that it refers to how a knowledge or skill are produced, managed, evaluated and accepted by the community(ies) of reference (18-19).

The third verb combines somehow the previous ones (19-20). *Formare* means to 'give form to action', in the sense that a person, as a subject, fulfills her/his project and self-development, thus connecting to the above-mentioned concept of *bildung*, *subjectification* and *educare* (oneself). Such self-direct processes, however, necessarily work in concert with hetero-directed actions of the environment – indicated by concepts such as *istruire* or *erziehung* – which enable and adapt the subject to carry out her/his self-development.

At this point it will be clear that, since the present work aims to explore the conditions and possibility of a SoR-based RE focused on the topic of Asian religious traditions, we are focusing on the above cited issues of *istruire* or *qualification*. That is, we need to engage first of all the issue of how the study of religion\s as a discipline, characterized by a highly specific, complex – and often internally contested – set of propositional and methodological contents could and should be transmitted and acquired by learners. As anticipated in the pre-

33 In this sense, in Italian *educazione* refers also to good manners or etiquette.

vious chapter, this is the task of didactics,[34] i.e. that science of education which focuses on the object of teaching and learning. More specifically, we refer to disciplinary didactics and its focus on how teaching and learning a given corpus of knowledge.

Before proceeding, it is worth noting that focusing on the field of didactics does not entail overlooking the above cited relationships between *istruire*, *educare*, *formare*, and so on. Indeed, referring to the school environment, Massimo Baldacci (2012b) speaks of two intertwined basic curricula in school education. The first one, *istruzione*, concerns itself mainly with the short-term acquisition and evaluation of knowledge and skills typical of certain disciplines or fields. The second curriculum, *educazione*, exceeds the limits of the school environment in being a task towards the formation of the person, a task which is shared with the society at large. It involves a more long-term dimension in that it refers to those mindsets and ingrained behaviors deemed desirable by society. The connection between the two curricula lies in an idea of learning on two main levels: in the first we have the short-term cognitive changes and adaptations, typical of a school subject-related instruction. In the long run these processes may elicit the acquisition of more lasting competence and mental habits that can belong to a certain area (logical-mathematical, historical, etc.), or be of more general nature (analysis, synthesis, critical thought, ethical reflections, etc.). All of these concur to the overall formation of the individual as a part of society. In other words, *educazione* and *istruzione* are thoroughly linked, and the former without the latter becomes ungrounded moralizing, and the latter without the former becomes shortsighted and pointless inculcation (Baldacci 2012b, 12).

Didactics investigate the phenomena teaching and learning on its own terms and its main perspective is towards the improvement of the quality of teaching and learning (Bonaiuti et al. 2017, 12). Teaching and learning (hereafter, otherwise specified, 'teaching') can mean a variety of elements: the contents of teaching, the act of teaching, the relationships between teacher and learner, and so on. Furthermore, there can be different dimensions of teaching: formal (in appointed facilities such as schools), informal (taking place during everyday activity such as daily work or socialization) and non-formal (somehow between the previous two).

Concerning the theoretical conceptualization of the object of 'teaching', it is not very useful to rely on a substantial definition pointing to an 'ontological core'. Indeed, 'teaching' refers to different empirical realities: the *act* of teaching, the *content* to be taught,

34 Since in Anglo-Saxon regions the fields of pedagogy and didactics are usually conflated or differently divided (cf. Hamilton 1999; Bertrand, Houssaye 1999), I will rely mainly on European, especially Italian and French traditions of scholarship in didactics, although I will not overlook some important American contributions.

the teaching *relationship* between persons, between persons and artifacts, and so on. Indeed, there can be various kinds of conceptualization of 'teaching' according to the types and number of variables (teacher, learner, content, act, medium, process, context, etc.) deemed relevant for a given enquiry (Baldacci 2013, 26-32; cf. also Pentucci 2018, 41-4). Moreover, the choice of relevant variables is often influenced by the applied overarching approach, which in didactics is generally divided into three main – and not necessarily mutually exclusive – approaches: Activism, Cognitivism, and Constructivism, which are worth mentioning in brief.

Activism is the first approach (also in chronological terms) and is process-oriented.[35] It is characterized by a focus on learning-by-doing, through both intellectual and manual activities. The learner and her/his needs are at the center of the entire process as s/he is the only one who ultimately can transform didactic inputs into real developments through his/her experiential engagement. The scholastic institutions are seen as workshops of socialization and democracy, in which the learner is supposed to re-enact the evolutive steps of the human community.

The cognitive approach, instead, is product-oriented and aims at identifying which procedures are most suitable for reaching and evaluating the planned learning outcomes. Its formal and general theories rely mainly on linear causal logic. It tries to exploit the potentialities of the human mind (e.g. the metacognitive competence of learning to learn) and to establish correct mechanisms of response to the learner's developments. Therefore, the teacher is at the center.

The last approach (also in chronological term) is Constructivism, which is context-oriented. Its basic axioms are that knowledge is a product of an active and intentional process, that learning is situated in a defined historical, social and cultural context, and that reality, ultimately, does not exist independently from the knowledge of itself, but is co-construed through social interaction. The varied range of didactic theories informed by this approach focuses on the interrelated variables that make up the environment in which the pupils learn, starting from the relationships between teacher-learner, learner-learner, learner-contents, learners-artefacts,[36] etc. Pivotal in this sense is "implicit knowledge": the pre-knowledge of the pupils, the knowledge embodied in the artefacts, the general knowledge embed-

35 Among its founding figures famous pedagogists like Maria Montessori (1870-1952) and John Dewey (1859-1952) are named.

36 In didactics, an 'artefact' is whatever aspects of material or social world modified by human action towards a certain aim. In this sense and artefact could be a worktable as well as a planification of activities. Often, an artefact is a material device that aids teaching (e.g. a handbook) or the outcome of a learning process (e.g. an essay, a drawing) (cf. Parmigiani 2013).

ded in the biographies of the actors involved, etc. (Bonaiuti, Calvani, Ranieri 2017, 20-32; Perla 2013, 38-45).

As anticipated above, since our focus is a fairly identifiable corpus of knowledge engaging the topic of religion\s, we are dealing with the field of disciplinary didactics (Nigris 2013; D'Amore, Frabboni 2005), and thus we can rely on the triangular conceptual structure illustrated in figure 1, adapted from Baldacci (2013, 31) **[fig. 1]**:

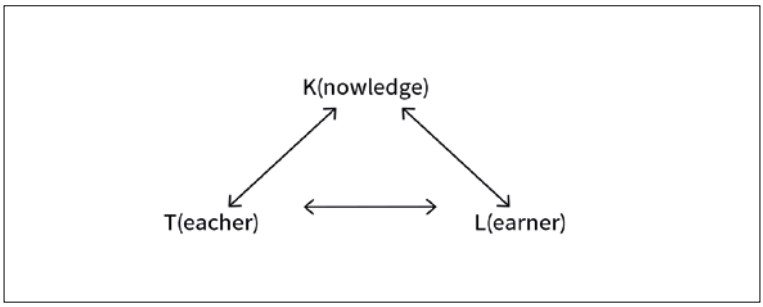

Figure 1 The didactic triangle

This triangle, with its vertices and sides, represents the multiple elements and relations at stakes.[37] First, there is Knowledge, which has its own logic, foundational concepts, its (non-linear) development, technical terminology, etc. In other words, its 'epistemology' and the relative issues such as the 'epistemological obstacles' (cf. *infra*, § 2.2.5). Around this vertex, moreover, the historical character of that Knowledge, i.e. its social acknowledgement as a distinct branch of knowledge deserving a specific treatment and relevance for education is also involved. The Learner vertex features instead a more psychological dimension and involves issues such as the biographical experience, personal cognitive and cultural project, previous knowledge, cognitive and metacognitive potential, learning styles, expectations and personal relationship with schooling institution, and so on. The Teacher vertex represents the expert of the Knowledge at stake, albeit not necessarily at a cutting-edge level as for example an experienced researcher would have, but able of mastering its epistemology in the above explained sense. Her/his individual biography as learner of that knowledge plays obviously a key role. The Teacher usually carries out his/her function on the basis of various factors: the ideal/model of teaching itself, personal convictions and assumptions regarding the Knowledge, and the expectations concerning

37 Nigris 2013; D'Amore 2001; D'amore, Frabboni 2005; Martini 2012.

the Learner. Finally, the Teacher employs, more or less consciously, those various devices that make up the didactic 'toolkit': the artefacts construed and/or employed, the didactical strategies and procedures (e.g. frontal lessons, project work, etc.), and techniques of verbal and paraverbal communication (Pezzimenti, s.d.).

Let us turn our attention to the sides of the triangle, i.e. the relationships between elements. Regarding the KL side, the main activity is learning. Now, especially from the perspective of Constructivism, the Learner cannot be an empty vessel to be filled with the 'liquid' of Knowledge, but s/he is and active participant in the gradual construction of her/his own personal take on that Knowledge. This construction, in fact, takes place in the interaction between: 1) the Learner's previous knowledge, her/his images, models and representations (including stereotypes) of the Knowledge, all of which are subject to change and cognitive conflicts; 2) Knowledge's epistemological and socio-cultural status; 3) all the artefacts (environment, resources, procedures, etc.) deployed by the Teacher as mediator between the Learner and the Knowledge.

The TL side involves a somehow wider, pedagogical dimension insofar as it points to that particular, personal relationship whose origins go back in time: the relationship between master-student (Rivoltella 2013, 123-4). Indeed, the Teacher does not only provide information and instruction, but, on the base of her/his charisma and other personal features, also is a role-model (or anti-model). Teachers can also be seen as a guide for the active exploration of the Learner (opposed to passive instruction). The main activity involved in the TL side is *devolution* towards the Learner, i.e. the Teacher's encouragement towards the Learner to become actively involved in the didactic project and to take the responsibility of the construction of her/his own knowledge. Factors influencing these activities are the pedagogical relations just cited and the various expectations the Teacher has concerning the Learner and vice versa.

The last side of this triangle is TK, whose main activity is 'teaching' in its stricter sense. At this point various observations are of order. First, it is not entirely up to the Teacher to decide which Knowledge should be taught, nor is s/he its foremost authority. Rather, s/he is an interpreter of that Knowledge and, often, also of the political-cultural reasons behind the choices made by the appointed actors (e.g. educational authorities and policymakers) regarding that Knowledge. Consequently, the personal assumptions and convictions of the Teacher concerning the nature of that Knowledge and its general educational value are influential factors in this interpretative process (D'Amore 2001, 112). The most crucial point, however, is the fact that the Teacher cannot limit her/himself to mere repeating what s/he has learned at university. Instead, s/he is expected to adapt the Knowledge to the needs and levels of the Learners and make sure that it does have an

impact on the Learners[38] in respect to a variety of factors, first and foremost the general socio-cultural horizon of reference, usually identified by educational authorities.

In other words, Teachers need to carry out a transformation from Knowledge to Knowledge to be Taught and Knowledge Learned, and this is the main concern of the theory of didactic transposition that I will use to articulate and explore in detail the above touched issues, as it is pivotal in the whole argumentative economy of the present work. I will proceed by employing, with a little tweak, the identification by Rossi and Pezzimenti (2013) of four perspectives from which to address the various aspects of didactic transposition, namely the epistemological, teaching, learning and axiological dimensions.

2.2.2 Didactic Transposition. Fundamental Structure

In addressing the perspective of didactic transposition, it is useful to distinguish (Perrenoud 1998) between *savoirs* and *connaissance*. The former, often indicated as *savoirs savants*, indicate that impersonal knowledge, with no explicit trace of their genesis or reference to social context, which are activated and referred to every time new knowledge is to be produced and organized.[39] *Connaissances* are the subjective side of the *savoirs*, i.e. the learned knowledge. They are contextualized, personalized, and entangled with the mental structure of the knowing subject. Basically, the birth of scientific knowledge can be conceived when a *connaissance* gains the status of *savoir savant*. In other words, *savoirs savants* can be defined as scholarly knowledge. Conversely, the passage from the *savoir savant* to *connaissance* is conceptualized as instruction or teaching.

The didactic transposition theory (hereafter DT), introduced first by Yves Chevallard (1985) and then developed by various scholars, aims at providing both descriptive and normative frameworks for the above-mentioned process. Concerning the description, it individuates the key passages, studying the conditions and limits of transposition from *savoir savant* to *connaisance*. The normative side of the theory focuses on how DT should be carried out so that a *connaisance* "make possible the next step towards the *savoir savant*" (Clerc, Minder, Roduit 2006, 3). We can start by delineating the stages of DT with the following diagram, adapted from D'Amore 2008, 177 **[fig. 2]**:

38 Especially, it is expected that such impact goes beyond mere 'scholastic' competence, i.e. an understanding or memorizing of a given topic only for the sake of being able to pass a relative examination (cf. D'Amore, Frabboni 2005, 73).

39 However, this 'knowledge' should not be referred to as 'fixed' or 'true', as it is constantly re-produced, changed and sometimes eliminated (Achiam 2014, 1).

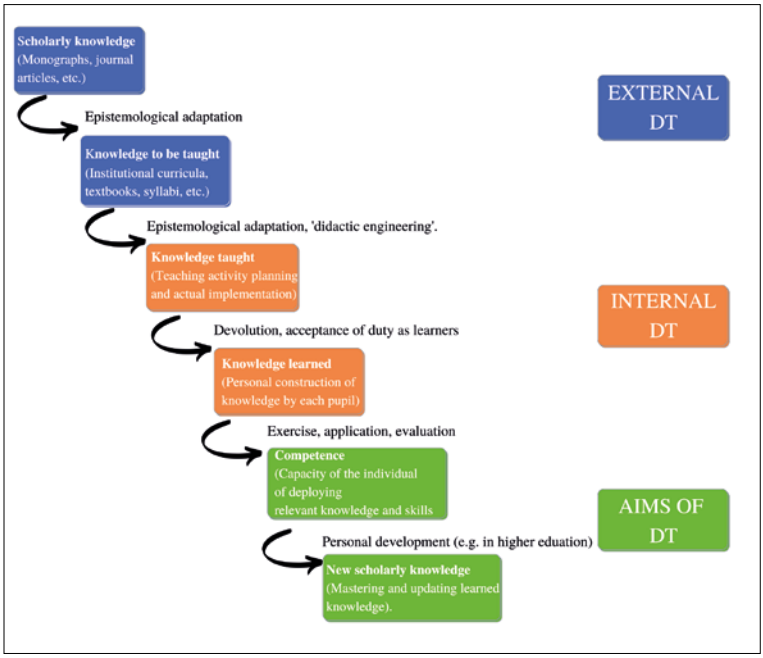

Figure 2 The structure of didactic transposition

The first two stages make up the External DT, because they involve institutions different from schools, such as universities and other centers (ministries and other educational authorities), where relevant ideas on teaching (contents, aims, objectives, societal expectations, and so on) are produced and debated. These are collectively termed as the 'noosphere', which is the intermediary between the school system and the larger socio-cultural context (D'Amore 1999, 221). Here is where scholarly knowledge becomes knowledge *to be taught* by establishing, for example, contents or indications for school syllabi and textbooks.

Throughout this process the knowledge produced by universities change its status under various aspects. It becomes *savoirs scolaires* (Develay 1995a) and as such it is better defined as propositional knowledge. The reason is that it tends to be more of a "savoir which settles for stating its contents in form of logically connected propositions" (Develay 1995a, 25).[40] Moreover *savoirs scolaires* undergo

40 More in detail, scholarly knowledge is meant to be used to produce new knowledge and organize the knowledge newly produced in a coherent theoretical assemblage. Also, it is legitimate internally by the standards of scientific community. *Savoirs scolaires*, instead, are externally legitimated by the noosphere (Kang, Kilpatrick 1992, 2). This is

further processes at the various levels of DT (school curricula, actual practices in class, actual learning of the pupils). It is useful to employ an ecological metaphor and think in terms of 'adaptation' of a certain knowledge in the various steps or 'eco-system' in which it is transplanted (Achiam 2014, 2).[41]

The internal DT stages refer to what happens in school, especially inside the classroom. The teacher starts from indications from the noospehere, such as syllabi and textbooks, but s/he inevitably will make adjustments, on the basis of various factors: her/his epistemological interpretation of the discipline, her/his subjectivity and educational/moral values (Rossi, Pezzimenti 2013, 130-3), so we have a further modification of knowledge *to be taught* into more precise *teaching objects*, which vary from teacher to teacher (Clerc, Minder, Roduit 2006, 2). Furthermore, these objects cannot be directly transmitted from the mind of the teacher to the mind of the pupils, but a process of mediation takes place through the actual activity of teaching, that is, knowledge *to be taught* becomes knowledge *taught* through all the various devices and artefacts that make up the 'toolkit' of a teachers. Finally, the *knowledge learned* represents the outcome of this mediation and ultimately of the whole process of DT. It is influenced by the pupil-related factors already mentioned above such as learning styles, previous knowledge, personal interest, and so on.

2.2.3 Didactic Transposition. Epistemological Dimension

Let us address in more detail the DT theory, starting from the point of view of the epistemology of the knowledge to be transposed. The epistemological dimension of DT is concerned with focusing on the 'mindset' of disciplines and to safeguard their structural aspects when re-constructing and re-presenting them to pupils (Rossi, Pezzimenti 2013, 130-1, 136-7). The following considerations apply to both the external and the internal phases of DT.

Three main points can be addressed. First, there must be an individuation of the key epistemological elements such as postulates, ba-

evident by the fact that *savoirs scolaires* are organized and taught through the institution of school subjects (*disciplines scolaires*), which draw from corresponding academic disciplines but at the same time have a separate status, as their paradigms do not fully correspond to the academic ones. *Savoirs scolaires* not only have to respond to scientific criteria, but also to other criteria such as determination of objects of study, tasks to be assigned to pupils, propositional and procedural knowledge (cf. Develay 1995, 27-30).

41 This is a reason why one of the purposes of the DT theory envisioned by Chevallard is to exert an "epistemological vigilance" on the relationship between *savoirs savants* and *savoirs scolaires*. For example, avoiding the creation of "monumental knowledge" (Chevellard 2004, 4-8) i.e., a situation in which students are invited to contemplate bodies of knowledge, whose rationale (i.e. *savoirs savants*) may have changed.

sic approaches,[42] research methodology, fundamental concepts, theories, technical terms, typology of objects and modalities of validation. Secondly, for an effective DT, suitable content should be selected on the base of their potential meaning and impact on the previous experiences and knowledge of the pupils. Last, but not least, the domain of knowledge in question should be presented in terms of continuities and discontinuities, focusing on the obstacles and conflicts which are inherent to the production of that knowledge. This last point aims at enabling the development of the discipline and its historical, social and cultural conditions of emergence to be retraced; in other words, to avoid a static monolithic representation (Develay 1995a, 11-12; Nigris 2013, 55-61). Together with the individuation of prior postulates, this focusing on limits, external constrains and unresolved questions also serves the important educative aim of creating a critical distance and of avoiding any knowledge that comes to be seen as 'absolute'.

Martini (2012) and Nirchi (2014) offer some operative criteria to carry out the above-mentioned points. In general, there should be overall attention to the "formative criterion" that is, to judge whether or not a DT of a given knowledge permits two intertwined processes: one is the acquisition of the *forma mentis*, i.e. being able to think and to act in ways typical of that knowledge; the other is to elicit a fictional "genesis of scholarly knowledge". More in detail, the organization of teaching objects should be carried out under the principles of *essentialization*, *problematization*, *historicization*, *balance* and *controllability*,

'To essentialize' means to address the already cited key epistemological elements from the perspectives of economy, effectiveness and the modality of representation of the selected information (Rossi, Pezzimenti 2013, 128). However, attention should be paid to the fact that essentiality is not a quantitative, but a qualitative criterion, that is, a notion is not essential when it is condensed into a limited space. Knowledge can be defined as essentialized when, albeit in a reduced format, it retains a full epistemological meaningfulness (Tessaro 2002, 26). In this regard, we can draw from Martini (2012, 52-3) and her idea of the "foundational nuclei", those areas or knots in which many essential elements (concepts, methods, terms, topics) are likely to be found together and/or those areas or knots that are periodically evoked within the scholarly discipline and that are, so to speak, its 'necessary steps'. Furthermore, it is important to note

42 As an example of postulates in the study of religions we can cite the 'methodological agnosticism', i.e. approaching religious phenomena as purely human phenomena, without considering any intervention from super-empirical entities. As a fundamental approach we can cite a stance of 'avalutativity', e.g. to avoid being pro- or anti-religion, or ranking religious traditions, phenomena or individuals, especially on a moral or 'evolutionary' base.

that the essentiality of a given knowledge is always challenged by the production of new knowledge. The degree in which such new developments should be considered is based on how they are accepted by the scientific community and how they re-organize the fundamental structures and vision of the discipline (a paradigm change) (Tessaro 2002, 26-7).

The criterion of *problematization* guides us in the question of how to address the key epistemological elements thus identified. It calls for the identification of those contexts and situations in which the key elements are actively recalled and put into operation, so that pupils may train the mindset specific of that scholarly knowledge. This means to fictionally recreate chances and occasions of questioning, inquiring, answering and reflecting, which are analogous to those which originally gave birth to that scholarly knowledge. This may entail somewhat artificial 'experiments' that reenact on a smaller scale the typical problems of scholarly knowledge, but nonetheless the aim is to foreground the specific way of reasoning of that discipline. The above cited foundational nuclei are particularly apt to this transformation. This criterion is also linked to the *historicization* criterion, that is, to show which problems and which solutions produced that dialectic between new theories and confutation of old ones, that constitute the very development of the discipline, thus raising awareness of the historicity of development of human knowledge (cf. Martini 2012, 48-9; Nirchi 2014, 8-9).

In terms of time allocation, the above operation should be carried out maintaining a certain *balance* between the conceptual (information, principles, ideas), methodological (how to think or act), and linguistic (how knowledge is expressed; terminology) aspects.[43] Indeed, continuously shifting between various epistemological facets is a way to recreate the non-linear and reticular structure of the scholarly knowledge of reference. However, this could be demanding in terms of effort and susceptible to confusion. The *controllability* of the effectiveness of the epistemological transposition can be ensured by the individuation and formulation of both general and specific learning objectives (Martini 2012, 49-51), which lead us to discuss the teaching aspect of DT in more detail.

43 For example, it does not make sense presenting all the fundamental theoretical concepts of the study of religion\s at once to pupils without teaching them first how to actually employ them (methodology) or without making them acquainted with the technical language of the discipline, which, apart from its own specific technical terms such as 'ritual' or 'super-empirical entities', often relies on the languages of the social sciences, history and philosophy.

2.2.4 Didactic Transposition. Teaching Dimension

We shift now from the K-L side of the triangle to the T-L and K-L sides, and to the DT phase in which the knowledge to *be taught* becomes the knowledge *actually taught*.

According to Chevallard (1985, 66 ff.), each single object of teaching, that is, a coherent piece of knowledge around which a didactic action is construed, must have two opposing aspects. It must appear new, thus opening new paths in the learner's previously acquired knowledge, but at the same time it must appear old, in the sense of being identifiable among previous knowledge. This tension must be well-balanced: if the object is too new, i.e. there is not enough continuity with previous knowledge, learning will encounter a bloc. When the teaching object is perceived as obsolesced, it means that learning must have taken place and a new object is needed in order to proceed. New objects should also have a retroactive effect on the previous knowledge.

We can see how the teacher 'knows in advance' which the steps are, i.e. the different 'evolutions' required for the object to elicit learning. This means that a certain 'linearization' of the knowledge taught is inevitable, differently from a more reticular and very much less linear structure and evolution of the *savoir savant*. This activity is called "chronogenesis" (Chevallard 1985, 67). Apart from 'knowing in advance', the teacher "knows otherwise'"[44] in the sense that the s/he masters the various aspects and dimensions of a given object. By exploiting such mastery, s/he offers various ways of teaching, that is, different ways of codifying information, in a manner that the teacher deems appropriate to this or that situation. This activity is called "topogenesis" (76).

Both chronogenesis and topogenesis are connected to the abovementioned *controllability* criterion. An operation crucial to an effective planning of the sequence and nature of what will be actually taught is the individuation of learning objectives. This means aiming at inner changes of the learning subjects (cognitive, emotional, motivational, behavioral), which are quite difficult to gauge (Bonaiuti, Calvani, Ranieri 2017, 48). Among various practical hints,[45] a fundamental distinction consists in differentiating between general and specific objectives. The former refers to the long-term acquisition of mind-sets typical of the discipline. The latter are more specifically concerned with single competencies or knowledge, and their sum should give an approximation of general objectives (Mar-

44 *"Le maître sait autrement"* (Chevallard 1986, 75).

45 For example, ambiguity should be as decreased as possible, i.e. instead of 'text comprehension' details should be added, e.g. "newspaper article comprehension with individuation of central topic". Objectives are also to be operationalized, that is, evaluation system and its measurement type (quantitative, estimative, interpretative) should be decided (Bonaiuti, Calvani, Ranieri 2017, 53-4).

tini 2012, 51-2). Another important step is to set up a taxonomy of objectives, that is, organizing the learning objectives within a structure of different types of competence to be gained.

One of the most famous taxonomies is Bloom's (Bloom et al. 1956). It features six class of objectives (each divided in further sub-sections): *knowledge*, *comprehension*, *application*, *analysis*, *synthesis* and *evaluation*, which are hierarchically arranged from simplest *cognitive* capacities (to memorize, to recall, to identify something, etc.) to the most complex *evalutative* ones (to assess, to compare and to judge, etc.). A revised version of Bloom's taxonomy has been proposed by Anderson et al. (2001). Here a matrix with two axes is proposed. One axis covers the knowledge dimension, divided into *factual knowledge*, *conceptual knowledge*, *procedural knowledge* and *metacognitive knowledge*. That is, arranged from the most concrete pole towards the most abstract one. Each of these types of knowledge are then combined with the dimension of cognitive processes, which is arranged from the simplest to the most complex task: in *remembering*, *understanding*, *applying*, *analyzing*, *evaluating* and *creating*.

Shifting from the planning of teaching activities to actual implementation, we reach the stage called "didactic engineering" which can be divided into "didactic procedures" and "didactic mediators" (Pezzimenti, s.d.). The former are, simply speaking, the various teaching methods, which generally are based on one of the three fundamental didactic approaches. For example, cognitivism-inspired didactic procedures will mainly provide pupils with the right arrangements of contents, possibly by adapting them to the cognitive makeup of the different pupils, to optimize the learning outcomes. A constructivist approach, instead, would put pupils within an environment equipped with adequate resources ('scaffolding') and have them engage problems (with many solutions possible) or projects. Pupils are expected to debate among each other concerning the problem's solutions or the project's steps, while the teacher acts as a facilitator.

There are many examples which obviously cannot be all cited here. However, there are some recurring parameters. For example, control: the traditional frontal lesson is highly manageable. However, it neglects important aspects such as activation and involvement of pupils. Also considering the interaction parameter, there can be frontal instruction divided into little steps/units, spaced out by interaction and feedback. By sharing more control with pupils, we may have a participatory lesson, which features only a partial planning of contents. The teaching proceeds through an interaction in which pupils concur to set the lesson's development, by answering open questions or completing proposed formulations. A problem-based methodology features most of the control on the side of the pupils. In this case the interaction is more pupil-pupil or pupils-environment, than pupils-teacher. In summary, by identifying and specifying the parame-

ter, we may range from simple discussions in class to more elaborate project-works (Bonaiuti, Calvani, Ranieri 2017, 59-72).

We may gain some practical indication from Hattie (2009, esp. chs 8 and 9) who attempts a synthesis of a high number of meta-analysis concerning teaching methods and techniques. His highlights are the following: first, clear and detailed objectives should be shared with the pupils, instead of pushing them simply to 'do their best'. Formative evaluation, which is a formal or in-formal assessment procedure carried out during the teaching process, is critical, especially in the form of feedback from pupils to teachers. Reciprocal teaching is deemed effective too. It consists of cooperative methods in which more expert pupils, or pupils with different pieces of information/ perspectives, teach each other. Rather free explorative activities, such as inquiry-based learning through e.g. websites browsing, are deemed not very effective due to the high cognitive load involved. A guided problem-solving teaching activity, however, is instead, highly evaluated. In conclusion, also following other studies of "evidence-based education" (cf. Bonaiuti, Calvani, Ranieri 2017, 75-7), direct or semi-direct teaching, with well-set objectives, carefully planned steps, clear instructions, constant feedback, refrains and inner connections, should be combined with cooperative activities in small groups focused on peer-learning. Moreover, activities aimed at developing meta-cognitive awareness, e.g. helping pupils find their suitable style of learning, are encouraged.

Other important elements in a teachers' 'toolkit' are the so-called didactic mediators (*mediatori didattici*; Damiano 1999, 213-28), which are all those devices deployed by teachers as 'bridges' or 'fields of mediation' in which the teaching 'vector' meets with the learning 'vector', thus facilitating the acquisition of the desired content. There are four types of didactic mediators, from the most concrete to the most abstract one. First, we have active mediators, which basically consist of the direct experience of a given object. For example, a religious practitioner invited during a lesson, who can be seen, listened to and asked questions. Active mediators are the nearest things to reality. However, they feature the lowest level of conceptualization and generalization.[46] With iconic mediators, we shift from real-life objects to pictures and videos portraying them, as well as to sounds, to geographical maps, charts, and so on. They put reality at a distance and thus ease the process of reaching a more general and abstract conceptualization of a complex empirical reality. They still maintain, however, a strong individuality.[47] The third type of media-

46 In the case of the religious practitioners invited in class, her/his individuality cannot account for the whole of her/his religious group or tradition.

47 A picture portraying religious practitioners during a ritual does allow for more active analysis and conceptualization not possible with a real person, but it is still a very particular aspect of that religious tradition.

tors are the analogic ones, which include all those activities of simulation and role-play. The advantages are a great motivation and impact since they allow direct experimentation of the complexity of a given situation. However, they are time-consuming, not very controllable and can be done only with a limited number of topics.[48] The last and most abstract type of mediator is the symbolic one: numbers, words and other types of symbols that express variables and relations. They permit the highest level of generalization and conceptualization possible, but they do not assure comprehension, as they can easily remain mere words or formulae learned by heart. Since every mediator provides a particular point of view of reality, Damiano (1999, 231 ff.) calls for an integrated and reticular (i.e. non-linear, not from the most concrete to the most abstract) use of them.

2.2.5 Didactic Transposition. Learning Dimension

Keeping on with our exploration of DT diagram, we reach the level of knowledge *learned*. Bruno D'Amore (D'Amore, Frabboni 2005, 81-101) explores some key interrelated issues concerning the learning side of the teaching-learning dyad. He starts from the "didactic contract". This consists in what the pupil expects as the specific behavior of the teacher, such as providing various kinds of constraints (e.g. time, types of outcomes required for a task, etc.), and what the teacher expects from the specific behavior of the pupil, such as a certain range of interpretations of topics explained in class. However, often these expectations are not explicit, but they are implicit and are strongly dependent on the pupil's own ideas about the school in general and the subject in particular (cf. also Nigris 2013, 57-8). For example, s/he may think of school as the place in which only the exact replication of transmitted knowledge is accepted, and s/he will try to provide the expected correct answer, even in case when a personal interpretation is asked. In other cases the pupils may – predictably – have a limited view on the subject. For example, s/he may be in difficulty when a solution to a math problem can be done only by using words, because s/he thinks of math as concerned only with calculation (D'Amore, Frabboni 2005, 82). A similar example in the field of RE may be a pupil convinced that religion is all about personal inner experience and will disregard as irrelevant 'outer' elements such as politics (cf. above, §§ 2.1.5 and 2.1.8).

Related to this general issue of 'misconceptions' other relevant concepts are 'images', 'models' and 'cognitive conflicts'. The former

48 Indeed, if we think especially in case of RE, there can be danger of confusion of levels such as reality/simulation or insider/outsider.

are mental images anyone can form upon internal or external inputs. These images are conditioned by cultural context, personal history, but nonetheless may feature common traits across individuals. Any pupil, upon receiving an input about a certain X information, notion, concept, etc., will consciously or unconsciously form a certain image. After successive input concerning that X, s/he will create a new, updated version of that image. At a certain point, such image will be so elaborated, so 'strong', to resist further updates. It thus becomes a cognitive tool that subsumes any new input, i.e. a 'model'. Its emergence could be elicited in accordance with the teacher's intention; or it could be formed by the pupil before having the chance of being further expanded; or it could also emerge when a teacher, in explaining concept X, uses a preliminary, propaedeutical image, which for its simplicity or intuitiveness could sound so convincing to the pupil that it may become an 'intuitive model' (i.e. not self-aware). In any case, 'cognitive conflict' rises when a new input contrasts with the model a pupil is accustomed to, and this may hinder learning.

However, it is important not to confuse misconceptions, or outdated images and models, with errors and therefore evaluate them negatively. They are not necessarily symptoms of ignorance but may simply represent the application of a previous knowledge, which had positive effects in the past but cannot stand in front of more specific and/or more expanded contexts. The point here is to be able to detect these outdated models and give pupils tools for critical self-examination. Accordingly, a teacher must take into serious consideration a pupils' previous knowledge and (mis-)conceptions about a given subject, especially those informally acquired outside the classroom. First, this motivates pupils, who see their own personal experience beyond the school context acknowledged, but it also stimulates pivotal meta-cognitive functions, such as the reconfiguration of previous knowledge in relation to new inputs (Nigris 2013, 59-60).

In this regard Guy Brusseau (2002, 82-3, 98-107) introduces the notion of "epistemological obstacles". In his view, an obstacle, similarly to the above-cited unripe models, is a kind of knowledge that has been useful at the moment of creation of a concept or in resolving a problem but fails when faced with other problems or other information. However, there is a tendency to maintain that acquired knowledge. Epistemological obstacles are linked to the very nature of the discipline in question. They depend on the evolution of key concepts within a discipline, their acceptance, critiques and even the language in which they have been expressed. When, in the history of evolution of a certain idea, discontinuities, fractures and radical changes of conceptualization are individuated, it is likely that the idea will contain in itself epistemological obstacles, and therefore, pupils will probably face hindrances similar to the historical evolution of the discipline. However, if this process is correctly handled

and pupils go through a paradigm change in a guided and safe way, it will instead become a productive factor in enhancing a well-rounded understanding of the *savoir savant*.

2.2.6 Didactic Transposition. Axiological Dimension

As stated in § 2.2.1, no teaching-learning process takes place in a value-free context. This applies both in the external DT (the noosphere) in which institutional curricula and syllabi are built on explicit and/or implicit values, as well as in actual teaching activities, since teachers themselves express certain values through their choices and interpretations of institutional curricula, through their teaching strategies, and their general behavior in class.

For this reason, Develay (1995a) indicates two main dimension or frames of DT. The first one is "didactization", which, as we have seen, starts from *savoirs savants*. The second one is "axiologization" and starts instead from the notion of "social practices of reference". This is because "he contents that these school subjects teach, before corresponding to *savoirs savant*, correspond first of all to a set of activities and social roles" (Develay 1995a, 26). He proposes the following diagram (adapted from Develay 1995a, 27) **[fig. 3]**:

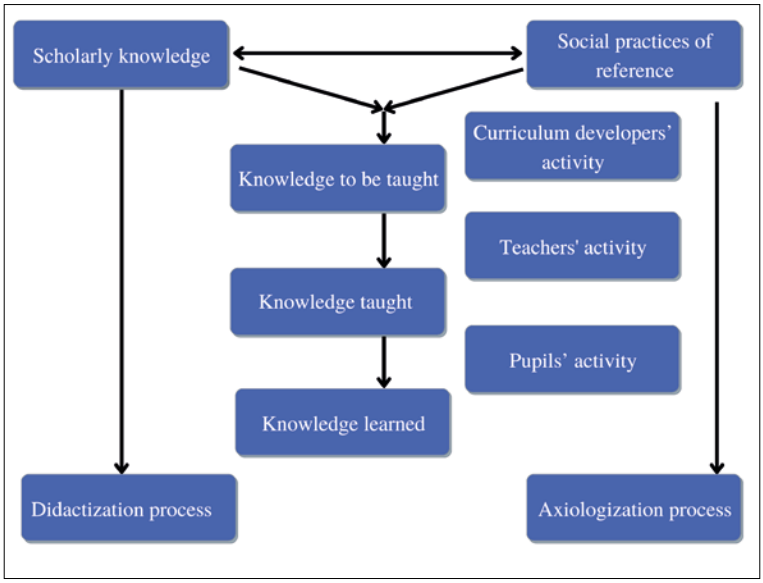

Figure 3 Didactic transposition according to Develay

Develay's point is the following: in the choice of the *savoirs savants*, of the topics and perspectives within them, and of the modalities in which they will be didactically transposed, a pivotal role is played by an implicit or explicit identification and choice of related social practices. Such practices are quite important as they provide a sense to what pupils learn and what teachers teach. Basically, they answer the two following questions: 1) what is it that society needs?; 2) what kind of relationships between pupils-knowledge, pupils-pupils, pupils-teachers, pupils-society, knowledge and ideals of the society, do these choices imply?

Some examples will help. In the case of history (Allieu 1995, 148-9), historical knowledge is not a specialistic competence bounded to particular contexts. Everyday TV programs often explain contemporary events by resorting to their historical background. Historical knowledge should be considered a shared language, because behind the names of famous historical people, politicians, battles, social categories, places, and so on there is also a communication of carefully established information, values, and points of reference. In a certain sense, it is our common practice to engage historically with any kinds of events. There are various uses of history in novels, films or arts, in scheduled celebrations, in politics of memory as well as of oblivion. Moreover, there is the commonly held idea that history's function is to anticipate future danger. It is thus connected with ideology, since certain events of the past – and their underlying values – are remembered as errors to be avoided.

Another example from the French context (GRAF SES 1995, 271-3) is useful to see a 'twin aspect' of the social practices in reference. In France Socio-Economic Sciences is a school subject, and especially regarding the economic side, the practices of reference can be easily surmised. The authors indeed cite examples of role-playing activities in which one pupil acts as a banker, another as a consumer or an entrepreneur asking for a loan. However, the social role of *chercheur en herbe* (GRAF SES 1995, 272) is also emphasized, in the sense of being able to work on hypothesis and to analyze data in order to interpret reality beyond initial and simple representations of a certain social fact. For example, the theme of sharing profit within an enterprise can be analyzed from two different points of view: that of the entrepreneurs and that of the employees.

A crucial point, however, is that only certain social practices will be taken as reference. As Chevallard (1989, 8) notes, what makes a given body of knowledge teachable is, above all the didactic intent of the society as a whole. However, since society comprises various segments, and there are various ways in which a certain *savoir* may be used, it is quite possible that some segments will hold different views on the knowledge to be taught, even in relation to different social practices taken as reference. For example, entrepreneurs may

value the practical side of a given knowledge more, while researchers will also emphasize the theoretical aspects.

Furthermore, the axiological choice of certain social practices greatly influences not only the choice of the *savoir savant*, but also, within that single *savoir savant*, the choice of a certain paradigm, or trend, called by Develay "matrice disciplinaire" (Develay 1992, 46). Indeed, it is quite normal that within the development of a single discipline, contrasting approaches which favor certain theories, concepts, and ultimately certain values, may emerge. Let us think for example of the importance, for the phenomenologist, of finding common ground among religions, such as 'the sacred', in contrast to the importance, for the critical theorist, of unveiling the power dynamics behind the postulation of this common ground. The choice of one *matrice disciplinaire* over another may well lead to different objects of teachings, with the additional risk of concealing the axiological choices behind them (cf. Develay 1992, 46-7).

We can easily see how this discussion on the axiological aspect concerning the choice of social practices of reference highlights a quite sensitive issue in the case of RE. As a matter of fact, knowledge concerning religion\s, even at the scholarly level – private and public universities, research centers, academic journals, monographs, etc. – are not exclusively the monopoly of the field called 'study of religion\s'. Religious traditions do produce knowledge about themselves and often the 'academic'/'religious' divide is quite blurred, especially in the case of theological faculties.[49] This is reflected also in the common phenomenon of confessional RE carried out in public schools in countries such as Italy, Spain or certain *länder* of Germany. Even in contexts in which RE presents itself as non-confessional, such as in the case of England and Wales, it is worth noting the inclusion of representatives from religious traditions in the decision-making processes leading to RE syllabi (cf. *infra*, ch. 4).

All these (political) decisions about RE do implicitly or explicitly refer to certain social practices of reference, which in turn are linked to certain ideas of what RE is or should be. Parker (2019a, 12-15) identifies six main, and sometimes overlapping, understandings of the term RE and their main social practices of reference. First, we have RE as nurture in a religious way of life. Here the obvious social practices are socialization and initiation in a well-defined religious community. Next, there is the concept of RE as a "practical theology" (13),

49 Indeed, the 'reflexive turn' in the study of religion\s, along with the general post-modern critique to the claims of truthfulness or objectivity of the modern scientific endeavor, on one hand addressed more deeply the problem of hidden theological (and non-theological) agendas in the field. On the other hand, it pushed some scholar, such as Giovanni Filoramo (2019, 23-7) to rethink the barrier and relationship between the study of religion and theology.

which has precise confessional roots in protestant theology, but can be found also in non-Christian contexts. It is aimed at fostering development in pupils or deepening their personal faith, without strong denominational constraints. Apart from theology, it also draws from educational sciences. When a given religious tradition is aligned to or endorsed by the state, then RE could also be linked to the social practice of nation building. Something similar applies even without strict national sponsorship of a certain tradition. The RE of England and Wales, can be seen as a

> part of a gamut of strategies by which migrant groups can be assimilated into a host culture, since it is strongly related to the issue of 'community cohesion' among different religious communities. (14)

Recently RE has been addressed as a way of contrasting religious illiteracy (Francis, Dinham 2016; Melloni, Caddedu 2019). Although there is no strong consensus among what constitutes religious illiteracy and, conversely, literacy (Giorda 2020), Parker (2019a, 13) defines it as the "attainment of necessary knowledge and understanding of religion in order to exercise the capacities of being a citizen". Here the social practices of reference are thus these citizenship capacities. In a similar vein, RE is also seen as a form of intercultural education, and thus connected to social practices broadly defined as 'intercultural dialogue'. Finally, the last understanding of RE refers to its being a preparation for the university-level study of religion\s and/or theology.

Since the determination of the social practice of reference is a matter of normative and political choice, I align myself with the perspective of RE as a *savoir scolaire* in function of what I would broadly define as 'social practice of intercultural citizenship'. Therefore, my next step is to introduce the issue of intercultural education as the axiological frame of reference for my take on RE.

2.2.7 Intercultural Education. Context and Underlying Theory

According to Portera (2013, 89-130), the concept of 'intercultural education' was employed for the first time in late nineteenth/early twentieth century in the US as a way of contrasting discriminatory and racist attitudes towards immigrants coming from Europe. The basic assumption and rhetoric was that similarities are more important that differences, which lasted through the 1960s when there were mainly assimilationist educational aims, feeding the ideology of the 'melting pot'.

However, from the 1980s onward, a new idea of intercultural education, focused more on the 'inter' suffix and developed out of a se-

ries of important considerations. First, the previous approach was considered more as a 'multicultural' one which aimed at fostering acknowledgement and respect for the various kind of differences, their autonomy, on the grounds of common shared norms. However, such an approach has been criticized for being static, running the serious risk of crystallizing people and communities into exotic or folkloric stereotypes. There is no attention to 'pluriculturalism', i.e. the combination within the single individual of aspects from different cultures, nor interaction, i.e. the active and creative side of diversity, taken into account (Portera 2013, 58, 84-5; Neuner 2012, 23-5).

Indeed, as Leeds-Hurwitz (UNESCO 2013, 7-9) observes, cultural diversity and intercultural contacts are facts of modern life. In the present days of 'global interconnectedness' and the fast movement of people, goods, information and capital, it is impossible to stop contact between cultures and heterogeneous groups. The result of this situation is the continuous creation of new cultural landscapes. From the point of view of the individual, in place of a slow and 'passive' identity formation, each person is pushed to actively choose, create and shift between identities. As a matter of fact, it is not feasible anymore to employ a concept of 'culture' as an equally shared 'asset' to be transmitted within the border of a stable living 'place'. In fact, the Article 1 of the 2001 UNESCO *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity* understands cultural diversity as necessary for humankind, just like biodiversity or genetic diversity are requisites for an ecosystem or species to thrive (UNESCO 2002).

Together with 'religion' and 'education', 'culture' is a concept very difficult to define, and to address it in detail is beyond the scope of this work. For our purposes, it suffices to approach culture as comprehending all the various material and immaterial resources that individuals and groups use to interpret, reconstruct and modify the physical and social-psychological reality of the world.[50]

50 It is customary, in the international debate on intercultural education, to start from the above-mentioned UNESCO declaration: "Culture should be regarded as the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, and that it encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs" (UNESCO 2002, 4). The CoE's *Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture* (CoE 2018a, 70) distinguishes three main levels in the concept of culture: there are material resources of the group, such as tools, food, clothing, and so on; non-material, socially shared resources of the group, such as languages, rules of social conduct, family structure, religion, and so on; and subjective resources of the individual, such as values, attitudes, beliefs, practices, memories, identities, and so on. Cunha and Gomes (2009, 100) further emphasize the individual dimension by defining culture as a "set of shared characteristics that gives to a person the sense of belonging to a certain community". From a more pragmatic and process-oriented perspective (such as that of business management), culture could also be intended as "the way in which a group of people solves problems and reconciles dilemmas" (Trompenaars, Hampden-Turner 1997, 6).

What is stressed in the contemporary debate on intercultural education as an important caveat is to avoid an essentialist perspective, i.e. to consider 'culture' or 'cultures' as monolithic blocks with strong ontological autonomy and fixed characteristics. Instead, culture should be conceived more as a 'process' in which participants are active actors in the creation, transmission and re-creation of values, beliefs, practices and traditions.[51] Personal choices and negotiations according to contextual needs and constraints are factors in these dynamics, as well as contextual dimension such as the social, economic, geographical. In a nutshell, culture is inseparable from social and physical realities, and, above all, from each individual who is at the same time both influenced by it and influences it (UNESCO 2013, 10; CoE 2018b, 15-16).

In addition, there is also the issue of internal diversity. Any kind of social group can have its distinctive culture, which may feature smaller sub-groupings or fit within larger cultural structures. Individuals, on the other hand, can simultaneously belong and identify themselves with many different groups or sub-groups. Furthermore, in contexts characterized by large pools of different cultural resources, each individual or sub-group appropriates and uses only a subset of all the resources available, and this appropriation, or "salience of socio-cultural identity" changes through time and context (CoE 2018, 29-30). In other words, not only is there internal variability, but it is affected by the way in which the resources which are employed by groups could be contested or challenged, therefore making the boundaries between and within groups disputed and fuzzy.

The above discussion also involves a reconsideration of the issue of identity: identity can be conceived as the merging of the extrinsic factors – cultural, but also political, economic, etc. – with the intrinsic ones (psychological, emotional), and it is always under construction (CoE 2018b, 16-17; cf. also Remotti 1996). Individuals may have multiple identities and there are, moreover, multiple dimensions of identity (gender, class, age, occupation, nationality, etc.) that change over time. On one side, this situation may appear to complicate things. On the other, it is this possibility of self-construction of multiple selves and their fluidity that, ultimately, enables intercultural dialogue (UNESCO 2013, 10).

However, it is likewise important not to forget how individuals and groups often strive to maintain a solid, positive self-identity, usually employing different strategies like in-group and out-group distinctions (cf. Remotti 2010). Similarly, to affirm that cultural differences are socially irrelevant or that collective identities "do not exist outside ethnic and nationalist ideologies would be intellectually inde-

51 Some of which may be also of recent invention (cf. Hobsbawm, Ranger 1983).

fensible" (Eriksen 2001, 66). Indeed, one of the consequences of the possibility of having fragmented or fuzzy identities is fear for this very loss of a stable identity. Therefore, this may well lead to the building up of walls in order to protect supposed 'essences' and the relative heating up of tensions among different communities (Portera 2013, 12-28). In other words, the perception of cultural diversity has always existed, and the question of how we can adequately manage it ultimately boils down to the choice of the typology of discourse we employ about cultural diversity, which may be essentialist, multicultural or, as in our case, intercultural (CoE 2018b, 18 ff.). This in turn affects our conceptualization of interactions between cultural diversity.

Since cultures are internally multiple and complex, and since individuals have multiple identities with various assumptions at work behind their will to interact, intercultural interactions may take place even in the same 'cultural group'. Even further, as everyone has their unique constellation of cultural resources, every interpersonal encounter is potentially an intercultural situation. Conversely, every intercultural interaction is an interpersonal encounter: while it is true that interaction between members of different cultural groups does not take place only in person but also through mediated forms – e.g. encountering a different culture through one of its artifacts which represents an aspect of that culture – these mediums/representations are ultimately made, or embodied, by individuals.

However, when we encounter other people, we can interact and respond to them as individuals, or we may as well engage them as representative of the cultures they belong to. That is, we shift our frame of reference from the individual and the interpersonal to the intercultural. There are various factors influencing this shift. First, it depends on the salience of the unique cultural constellation of that individual in respect to our unique cultural constellation. In other words, the sense of otherness evokes in us the category of 'culture' which we use to make sense of this very otherness. In this situation – an 'intercultural situation' – not only do we tend to categorize the other person(s), but also ourselves, as members of a cultural group, rather than as individuals (CoE 2018a, 31). Therefore, intercultural dialogue should be defined as an "exchange of views […] between individuals or groups *who perceive themselves as* having different cultural affiliations from each other" (31; italics added), rather than as an "exchange of views between individuals and groups belonging to different cultures" (17).

On the base of this perception, and on the base of the type of discourse employed about cultural diversity, there can be various stages of intercultural sensitivity, summarized in the well-known work of Bennet (1986). In his developmental model, the first three stages are labeled 'ethnocentric', and start from the *denial* of cultural diversity,

in the sense of considering only one's own culture as 'real', and the rest as undifferentiated 'otherness'. The next stage is the *defense* of the native culture from any foreign influence. A variation of this is *reversal*, that is the adoption of a foreign culture as the ideal standard and the denigration of one's own cultural background. The last ethnocentric stage is *minimization*, which entails regarding others' differences as marginal or insignificant in front of those elements of one's own culture experienced as universal, such as economic or scientific concepts that have cross-cultural applicability. It is worth noting, *en passant*, how this subsumption of particularity into universality is, critically relevant to the issue of religion\s. Moving to the *ethnorelative* stages, difference is no longer perceived as a threat, but as an occasion for expanding one's own understanding. They start with the *acceptance*, i.e. acknowledgement and respect – not necessarily agreement – of different cultures. When one gradually enriches their pool of cultural resources, it is called *adaptation*. Finally, in the *integration* stage, one has mastered various frames of reference which can then be put in use in a highly contextual manner.

Certain present-day contexts and situations are deemed critically relevant to the issue of intercultural interactions and, consequently, to intercultural education (cf. CoE 2018b, 10-13). Starting with the case of Internet, it nowadays commonly acknowledged how the World Wide Web can have two opposite potentials. On one had it is extremely easy to learn about distant and marginal cultures and to stand up for common cause (e.g. through online campaigns). On the other hand, it is equally easy for hate speech to spread and for simplified or distorted information to be disseminated in uncontrollable ways. In particular, one can easily encounter peculiar situations called 'echo-chambers' (Quattrociocchi 2017). These are situations and contexts in which only information that confirms pre-existent bias is allowed and reinforced. This is also connected with the recent rise of populism, understood in terms of a modality of discourse which "simplifies the political space by symbolically dividing society between 'the people' (as the 'underdogs') and its 'other'" (Panizza 2005, 3 ff.), which is, a polarizing discourse that often taps into strong emotions and identity rhetoric. Another two related issues in this regard are terrorism and the immigration crisis. In the first case, the phenomenon of contemporary terrorism has increasingly been leading to a peak rise in islamophobia and global bias towards Muslims, while constant media exposition of the migration issue has been fueling a homogenizing image of refugees as inherently poor, uneducated and sometimes equated with terrorists (CoE 2018b, 12).

All the points above involve in some way the pivotal topic of 'stereotype'. An important observation in this regard is that stereotypes are not inherently 'bad' and should be suppressed, but should be seen as inherent in our process of categorization, abstraction and imagi-

nation, very often at the unconscious level (Banaji, Greenwald 2013, 71-93). According to Neuer (2012, 27-30) intercultural encounters inevitably take place within the framework of our pre-existent 'interim world' which we build around self- and hetero-stereotypes. Every time we engage with otherness we generate and enact these interim worlds. If the categories of our interim worlds are insufficient to 'come to terms' with otherness, we are more prone to rearrange our understanding of the otherness itself to make it 'fit' our categories, than to revise instead our categories. For example, we ignore and/or isolate the elements that we found disturbing. However, these interim worlds are also unstable and prone to change. Even unconscious bias seems to be elastic (Banaji, Greenwald 2013, 145-66). One of the objectives of intercultural education is to foster the adequate competences to make our interim world open and flexible.

2.2.8 Intercultural Education. Operational Indications

At this point of our discussion, we can summarize the concept of intercultural education as a kind of 'education for diversity' that wants to go beyond the old paradigms of essentialism, assimilationism and multiculturalism. Among many examples of what intercultural education may look like, we can cite the following three main principles of intercultural education (cf. CoE 2018b; UNESCO 2013). The first is *valuing diversity*, not only in the sense of knowing about different cultures, but also as a resource for creating new meanings and new narratives, in line with the above cited idea of cultural diversity as an 'ecological' asset. Valuing diversity also means acknowledging complexities and interconnections, refraining from simplistic narratives and categorization. This is linked to the second principle, which is *multi-perspectivity*. It entails resorting to different sources and types of sources, to get a nuanced understanding of reality, to learn about the perspective of the others, and to ultimately deconstruct self-centered (nation-centered, Euro-American-centered) narratives. This leads to the third and overarching principle of *cultural relativism*, i.e. the fact that values and norms of a given culture cannot be the base through which to judge other cultures. This last issue should not lend itself to an easy 'anything goes' discourse, but should be instead the starting point from which to seriously tackle the problematic tension between cherishing diversity and working on common frames of reference, such as human rights.

The concrete outcomes expected from intercultural education can be variously listed. Among them there is the reduction of the ethnocentric perspective, a willingness to fight prejudices and to promote respect for plurality and solidarity. It is also expected to foster more proactive behavior in terms of preparation for intercultural dialogue,

such as holding an open definition of identity, feeling curiosity towards a complex world, being willing to adequately interpret it, and ultimately cherishing human diversity in itself. In a nutshell,

> improving human interactions across difference, whether within a society (differences due to age, gender, religion, socio-economic status, political affiliation, ethnicity, and so on) or across borders. (UNESCO 2020, 5)

To fulfill these aims, intercultural education scholars and pedagogist have theorized, as ideal outcomes of intercultural teaching-learning activities, a series of competences that should be set and operationalized in concrete practices. Many models of competence have been proposed (cf. e.g. Portera 2013, 163-83). Deardoff (2011) in her comparative study individuates some minimal requirements for the attainment of intercultural competences, which can be summarized as

1. *respect*, in the sense of giving value to others;
2. "self-awareness/identity", in the sense of knowing the lens through which one makes sense of the world;
3. *hetero-awareness*, in the sense of being able to compare others' worldviews with the own's one;
4. *listening*, in the sense of being able to engage in a potential transformative dialogue;
5. *adaptation*, in the sense of being able to temporarily apply other perspectives;
6. *relationship building*, in the sense of being able to make personal bonds;
7. *cultural humility*, in the sense of the combined effect of self-awareness and respect for others.

Given the enormous wealth of methods and approaches to foster intercultural competences, it is more practical to ask which measures are not enough or should be avoided. Walton, Priest and Paradies (2013) in their meta-analysis of 70 studies, stress that the mere increase of cultural knowledge and awareness are not sufficient, as more in-depth and critical approaches are needed, that is, approaches that elicit exploration of one's own stereotypes, bias and attitudes. In other words, a theorical/critical framework is also needed in reference to one's own cultural background, as mere cultural contacts, be it in real or through mediators, do not necessarily lead to intercultural competences or reduction of stereotypes (Perry, Southwell 2011, 457).

Concerning the pitfalls to be avoided, the main risks in intercultural education are probably linked to the 'irenic aura' surrounding the idea of interculturality, which may instead overshadow unwanted naive or, at worst, hegemonic approaches. Aman (2013), for example, notes that since intercultural education acts within the ambiguity between otherness and sameness, it entails the risk of colonial

discursive practices, especially by resorting to the trope of 'modernity *versus* tradition'. The narrative of interculturality as interaction between cultures to create a new joint culture may foster the presupposition that sameness is not a precondition, but the potential goal. In other words, it could endorse the idea of aiming at one single trajectory of one single modernity. Conversely, since the interest in interculturality seems to start from fascination with remote territories, the incorrect handling of this issue may lead to the myth of the 'discovery' of 'isolated' people, who thus come to be represented as a-historical or semi-historical cultures. Similarly, the perceived 'backwardness' of certain cultural traits may be uncritically objectified and used as a critique to European post-industrialization lifestyle. It is easy to see how this kind of discourse follows the same logic of those orientalist discourses which represent religions, especially those outside Europe, as a resource to counter 'Western and modern malaise' (more on this in ch. 3).

The 'irenic' façade of discourses on interculturality may also overlook another critical issue, i.e. the one of conflict, in all its possible nuances. As Hardy and Hussain (2017, 67) note, intercultural dialogue should not aim at "persuading others to be more like us", but at promoting deliberations about disparity and divergence. Since conflict – in the sense of contrast – is an inherent outcome of diversity, the point is not avoiding it, but avoiding violence (Neuer 2012, 35). It seems to me that intercultural dialogue could be usefully conceived as negotiation (cf. also Portera 2013, 187-93). Indeed, intercultural dialogue often does not take place in non-conflictual contexts or feature good-willing interlocutors (Phipps 2014). The point is that, in tense situations, avoiding difficult issues is self-defeating, as "reasoned disagreement can build stronger and more authentic and lasting relationships" (Hardy, Hussain 2017, 69). Focusing on the notion of negotiation has the advantage of highlighting the controversial aspect of dialogue. As a matter of fact, there are consciously or unconsciously non-negotiable assumptions or power inequalities in almost any dialogue. Often, these may well remain implicit, but constitute nonetheless the hidden ground of dialogue/negotiation. In other words, dialogue/negotiation cannot therefore be understood as taking place on a blank canvas (Hardy, Hussain 2017; Mansuri, Arber 2017).

'Non-negotiable assumptions' may refer to critical issues such as controversy over human rights, but may also refer to much more culture-bound values which could be erroneously be taken as universal. In this regard, Bouma (2017) and Morris (2017) offer interesting observation on how religion is conceptualized in various publications and supranational guidelines addressing intercultural education and dialogue. Bouma calls the idea of religions in these writings as "package religions", and fundamentally reflect the world religions paradigm above criticized (§ 2.1.5). Religions are all represented as

hierarchical organized groups, with defined boundaries, often in competition, and with a "complete and coherent package" of leaders, creed, rules. It is expected from them to be compliant with their pure form of origin and not to borrow or being influenced by other religions. In a similar way, adherents are also expected to uniformly follow a set of beliefs and behaviors, and often their identity is supposed to coincide with their religious belonging. Clearly a protestant stereotype or 'Westphalian paradigm' is at work here. Morris too warns against treating religion as 'special thing' that requires a *sui generis* approach. He says that reductively framing religions as "resources for 'the conception of the purpose of life'" (Morris 2017, 151-2), i.e. a philosophical stance with a focus on beliefs, makes them way too abstract and difficult to locate. In this way religions are put outside the dynamic interplay between many practices, commitment, and identities that characterizes nowadays super-diverse society. Conversely, treating religions as some intercultural education activities do only in their fashionable aspects, e.g. food, festivals or dressing, neglects other important issues such as modality of expression, polygamy, crime and punishment, concept of good society, ideas about genders, conception of human person, human rights, ethics, and so on.

Another important recommendation is to avoid treating culture and intercultural education as something irrelated to 'material' or 'unpleasant' aspects such as economy, politics, and in general power issues. If, as proposed above, intercultural education is mainly concerned with positively engaging and negotiating possible conflicts rising from diversity, at the same time these conflicts cannot be conceived as merely 'cultural'. Instead, political, institutional and material factors must also be taken into account. In other words, intercultural education is also about "decoding power structure in society" (CoE 2018b, 5). Indeed, if globalization is one of the driving factors that increase the possibility of intercultural situations, it is also recognized as a factor in the unequally distribution of power and wealth (cf. e.g. Kirby 2010). This means that intercultural dialogue is often carried out in a framework of asymmetrical power dynamics (Hardy, Hussein 2017, 68 ff.).[52] However, Mansuri and Arber (2017) lament that important supranational documents on intercultural dialogue often tend to take for granted that any groups or individuals have the same opportunities to dialogue or are in equal power relations. Phipps (2014) warns against neglecting all those contexts which may engender, in intercultural situation, an 'I-it' relation, that is, a human-subhuman asymmetrical relation in which the weaker in-

52 For example, how are we supposed to discuss poverty and include the poor in such discussion, if they are even poorer in their very possibilities of communication? How often a respectful attitude by the more empowered side actually masks a lack of desire to surrender or share power and privileges?

terlocutor's identity is highly reduced in terms of complexity. In conflict context, moreover, the image of the interlocutor is often stripped of its humanity. However, this de-humanization or reduction can also happen in non-conflictual contexts where, for example, a general sense of precariousness (e.g. economic crisis or mediatic over-exposition of refugees' migration), may still lead to obscure the multiple nature of the weaker interlocutor and simplify its identity.

In summary, patterns of material disadvantage, discrimination, differentials in allocation of resources and opportunities may disempower certain groups from entering dialogue on equal footing. As others have observed (Neuer 2012, 31-3; CoE 2018b, 13, 21) intercultural education intersects with democratic citizenship education, human rights education, conflict transformation education and global education, in an integrate cooperation aimed at engendering social transformation. As a comprehensive approach that brings together these dimensions, the idea of "competences for democratic culture" have been put forward by the Council of Europe (CoE 2018a). Here 'democratic culture' stands as a set of values, attitudes and practices shared by groups of individuals (i.e. citizens) without which democratic institution cannot exist. It is important to note that, in this context, that 'citizens' indicates all those individuals affected by democratic decision-making and not only those who hold legal citizenship. In a nutshell, the fundamental aim of this framework is to foster active participation in a democratic decision-making process in order to elicit an equal and sustainable well-being across any kind of diversity. I will discuss in more detail this framework and the reason for its choice in the context of my proposal of RE 'model' in ch. 5.

2.3 Conclusion

This chapter aimed at providing an exploration of the theoretical and analytical 'toolbox' that will structure our discussion of what Japanese and other East-Asian religious traditions may entails for a proposal of RE which is expected to be neutral, self-aware of its assumptions and to provide an educative impact preliminarily and broadly defined as 'intercultural' and 'citizenship-focused'.

The first half of the chapter dealt with the question of how to approach those phenomena nowadays referred to as 'religion' or 'religious'. We thus addressed the various theoretical and methodological issues at stake focusing on three foci, the ontological one (what is religion?), the epistemological one (how to study religion?), and representational one (what are the communicative results of the previous two points?). We have seen how the opposite 'constructive' and 'deconstructive' tendencies of the academic field of the study of religion\s differently address these foci.

On the ontological level, the 'constructive' side sees a degree of consistency among certain phenomena which justify the creation of the theoretical object 'religion' for heuristic purposes. The 'deconstructive' side highlights instead the heterogeneity of those elements and, above all, the historical construction of the concept of religion. In this regard, critical scholars claim that discourses on the nature of religion, including scholarly ones, are inextricably entangled with issues of power, protection of interest of certain groups, and universalizing ideologies. The epistemological endeavors of the 'constructive' side focus on how certain definitions, ideas and theorization can be successfully applied in conceptualizing, describing, and explaining religion. The 'deconstructive' side is more interested in genealogical and critical analysis on the contexts, motivations, and consequences of the arise and application of the concept of religion itself. This in turn leads to very different perspectives towards the 'religious' phenomena. On one side we may have and explanation of these phenomena on the basis of the basic functions of human cognition. On the other, there can be an analysis of how the application of the modern concept of religion in extra-European contexts discursively created entities which came to be perceived as coherent wholes, variously defined as Buddhism, Hinduism or more in general, 'world religions'.

However, things are not so simply polarized. While it is true that the constructive side still endeavors to come up with a satisfying concept of 'religion' or 'religious', it has thoroughly acknowledged the critique to naive *sui generis*, essentialist and crypto-theological approach, together with the impossibility of having an absolutely neutral position concerning 'religion', due to its modern, European and Christian origin. This can be seen in the critique to the phenomenological approach to religion, which is nowadays a point common throughout the entire field. Similarly, certain trends of CSR may tackle certain phenomena as 'religious' just as a preliminary step. If future research and experiments will find the category of religion not useful or incoherent to classify certain phenomena from the point of view of universal human cognition, many CSR scholars may willingly discard it as well (cf. White 2018, 38-9). Moreover, the CSR approach is not destined to be a stand-alone one, but could be embedded, as we have seen with Tweed (2006) and Jensen (2014), with more 'traditional' hermeneutical approaches. On the other side, as King remarks (2017b), critical treatment does not necessarily entail the total refusal of the scientific enquiry of religion\s. Instead, this is an occasion to strive further toward more inclusive and less Eurocentric representations of religions and to shade further light on our self-consciousness, by exposing hidden presuppositions. Finally, we have seen that a common, baseline methodology intersects multiple times with both tendencies of field, whereas one need to compare different religious phenomena or the use and application of the concept of religion it-

self, or when it is needed in both tendencies to adopt an 'hermeneutic of suspicion' and consider all other contexts of economic, political and even sportive nature. In conclusion, it is possible, as suggested by Alberts (2017) to pursue a certain coherence among the various facets of the two main tendencies.

In the second part of this chapter we addressed the other half of our theoretical and analytical framework, that which concerns education. We have seen how this concept entails different, yet thoroughly interrelated dimensions, each one giving more weight to certain aspects, such as providing cognitive or technical skill, or fostering socialization and integration, or providing guidance towards increasing autonomy and self-realization.

Since my point of departure is the academic study of religion\s, i.e. a well-defined corpus of knowledge, the next logical step was to focus on the field of didactics, especially disciplinary didactics, i.e. the study of the processes of teaching and learning a certain kind of institutionalized knowledge. I use the wording 'institutionalized knowledge' with the precise intent to underline the particular status and the various transformation that a certain corpus of knowledge undergoes, from its birth as *savoir savant* to its administering as *savoir scolaire*. This is the process individuated by the theory of 'didactic transposition', which we have deemed useful not only in analyzing and describing the actors and the steps of this process, but to also individuate those principles, methods and practices which should bring pupils towards the acquisition of desired competence. These are, among other things, the criteria through which to individuate the key components of a given knowledge relevant for teaching it, the actual teaching methods and techniques, and reflections on the psychological mechanisms of learning.

Coherently with the above-mentioned observations about the interrelatedness of the different meanings of 'education', we have also seen how the larger social context affects the value-driven decisions concerning the nature of the knowledge to be taught, that is, through the implicit or explicit determination of the social practices of reference for that given knowledge. We have preliminary glimpsed, in the case of RE, at how different these practices may be. On this issue, I have explicitly stated my choice of taking, as the social practices of reference, what we could term as 'intercultural citizenship'. What it entails, and how to gain the competences necessary to perform such practices are questions addressed by the field of intercultural dialogue and intercultural education. Therefore, we briefly explored the main topics of this field, focusing on such key topics as the conceptualization of 'culture' and intercultural interactions, on the main aims of intercultural education, and on the various pitfalls that may jeopardize the fulfillment of these aims. In particular, we have seen how the practice of intercultural dialogue and education

intersects with the whole institutional, political and economic context, thus justifying the widening of scope to include the notion of citizenship education, in the sense of active participation to democratic decision-making processes in the perspective of achieving a sustainable well-being across any kind of diversity.

In the background of these theoretical, methodological and axiological discussions concerning the two big themes 'Education' and 'Religion', we will structure our analysis and evaluation of our case study in RE, represented by the English example. Similarly, in the discussion and construction of our proposal for a 'model' of RE, we will try to usefully weave together the threads composing the two big themes. Framing the discussion with the above examined key dimensions of axiology, epistemology, teaching and learning, I will propose a possible transformation into the *savoir scolaire* of our *savoir savant* of interest, i.e. the study of Japanese and other East-Asian religions from the perspective of the academic study of religions. Before proceeding, however, it is necessary to discuss the relevance of this very *savoir savant*, which will be explored in the next ch. 3, primarily from the perspective of critical and deconstructive study of religion\s.

3 Japanese and Other East-Asian Religious Traditions
Two Challenges

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3.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to identify and discuss those factors that I deem relevant to address the theme of Japanese and other Asian religious traditions in the most comprehensive and nuanced way possi-

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ble, especially in order to avoid possible appropriation and accommodation to Euro-American modern cultural perspectives. These factors are discussed 'negatively' in the sense that I treat them as 'challenges' to be adequately reckoned with. I will identify these challenges by starting from topics previously discussed in ch. 2 to which I will add some further nuances and qualifications. Subsequently, for each challenge I will provide and discuss some relevant examples and case-studies from Japanese and other Asian religions. My aim is to highlight two needs: first, the necessity to be wary of the inadequacy of what I call 'Modern Euro-centric/ Christian-centric epistemologies'; secondly, a serious consideration of the historical-cultural entanglements brought about by the legacy of modernity and colonialism, also in a contemporary global perspective.

It must be added that these two challenges may also be conceived as different aspects of the same complex issue. In a nutshell, modern Christian-centric epistemologies not only represent a possible hindrance to a rounded understanding of extra-European religions in the present days, but especially in the case of East-Asian traditions, they have also historically influenced the way in which both colonizers and the colonized people understood and acted upon these religious traditions. In this way they engendered 'modern' variations and interpretations that reinforced, and still reinforce, modern Euro-American expectations, in particular those processes of marketization and *bricolage* typical of the contemporary globalized religious landscape. Similarly, as explained below, the various aspects concerning the inadequacy of the Euro-centric/Christian-centric epistemologies are mutually related as well.

3.2 First Challenge: Inadequacy of the Euro-Centric/ Christian-Centric Epistemologies

We have seen in ch. 2 how the modern concept of religion based on Christian, more specifically Protestant, self-understanding came to have a prototypical and normative character, which is still influential nowadays. In this understanding, religion is considered to be a universal phenomenon, and what we can find in all societies are just particular species of a common genus 'Religion', which are different and clearly distinguishable from other cultural phenomena such as 'science', 'politics' or 'economics' because they center on what is variously identified as the 'sacred', or the 'divine'. Through the 'sacred' the individual is expected to entertain a fundamentally private, inner relationship, concerned with 'transcendent' matters such as otherworldly salvation, knowledge or experience of 'the Truth'. Religions' doctrines, usually thought to be derived from an enlightened founder, explain and articulate this fundamental relationship. Therefore,

the most relevant modality of being religious is to know and hold belief in these doctrines, which are often organized as propositions explicitly expressing truth claims. Such pivotal doctrines are thus inscribed in a closed canon of 'sacred texts', expressed and transmitted through rituals managed by an organization. Despite this common structure, different religions are thought to be discrete entities with clear differences in terms of beliefs, texts, typology of their rituals, structure of their organization and, above all, the exclusive affiliation of their members. In this way they can be conceived as homogeneous actors. However, given the common focus on 'the Sacred' or 'the Truth', these actors share a common public space in which they dialogue or battle over the monopoly of 'the Sacred'. Therefore, any evidence of 'mixture' between religions is seen as a contamination of these competing truths and practices. This way of understanding religions replaced the old division between Christians, Jews, Mohammedans and heathens, with the paradigms of 'world religions', which may span from a core of five (Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism and Hinduism) to roughly a dozen well-distinct religions, including e.g. Daoism, Shintō, Baha'i and Confucianism.

We can extrapolate four interrelated aspects of this prototypical understanding of religion which I find particularly problematic in respect to Japanese and Asian traditions. First, the aspect of discreteness, in the sense of exclusive affiliation by practitioners, of adherence to distinct doctrines and practices, and with the maintenance of a high degree of 'purity' and separation between religious traditions, and between the religious and not religious sphere. Secondly, the importance given to the cognitive aspects, i.e. the centrality of a coherent system of beliefs (and of texts in which they are inscribed). Beliefs are considered the core components of religions, both in the sense of being what give distinctiveness and peculiarity to each religion, but also of representing the key modality of being religions, i.e. 'to believe'. This emphasis on belief can be seen as a component of the third problematic aspect, namely the emphasis on the inner (psychological, intellectual, moral) world of the individual practitioner as the fundamental dimension in which the relationship with a transcendent 'sacred' takes place. This automatically implies the downplay of the social, ritual, bodily and pragmatic dimensions, and the often-related idea of an enchanted and magically manipulable phenomenal world. Fourthly, this emphasis on the inner dimension of the individual as the most authentic root of any religions has fostered certain cultural developments according to which this dimension of religiosity can paradoxically be extrapolated from the religions themselves, and even put in contrast with them, thus creating the rhetoric of 'spirituality *versus* religion'. We will now examine in detail each of these four aspects, contrasting them with various examples taken from Japanese and other Asian traditions.

3.2.1 Inadequacy of the Paradigm of Religious Traditions as Discrete, Separate Entities

We have already seen (§ 2.1.5) how religion came to be seen as a discrete sphere of human action. Concerning the cliché of religions as necessarily mutually exclusive, Ramey suggests that it can be explained on the base that "in European thought, it is not possible for two different, conflicting propositions to be equally correct" (Ramey 2017, 91), and this can be seen in various contexts, from the harsh debates over Christological nature in the early Church councils to the conflicts that arose in Europe in the wake of the Protestant Reformation. Shifting the scope of enquiry further back in time, this focus and emphasis on the intellectual distinction between 'true' and 'false' religion have been ascribed by the Egyptologist Jan Assmann to what he called the "Mosaic distinction" (Assmann 1996), i.e. the invention of exclusivist monotheism. According to Assmann, in the Old Testament we can find a tension between a previous polytheistic context and a subsequent monotheistic revolution. This latter can be labeled as such because it brought a noteworthy

> break with the past that rests on the distinction between truth and falsehood and generates, over the subsequent course of its reception, the distinction between Jews and Gentiles, Christians and pagans, Christians and Jews, Muslims and infidels, true believers and heretics. (Assaman 2009, 11)

While this has been criticized and deconstructed within the academic study of religion\s, everyday experience shows that the most common understanding of religion and religious affiliation in Euro-American contexts (and widespread also beyond it) is still framed in the terms of 'one person, one religion'. The extent of how much this cliché is disseminated, unnoticed and undiscussed can be gauged in seemingly unrelated contexts, such as demographic census or surveys, which usually ask to 'check one (and only one) religion', therefore contributing to the pervasiveness of the cliché (Ramey 2017, 83-7). This is further reinforced by modern national legal systems. As Schonthal (2016, esp. 372-4) explains, while modern state law is commonly understood, especially in Euro-American contexts, as being a stable and bounded social phenomenon, clearly separated from religion, it betrays "traces of its historical links with Christianity" (Schonthal 2016, 372). Modern state law, "like religion, has its own approach to reality, its own epistemology, hermeneutics, even its own aesthetics" (Schonthal 2016, 374), and ultimately has also its own implicit theologies, often reproducing general protestant features. Among such features there is the idea of discreteness among religions, in the sense of exclusive affiliation and maintenance of separation between other beliefs and practices.

3.2.1.1 Blurred Boundaries Between Traditions

Given this situation, it is not surprising that, when discussing epistemological problems in studying religion outside Euro-American contexts (especially Japan and China), scholars indicate the fact that "the exclusivist orientation and emphasis on institutional membership so prominent in the West lack cultural significance within Chinese society" is a major issue (Fan 2011, 105). Indeed, within the Chinese cultural context it is absolutely not uncommon for the individual religious practitioner not only to remain quite comfortable with the beliefs and rituals of others, but to identify himself/herself to a greater or lesser degree with all the so-called *san jiao*, the three teachings of Daoism, Buddhism and Confucianism. Furthermore, in his/her everyday religious life, s/he would articulate this identification within various aspects of what is generically referred to as 'Chinese folk religion', notably the cult of ancestors.

These observations seem even more relevant in the case of Japan, since, as we will see many times in this chapter, the blurring between traditions takes place in prominent ways, in close continuity with the institutional, ideological and philosophical background. For Japan, to talk about Buddhism, Shintō, Shugendō and Onmyōdō as *ab origine* separate and discrete traditions is misleading, and these terms "can no longer be used in a generic or supra-historical fashion" (Hayashi 2021, 199). An exemplary case of the difficulties in individuating well-defined borders between religious traditions is the question of Buddhism *vis-à-vis* Shintō, and the questions of different Buddhist schools *vis-à-vis* each other.

Let us start with Buddhism and Shintō. Before going into detail, I need first to qualify the use of this latter term: I use here the word Shintō as a shorthand to loosely identify all those practices and discourses, present in the Japanese archipelago before the arrival of Buddhism, concerning superhuman beings called *kami*. Eventually, through various historical circumstance, starting from the sixth century, such practices gradually developed into a systematic, self-conscious religious tradition self-identifying as Shintō. I will briefly explore the issue of Shintō history in relation to the critique of the paradigm of religion as system of beliefs in the next section (§ 3.2.2.3). What interest us now is to note how Buddhism and the *kami* worship developed an increasingly complex and intimate relationship which lasted till the nineteenth century (Teeuwen, Rambelli 2003a). In the first century after the arrival of Buddhism in Japan (mid-sixth century) Buddhist divinities were treated as foreign, and in a certain sense 'competitor' *kami*. Subsequent developments

(commonly found also in other Asian Buddhist countries)[1] interpreted local *kami* as wrathful beings in need of being quelled by Buddhist doctrine, or as deities whose role was to protect and propagate Buddhist teachings. For these reasons, from the seventh century onwards, Buddhist temples were built near *kami* shrines and vice versa, creating temple-shrine complexes (*jingūji*). Around the eleventh to twelfth centuries, *kami* began to be envisioned instead as local manifestations (Jp. *gongen*; Sk. *avatāra*) of buddhas, bodhisattvas or other deities of the Indian pantheon brought to Japan by Buddhism. The doctrinal ground for this operation was formed by the concepts of *honji suijaku* and *wakō dōjin*. The former is originally a Chinese interpretation of the influential *Lotus Sūtra* (Sk. *Saddharma Puṇḍarīka Sūtra*) by Tientai school founder Zhiyi (538-97), who distinguished within this scripture a provisional and fundamental teaching. In Japan, instead, this idea came to indicate the original ground (*honji*), the Buddhist deities, from their traces (*suijaku*), the manifestation as local *kami*. Buddhist deities were thought to act in this way out of compassion: they "dim the light and become like the dust" (*wakō dōjin*, a reference to ch. 4 of Daoist scripture *Daodejing*), i.e. they 'coarsen' their form into lesser *kami* in order to become more understandable. However, these connections between *kami* and Buddhist deities were not simple nor unilateral. In fact, they were all conceptualized within the framework of esoteric Buddhist discourse, which we need to touch on briefly.

As argued by Abé (1999), when the Shingon school founder, Kūkai, brought esoteric[2] Buddhist teaching or *mikkyō* to Japan, he did so not with the intention of merely creating a separate lineage or school (*shū*), as those were already present in Japan. Instead, he sought to introduce a "new religious discourse" (Abé 1999, 4) that would also subsume and harmonize the other teachings, classified as exoteric (*kengyō*). This new discourse, among other things, envisioned the whole universe, which is in itself the body of the supreme Buddha Dainichi (Sk. Mahāvairocana), as timelessly expounding his teaching not only through ordinary scriptures, but through the articulation and differentiation of any kind of linguistic or material phenomena (sinographs, sounds, ritual objects, natural elements, landscape,

1 Space prevents further treatment, but even in what is commonly considered the most 'orthodox' tradition of Buddhism, i.e. Theravāda Buddhism of South-East-Asia, Buddhist monks cope with and accommodate local spirits in various ways, such as the *phī* in Thailand or the *nat* in Burma. Often the strategy has been to incorporate these spirits as low-ranking superhuman beings within an overall Buddhist soteriological framework. Cf. Crosby 2013, 132-4; cf. also *infra*, § 3.2.3.4 for what concerns the relation of the first Buddhist communities with local spirits.

2 Esoteric Buddhism can be seen as a part of one the most widespread tradition of religious discourses and practices throughout all Asia, generally called by scholars 'Tantrism'. On this topic cf. more in detail *infra*, § 3.2.3.2

etc.), which were thus considered as meaningful signifiers (*ji*). The entire world is thus a text in a constant state of "semiogenic process" (Abé 1999, 282; cf. also 273-358) which requires however the right initiation (Jp. *kanjō*, Sk. *abhiṣeka*) and guidance to be read and actualized through the right ritual action. This kind of discourse was proven successful and was adopted by other Buddhist schools. Tendai school even developed its own and very influential kind of esotericism (cf. Dolce 2011). This situation created what has been termed, by the influential Japanese scholar Kuroda, the *kenmitsu* (exoteric-esoteric) system of Buddhist thought (cf. Dobbins 1996), which was dominant in medieval Japan (twelfth-seventeenth century). In a nutshell, all the various teachings, including 'non religious' ones, such as those concerning poetry or theatre (Klein 2006), were understood as the exoteric articulation of a hidden, esoteric truth, to be unveiled through a process of interpretation of various kinds of signifiers.

This framework also included ideas and practices related to the *kami*. The above-mentioned *honji suijaku* discourse

> employed all strategies of correlation and combination developed by exoteric-esoteric Buddhist hermeneutics. As a result, it construed macrosemiotic entities in which Japanese, Chinese, and Indian elements were clustered on the basis of similarities of the signifiers (linguistic and/or iconographic), and of the signifieds (functions, religious meanings, etc.). These similarities were identified by particular interpretations of myths, histories, doctrines, practices, and so forth. In this sense, a *honji suijaku* combinatory deity was often not just a dual entity (a buddha or bodhisattva and a kami), but a multiplicity in which different images of the sacred, ritual elements, myths, and narrative elements interacted in complex ways. (Teeuwen, Rambelli 2003a, 48)

As a brief example of Shintō-Buddhism combination, (cf. Teeuwen 2003; Teeuwen, Rambelli 2003a, 48-9), let us take the tutelary and ancestor *kami* of the imperial line, Amaterasu Ōmikami. She is worshipped at the Ise shrine, which is divided into an Inner and Outer shrine. These two shrines are linked by means of two important visual and intellectual devices of *mikkyō*: the *maṇḍala* of the womb and the *maṇḍala* of the diamond, which are meant to graphically reproduce the two fundamental *mikkyō sūtras*: *Dainichikyō* (Sk. *Mahāvairocana Sūtra*) and *Kongōchōkyō* (Sk. *Vajraśekhara Sūtra*). In this way Amaterasu is connected with the supreme esoteric buddha Dainichi. The numerological symbolism of two recalls, on the Buddhist side, the two main manifestation of Dainichi, i.e. the wisdom

kings (Jp. *myōō*, Sk. *vidyārāja*) Aizen and Fudō.[3] On the shintoist side, the number two recalls Izanami and Izanagi, the two primordial *kami* who created Japan by stirring the ocean with a halberd. The place where the halberd struck corresponds to the central pillars of Ise shrine, underneath which white snakes are supposed to live. Snakes bring a connection with the Bodhisattva Nāgārjuna, the mythical founder of *mikkyō*. The link is also etymological, as the *nāgā* are the well-known snake/dragon divinities that guard Buddhist teaching. As any *kami*, also Amaterasu has a wrathful side (*aramitama*), which conceptually links her to Buddhist deities in charge of punishments, such as Enma, the king/judge of Buddhist hell.

This picture, however, should not lead us to straightforwardly consider Buddhism as the 'container' and Shintō as the 'contained'. *Kenmitsu* hermeneutics also made use of other Chinese ideas, adding further layers of meaning. For example, the above cited dualisms were understood in terms of *yin-yang* correlative thinking and practices, and astronomical numerology linking the seven auxiliary shrines of Ise with the seven stars of the Big Dipper (Jp. Hokutō, 'northern dipper'), a divinized asterism in Daoism. Furthermore, we may speak of the combination between Shintō and Buddhism, but not of a total assimilation. In fact, medieval Japan developed the idea that not all *kami* are manifestations of buddhas or bodhisattvas, and that some deities lack a Buddhist correspondent. They were mainly considered malevolent entities and identified with local, primitive and wrathful *kami* (Teeuween, Rambelli 2003, 31-3). Similarly, there have been various discourses and practices that tried to isolate Buddhism from *kami* worship, such as the prohibition of monks and nuns to enter in the imperial palace during certain Shintō rituals, or the tabooing of the use of Buddhist terms at the Ise shrine (Teeuween, Rambelli 2003, 21-3).

Our treatment of the dominant *kenmitsu* discourse in Medieval Japan allows us not only to avoid a simple contraposition between Buddhism and Shintō, but also to see how, even within the large phenomena of Japanese Buddhism, the borders between various schools have not always been so distinct. However, until recent times there has been a largely unquestioned narrative concerning the development of Buddhism in Japan, and to some extent it is still current (cf. for example the introductory monograph on Japanese religions by Ellwood 2016, edited by Routledge). In the Nara period (710-94), six schools were established: Kusha, Sanron, Jōjitsu, Kegon, Hossō, and Ritsu. Being just preliminary, 'scholiastic' steps, these schools were then superseded by the two first 'indigenous' schools, Tendai and Shingon. However, even these latter, due to their excessive intricacies of rituals and doctrines, which appealed the aesthetic taste of imperi-

3 On Fudō cf. *infra*, § 3.2.2.

al courtesans, and due to the corruption engendered by this connection with power, were eventually replaced by the medieval schools of Zen, Pure Land and Nichiren. These became traditionally understood as the 'real' Japanese Buddhism, representing a sort of "oriental version of Protestantism" because they rejected the elitism of the previous esoteric practices and offered instead simplified means of salvation to the larger population (Raveri 2014, 452; cf. also Dobbins 1998). However, more recent research, drawing and developing from Kuroda's seminal theories,[4] greatly diverges from this narrative. Firstly, until the beginning of the seventeenth century, the Buddhist landscape was still dominated by the so-called eight orthodox schools (the six from Nara plus Tendai and Shingon). Moreover, they all shared the same esoteric theories and practices, which functioned as a sort of metalanguage which easily allowed exchanges between schools. Deal and Ruppert (2015, 142-70; cf. also Ruppert 2017, 333-9) illustrate the networking attitude among many medieval monks, who belonged to multiple lineages and studied in multiple temples, driven by a general culture of Buddhist learning that pushed practitioners to undergo multiple initiations and receive relative secret transmissions of doctrines and rituals. This was grounded by the general idea that each exoteric teaching had its own esoteric key to a common hidden truth. Furthermore, this networking *milieu* also included the so-called new schools of Zen, Pure Lands and Nichiren. If the initial rejection of the *kenmitsu* discourse by their 'founders' set them outside the mainstream, these schools gradually started to incorporate esoteric practices and doctrines. For example Zen monks, especially Sōtō, not only have been employing *darani*, formulae typical of esoteric Buddhism, but have even incorporated key *mikkyō* rituals such *goma* fire ritual[5] and the practices of esoteric initiations in the form of transmission of secret documents called *kirigami* (lit. 'cut paper'). Most importantly, they shared all those esoteric rituals specialized in warding off evil influences and in bestowing various types of blessing (Bodiford 2011).

Indeed, it was this strategy that helped medieval schools to slowly but steadily thrive and to become prominent after Oda Nobunaga (1534-1582), and the following Tokugawa shogunate, exerted a new and total control on the Japanese Buddhist institutions that basically erased the previous *kenmitsu* system. As a result of the strict management of the shogunate, the various schools increasingly developed as separated 'denominations'. In order to be officially recognized, each temple had to be inserted into a bureaucratic system such

4 Cf. Kuroda (1996) and the other essays discussing its legacy in Dobbins (1996).

5 From Sk. *homa*. It is a ritual virtually common to any esoteric/tantric religious tradition. Cf. more *infra* in § 3.2.3.2 and fn. 27.

as the *jidan seido* ('temple-household system'), in which all citizens had to register as parishioners to only one temple, or the *honmatsu seido* ('head-branch system'), in which each temple had to be inserted into a fixed hierarchy within a well precise lineage. In order to fit into such systems, schools developed strictly mono-sectarian chronicles that blurred the fact that such sectarian consciousness developed only in the recent past (Abé 1999, 409-13; Deal, Ruppert 2015, 171-209). In turn, these sectarian histories formed the basis on which the first modern Japanese historians, from Meiji period (1868-1912) onwards, construed the history of Japanese Buddhist through the lenses of Euro-American understanding of religion (Abé 1999, 414-16; Klautau 2011, 82-5; cf. *infra*, § 3.3.1).[6]

6 These early modern developments (1603-1868) may make us think that a 'denominational' paradigm may have been at work also outside a modern Euro-American context. Indeed, we must also note that there are recent strands of scholarship which aim to curb oversimplified post-colonial narratives which, by using a 'Western' religious-secular divide, tend to present an 'East' unable to think about any possible way to separate 'religious' from 'non-religious' phenomena, or among 'religious' phenomena themselves. Instead, there are arguments for seeing in East-Asian pre-modern contexts those emic condition that led to what are called today 'diverse secularities' (cf. Kleine 2018 for the case of Japan). However, I do not think that this may affect my general argumentation. First, on a general level, that I am contrasting clichéd, stereotyped – albeit diffused – ways of conceptualizing religions with some examples of East-Asian religiosity, is far from arguing that there exists a certain kind of homogeneous 'modern Euro-American religiosity' antithetical to a likewise homogeneous 'pre-modern East-Asian religiosity'. On the contrary, I will argue that this contrast may fruitfully highlight unsuspected similarities (cf. *infra*, ch. 5). Concerning the issue at hand, i.e. Edo Buddhism sectarianization, while it is true that it may be similar to denominational division within Protestantism, we should note that it has been an extrinsic factor (a new political regime) that pushed Buddhist schools to concentrate on internal study and chronicle, while the *kenmitsu* system that facilitates the inter-school network had intrinsic factors (Shingon and Tendai esotericism). Furthermore, especially in the early Edo period, inter-school networks and mutual study was still taking place (cf. Mohor 1994; Deal, Ruppert 2015, 197). Again, even if *honmatsu seido* fostered a focus on 'sectarian' doctrinal scholarship and institutionalized the separation of practices between schools (Deal, Ruppert 2015, 184-5, 197) this does not entail that transectarian phenomena, especially at the level of less intellectual practices, was completely erased. One example is the distribution of talismans by certain Shingon itinerant priest, called *koya hijiri*, to temples which belonged to other schools, such as Tendai, Sōtō, Rinzai, and even to those school which were more 'sectarian', such as Jōdo shin or Hokke (Ambros, Williams 2001, 216-17). In summary, by pointing to the shortcomings of what I call 'denominational' epistemological paradigm I am not saying that sectarian consciousness did not exist at all in Japanese Buddhism nor that this consciousness had not been reinforced from the Edo period on, but that treating Buddhist schools as separated cultural and social worlds misses a great deal of the overall picture of Japanese Buddhism.

3.2.1.2 Blurring Between 'Religious' and Other Spheres of Society

The Japanese and Chinese cases show us that not only is it difficult to pinpoint a religious tradition through precise and exclusive borders, but, if we are to follow other Christian-centric parameters, we encounter difficulties in individuating precise morphological contours, especially if we look for elements such as conversion, institutional organization or the existence of an official priesthood or clergy. This is particularly true for that tradition that has always puzzled scholars and not only them: Confucianism.

The first interesting point is that, differently from Daoism and Buddhism, its status as 'religion' has always been hotly debated. Sun (2013, 17-96) individuates four main controversies. The first is the well-known Rites Controversy from 1579-1724, when it was debated whether Chinese Catholic converts were allowed to worship/venerate their ancestors and Confucius. The second controversy (1877-91), sparked by the missionary-sinologist James Legge (1815-1897), consisted of debates on whether 'the cult of Confucius' or 'Confucianism' (a term coined in those years) should be considered a religion. In the third controversy (1911-20), Chinese intellectuals such as Kang Youwei (1858-1927), considering Christianity as a major force behind Euro-American powers, argued for the establishment of 'Confucianity' (*kongjao*) as a state religion (*guojao*). Sun sets the last controversy between the years 2000 and 2004, when a debate initially limited to intellectual arguments over the religious nature of Confucianism reached a higher level, so that from 2004 onwards, the government started endorsing Confucianism by presiding the annual ceremony in Qufu on Confucius's birthday and by creating the network of the so-called 'Confucius Institutes' all over the world. The government has still not, however, recognized it among the other five official religions (Buddhism, Daoism, Catholicism, Protestantism, Islam).

Setting apart for the moment (cf. *infra*, § 3.3.1) the political/ideological factors in these debates, there are indeed some epistemological difficulties in looking at Confucianism with a Christian-modeled concept of religion. Due to the absence of a religious authority in charge of the acceptance of new members, or to administer official certificates for conversions, it is difficult to speak of membership in Confucianism (Sun 2013, 79-80, 124). Also, the settings in which it is practiced are somewhat 'unusual' (Adler 2014, 7-8); at the individual level there is the work of self-cultivation especially through study of the classics, and (for some, especially after the Song dynasty) meditation. In the family and clan, there is filial behavior and ancestor worship. At what could be taken as the community level, there are the private Confucian schools or academies – a setting especially fitting since Confucianism is the tradition of *ru* or literati. In these

academies, among other things, daily ritual observances, including prayers to Confucius and other sages and worthies were (and still are) carried on. Finally, through out the whole imperial period – but also recently, as we have just seen – we find a complex ritual apparatus at the state level honoring Confucius and other sages, which inscribe the role of the emperors and other governmental actors within a cosmic framework informed by Confucian ideas such as filial piety, sagehood, heavenly mandate, and so on. The critical point, as Adler (2014, 8) notes, is that these settings we have just named are what we (modern Euro-Americans) would call 'secular', or at least what we would not consider to be a 'separated' or 'special' sphere of social behavior. This is highly relevant also in connection to our previous discussion on the twin birth of the religious and the secular (cf. § 2.1.8).

Indeed, a major source of puzzlement is the close relationship between Confucianism and statecraft, and not surprisingly various contemporary scholars do not engage Confucianism as a religion, but as an ideology, a social and political ethos, a tradition of thought or a philosophy (cf. Sun 2013, 25-7). From the Han (206 BC-220 CE) till the Qing (1644-1911) dynasties, the central textual component of Confucianism kept informing the administrative structure of the empire through the system of imperial examination (*keju*), based on the Confucian canon. Similarly, if we shift to Japan, Confucianism was initially (seventh-eleventh centuries) limited to the construction of the state ideology and the formation of low-to-mid rank officials, and, especially in comparison to Buddhism, had limited influences on large social scale (Paramore 2016a, 16-31).

Another relevant issue is the 'plasticity' of Confucianism. On one side, "the Confucian conceptual framework was flexible enough that it was always possible to incorporate opponents' ideas and practices" (Knapp 2012, 147).[7] On the other side, it was co-opted by other traditions, especially by Chan Buddhists during the Song dynasty, who incorporated the dominant form of Confucianism at that time, established by Zhu Xi (1130-1200) in their training, along with other forms of Song elite culture and learning. It was in fact through the Chan/Zen mediation of the so-called Gozan temple network that Confucianism, in medieval Japan, started to become more broadly culturally integrated than it had been in ancient times, albeit not in a clearly systematized way. According to Paramore (2016a, 35-40), the influence of medieval Japanese Confucianism can be seen in the Buddhist funerary rites, whose mainstream form is based on Chan rituals, which in turn were inspired by Confucian ones. Confucian-

7 With this statement I do not intend to infer that influences and borrowings did not occur from and to Daoism and Buddhism. On the contrary, especially during the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1636-1912) dynasties exchanges between the three teachings were common; cf. Meulenbeld 2012, 135-8.

ism also exerted an influence in the conceptualization of Shintō as a separate tradition (cf. *infra* 3.2.2.3).

However, it would be misleading to treat Confucianism as something 'lesser' in comparison to Daoism or Buddhism. As Adler notes, the very fact that these three traditions were equally treated as *jiao* means that Confucianism "must have been playing the same game" (Adler 2014, 5), and indeed, at least

> by the Song period, *ru* were clearly understood to be the literate followers of the Confucian-Mencian tradition, as opposed to followers of the Buddha, who were usually called *shi* […] and to Daoist adepts (*daoshi*). (Adler 2014, 3)

According to Sun, "Confucian rituals have been and will possibly remain the most salient component of this complex tradition" (Sun 2013, 7), and indeed a great deal of her study is focused on the revival of Confucian ritual practices in contemporary China, including initiatives aimed at establishing

> Confucianism in a full-blown form of religion, with rigorous religious doctrines and rituals, as well as an institutionalized clergy that has the possession of all Confucian temple properties. (xv; cf. also 77-96, 178-9)

Similarly, if we shift to early modern Japan, also the above cited 'embedded' medieval Confucianism eventually developed as an independent tradition on its own, characterized by various teachers, movements and practices, whose practitioners often explicitly self-identified as followers of Confucius, Mencius, Zhu Xi and others, especially in contrast to Buddhism (Paramore 2016a, 41-65).

Probably, an even more puzzling phenomenon than Confucianism is Japanese Onmyōdo (lit. 'the way of *yin-yang*'). Indeed, there are scholars who tend to deny it the status of religion (cf. Faure 2012a, 5). With Onmyōdo we refer to those practices, techniques, doctrines and more or less defined institutions which can be traced from the reign of emperor Tenmu (r. 673-686) down to some degree even to present days. What is interesting in our discussion is the difficulty in defining it. Is it a corpus of 'technical' knowledge and practices, and thus not engaged, transmitted, and perceived as somehow analogous from other established traditions? Otherwise, does it have 'religious' features? If so, do these have a distinct character from other Buddhist, *kami*-related, or even Chinese Daoist-traditions?

In its initial period, it is more appropriate to speak of Onmyōryō, the 'Bureau of *yin-yang*' established by the 701 Taihō Code in order to secure, manage and apply all those various knowledges, practices and techniques imported from mainland which were based on frame-

work of *yin-yang* principles, Five Agents and *qi* energy theories. They dealt with divination, geomancy, astronomy/astrology, calendar creation and time regulation, and were critical in forecasting auspicious and inauspicious times and directions, interpreting strange events, establishing the right construction sites and preventing harmful energies (*gaiki*) (Yamashita 2012). The fact that Buddhist monks, who also figure among the first importers (cf. Como 2015, 26), were prohibited to practice these techniques, underlines the critical role attributed to them (Masuo 2013, 23-5).

Towards the ninth century various natural disasters or unusual events spurred a widespread belief in *onryō* (vengeful ghosts) and in *mono* (spirits) causing or announcing catastrophes. In such context, the activities of Onmyōryō officials exceeded previous 'institutional' duties as they began to enact rituals in public ceremony, often together with Buddhists or *kami*-related specialists. They also began to respond to the increasing requests of individual nobles. Here we may see a shift towards Onmyōdō in a proper sense. Quelling rituals or life-prolonging rituals often invoked many Chinese deities, such as Tianguan, Diguan, Shuiguan (the 'Magistrates' of Heaven, Earth and Water), or Siming, the 'Director of Fate', an asterism-deity linked to the Big Dipper and believed to overseen humans' destinies and lifespan (Masuo 2013). Furthermore, many other deities, who initially were little more than hemerological indicators in calendars, gradually acquired a personality and become individual worshipped deities. This is the case of Dajangjung ('Great General', jp. Daishōgun). Originally, he was considered a malevolent entity said to descended down to earth at specific cardinal points. However, during the late Heian and Kamakura periods (eleventh-fourteenth centuries) he eventually became a popular deity, especially among samurai, and was the main object of worship in shrines and temples named after him (such as present-day Daishōgun Hachi Jinja in Kyōto). Faure (2012b) argues that *mikkyō* combinatory though was pivotal in construing his 'personality' as deity, by interpreting him as an emanation within a network of other more prominent deities, such as the Buddhist deity of the polar star Myōken Bosatsu. This allowed Daishōgun to retain both his 'technical' role in Onmyōdō calendars and to partake at the same time in the rich pantheon of Japanese super-empirical beings. Similarly, Onmyōdō motifs and themes permeated *mikkyō* discourses and practices (cf. also *infra*, § 3.2.2.3).

Other details and historical developments further underline this tension within Onmyōdō between its traits as a 'technical tradition' and as a 'religious tradition'.

First, notwithstanding the clear influx of Chinese and eminently Daoist traditions, the main practice of Onmyōdō remained divination, which does not seem to be a prominent element in Chinese Daoism (Miura 2015). This suggests that it should be considered an original

and creative Japanese re-elaboration. However, notwithstanding the establishment of the two family-lineages (Abe and Kamo) carried on the tradition throughout history, no special religious facility such as shrine or temple was ever built. Furthermore Yamashita (2012, 90) argues that Onmyōdō was lacking a view and a direct connection with the theme of the afterlife. *Onmyōji* ('*yin-yang* masters') did not deal directly, for example, with the individual *onryō* (a task left for Buddhists), but only detected their malicious influences. Indeed, Abe and Kamo *onmyoji* took Buddhist vows in their later years.

We can see at the onset of Edo Period a certain institutionalization of Onmyōdō,[8] with the appointment of the Tsuchimikado family (descendants of Abe family) by the Bakufu in order to manage, through licenses, the activity of all practitioners of Onmyōdō (Hayashi 2013). These included both the 'institutional' ones, i.e. involved in the 'mainstream' ritual and divination services for the imperial court and the shogunate, and those who practiced that kind of Onmyōdō which permeated Buddhist and *kami*-related discourses and practices. This latter case often results in disputes with other religious practitioners (Hayashi 2013, 162), which underlines how the social status of Onmyōdō as a 'separate' or 'competitor' tradition was contested even among practitioners. However, such a situation did not evolve towards Onmyōdō as a separate tradition. Quite the contrary, the Tsuchimikado family increasingly endeavored to involve all those who practiced some form of divination, irrespectively of their prominent religious affiliation. Moreover, with the establishment of the Tenmongata ('Office of astronomy') by the Bakufu and the production of standardized calendars for the general population, the deities, knowledge and practices of Onmyōdō, traditional prerogative of the imperial court, spread among commoners.

In 1870 all Onmyōdō practices or organizations were strictly banned by the Meiji government as they were considered to be 'superstitions' and part of the past Bakufu's ruling system. However, they did survive in folk religious practices still extant in the Shikoku Island, which scholars call *Izanagi-ryū* (Pang 2015). In the early twenty-first century Japan witnessed a 'revival' of these themes, especially through the semi-legendary figure of Abe no Seimei (921-1005), a Heian *onmyoji* who become a protagonist of novels, manga and the main topic of museum exhibitions (Hayashi, Hayek 2013, 8-9).

8 This one parallels the re-organization of the Buddhist lineages through the *honmatsu seido* and the appointment of the Yoshida family as the head of all *kami* affairs (cf. *infra*, § 3.2.2.3).

3.2.1.3 Multiple Affiliations and Different Modalities of Doing Religion

Chau (2011; 2019, 23-33) emphasizes the fact that in China it is epistemologically pointless to sort out which tradition this or that person belongs to, and he proposes instead to substitute the "conceptual fetishes" of Daoism, Buddhism and Confucianism with a framework that focuses on the ways in which people *engage religion in practice*, instead of focusing on what they *belong to* or *believe in*. He in fact individuates five modalities of *doing religion*.

The pivotal point is that these modalities crosscut among religious traditions – which, as historical realities, nevertheless maintain a certain degree of internal coherence and self-consciousness, and provide contents to the said modalities. Moreover, while it is common to find people preferring one or two of the particular modalities, they have absolutely no exclusive character. The first modality is the *discursive* or *scriptural* one, based on the composition and use of religious texts. We can think about late imperial state officials, whose career was dedicated to the study of classic Confucian texts. Nonetheless, since they were trained in such modality, they would often be drawn to other intricate and highly symbolic texts, like the Buddhist *sūtra* or the Daoist scriptures. The second modality is the *liturgical* one, involving elaborate procedures conducted by priests, monks or other ritual specialists. This modality is especially apt to show the porous boundaries between traditions: a community may hire Daoist specialists for performing a *jiao*, a large-scale blessing ceremony to ensure a prosperous renewing of the life-cycle (cf. Andersen 2008). However, when it comes to funerary rites, the same persons who participated in this *jiao* will probably choose to have their deceased buried in accordance with Buddhist practices. As example of small-scale rituals, we can think of exorcisms, which may be offered by Daoist or Buddhists specialists, local spiritual mediums (*wu*) and even Confucian affiliates (cf. Sutton 2004). The third modality is the *personal-cultivational* one, involving a long-term interest in cultivating and transforming oneself. People interested in this modality usually have a lofty religious aim, such as obtaining long life as result of attunement with the Dao, to achieve *nirvāṇa* or a better reincarnation, or to gain the sagehood preached by Confucians, or even a combination of these three. To achieve such goals they may undergo self-cultivation practices, which range from more elitist forms such as Buddhist meditation, Daoist internal or outer alchemy, *qigong*, etc., to more popular and accessible forms such as *sūtra* and

mantra chanting, or keeping a merit/demerit ledger.[9] Other people, inclined to more practical matters, would nonetheless often resolve to *immediate-practical* modality, such as drawing divination lots for deciding whether or not to start a new business, or burning incense in front of a deity to ask for assistance in the same regard. Finally, most of the people take part in the *relational* modality of doing religion. One typical example is the veneration of one's clan's ancestors, when family members will bring offerings and burn incense in a hall dedicated to the ancestors. Family members who work far from the village return on these special days, which act also as family gatherings (Wai Lun 2011, 37-41).

This approach, I will argue, can likewise be fruitfully applied to the Japanese case. Concerning the crosscutting between traditions in the *discursive* or *scriptural* modality, a prominent example is the Shingon Buddhist school funder Kūkai (774-835), who shows mastery of Chinese Confucian and Daoist texts – albeit in order to criticize them – in his early work *Sangō shiiki* (Indications of the Goals of the Three Teachings, 797 CE). Closer textual cross-fertilization examples come from medieval Japan, when theological developments in the Outer Shrine of Ise, which paved the way for the rise of Shintō as a self-conscious tradition, benefitted philosophically and ideologically from an incorporation of Daoist themes (Tewueen, Breen 2017, 83-97). Moreover, it seems that these Daoist sources were brought to Japan by Chinese Chan masters patronaged by the Kamakura shogunate. We have already seen how the monks of the Gozan network of Zen temples played a key role in disseminating various strands of the artistic and literary culture of Song China, among which texts of Neo-Confucianism figured prominently, and whose tenets, moreover, were often integrated into a Chan/Zen doctrinal framework (Paramore 2016a, 31-40, esp. 35). A final recent example is provided by an intellectual trend, at its apex from the 1980s to the early 1990s, whose actors have been labelled 'spiritual intellectuals' (Shimazono 2004, 275-92; Gebhardt 2012). These thinkers, coming from academic or journalistic background, address many Japanese religious traditions simultaneously, often in connection with other Asian regions such as India or Tibet. The overarching theme is a call for a rediscovery of traditional Japanese (and other Asian) religions, often in contraposition to a 'Western' and modern worldview which is to be overcome.

We have already seen how in pre-modern Japan it is almost useless to approach Shintō and Buddhism as two separate entities, espe-

9 One of a type of morality books that achieved sudden and widespread popularity in China during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. They consist of lists of good and bad deeds, each assigned a certain number of merit or demerit points. These ledgers offered the hope of divine reward to users that behaved 'good' enough to accumulate a substantial sum of merits.

cially for what concerns the *discursive* or *scriptural* and the *liturgical* modality. Nonetheless, there is evidence of people also engaging with additional religious practices outside the Shintō-Buddhism complex. Aristocrats from the Heian period (794-1185) performed an apotropaic ritual called *Shihō hai* ('salute to the four directions') at the start of the New Year which has clearly Daoist features, as attested by certain markers such as the formula "Quickly, quickly in accordance with the statutes!",[10] the instruction to face towards the direction of ascending *qi*, and the mention of the deities called Jade Women,[11] which in China were mostly identified with the stars of the Northern Dipper (Como 2015). Shifting to contemporary Japan, one would expect a separation in ritual practices between Shintō and Buddhism. However, there is a resurgence of rituals involving actors (human and superhuman) from both sides. In many cases, the institutions involved are those which, in pre-modern times, were closely connected through a combinatory framework, such as the Kasuga shrine and the Kōfukuji temple, or the Hiyoshi shrine and the Enryakuji temple in Kyōto. These rituals are important annual events in both Shintō and Buddhist liturgical calendars and feature pre-modern protocols such as recitation or debating of *sūtra*s by monks in the presence of *kami*. More interestingly, new combinatory rituals are also emerging, such as a pilgrimage linking together famous shrines and temples, organized by a Shintō-Buddhist association, or new rituals which symbolically create a bond between a temple and a shrine through a common element, e.g. the water (*mizu*) in the case of the Kiyo*mizu* temple and the Iwashi*mizu* Shrine, the first characterized by a waterfall, the other by a water well (Dolce 2021).

Concerning the *personal-cultivational* modality, a striking example is provided by the Zen monk Hakuin Ekaku (1686-1769), a widely known religious personality of pre-modern Japan. He recounts in his *Yasekanna* (Idle Talk on a Night Boat) what is probably a fictious encounter with a hermit named Hakuyū, to whom he asks help to overcome his sickness caused by unrelenting zen practice. Not only is this hermit portrayed as being versed in both Daoist, Confucian and Buddhist traditions, but Hakuin even asserts that the Daoist-based meditation techniques he learnt from Hakuyū, apart from healing his sickness, actually helped him in achieving illumination (Waddel 2002). According to Conway (2015), we can infer that Buddhists monks engaged with Daoist practices from lengthy polemical excerpts in Shinran's (1173-1263) *Kyōgyōshinshō*, which discuss various Chinese sources in order to debunk meditative and astrological Daoist practices and assert how they are harmful to the Buddhist path. In contemporary times, Lobetti (2014) observes that the

10 Jp. *kyu kyu nyo ritsurei*; Ch. *ji ji ru luling*.

11 Jp. *gyokunyu*; Ch. *yunu*.

> characteristics of ascetic performance in Japan seems to be its transectarian nature, where ascetics acts or practices cannot be identified as a particular feature of one specific religious environment alone. (104)

Buddhist themes seem prevalent; however, participants have very different backgrounds (lay people, confraternities, religious specialists) and, while many acknowledge that there are specific doctrinal backgrounds and contexts (Tendai, Zen, Shintō, etc.), a doctrinal proficiency is deemed irrelevant to the success of ascetic performance. Indeed, many participate in various ascetic retreats organized by different religious institutions.

The *relational* modality is indeed one of the most conspicuous features of Japanese religiosity, and Japanese ritual culture in general. The contemporary range for the application of the term *matsuri* (often translated with 'communal celebration' but usually left untranslated), provides some hints in this regard. It may span, in fact, from Shintō-related communal ritual events, to Buddhist-related ritual events, to various celebrations of sporting, civic or commercial nature.[12] Scholarship has clearly described at length how the majority of Japanese people attend to such events independently from affiliation to any religious traditions, institutions or sets of beliefs.[13] 'Relations', just as we saw in the Chinese case, extend beyond the living and touch the realm of the ancestors. There are in fact many rites of passage marking important social stages of both life and death, from birth, marriage, death and the bestowing of the status of ancestors, in which different religious traditions and specialists are involved.[14] Concerning ancestors and the theme of relationality, Fujiwara (2019) argues that the relational dimension of Japanese religiosity, based on the system of *ie* ('household') and the worship of ancestors, has a remarkably pervading character. She sees various contemporary practices, emically defined both as 'religious' and 'non-religious', as rituals worshipping the concept of *tsunagari* ('relationships', 'belonging'). These rituals, she argues, can be seen as an updated version of a previous "religion as human relationships", of which the *ie* and the ancestor's worship were primary expressions. A change brought about by a shift toward the nuclear family system.

Finally, the *immediate-practical* modality, which also has struck many scholars as being a common theme among the various religious traditions in Japan, will be briefly discussed below in § 3.2.3.5.

12 Cf. s.vv. *nihon kokugo daijiten*; *daijisen*; *meikyō kokugo jiten*; Bocking (1997).

13 Reader 1991; Davis 1992; Swyngedouw 1993; Reader, Tanabe, 1998; Pye 2009; cf. also *infra* § 3.2.3.5.

14 Cf. Raveri 2006, 93-102, 178-83; Bulian 2018, 119-32, 144-63. Often, especially in case of marriage, Christianity is also involved (LeFebre 2015).

3.2.1.4 Conclusion

In this section we saw how Japanese and other East-Asian religions easily defy what we may call a 'denominational' epistemological paradigm, i.e. the expectation of easily finding well-defined socio-cultural phenomena characterized by exclusive affiliation, separation from non-religious systems, and mutual exclusion not only among religious traditions, but also among internal divisions. Borders between traditions and other spheres of human action are fuzzy, as in the case of Confucianism, Onmyōdō or Shintō. In the case of the latter, its relationship with Buddhism is more 'combinatory' than pertaining to a process of absorption or simple syncretism.[15] The same peculiar hermeneutical framework that permitted Shintō-Buddhist coexistence, moreover, also allowed a closer networking among different Buddhist schools, at least until early modernity. Both in the Chinese and the Japanese case, it has been showed how different traditions crosscut and coalescent in different modalities of practices.

In the modern Euro-American perspective, one of the criteria by which religions have been traditionally distinguished among each other was the mutual incompatibility of their set of beliefs. These were in fact understood as forming the essential, immutable core that characterizes any religious tradition. We now proceed to examine this paradigm in relation to the East-Asian context.

3.2.2 Inadequacy of the Paradigm of Religion as Systems of Beliefs

We have already seen in § 2.1.5 how, from the Renaissance onwards, religions were progressively understood especially as sets of belief. This characterization was indeed useful, on the internal side, to differentiate among the various confessions within Christianity. On the extra-European side, it heavily contributed to the construction of the system of 'taxonomic equivalence' (cf. § 2.1.8) to compare similar phenomena. This brought the category of belief to occupy a central place in the study of religion\s, which only recently has been put under critical scrutiny (Bivis 2016). In the prehistory of the study of religion\s, belief, in the sense of metaphysical assumptions and/or mental dispositions, was understood as the place of the real authentic religiosity, to the detriment of external expressions such as ritual. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the scope of the discipline enlarged, but nonetheless the concept of belief re-

15 For a discussion on the limits and possibility of the theoretical concept of syncretism, cf. Johnson 2016.

mained central, shifting from philosophical interrogations to sociological and psychological functionalist interpretations. According to these latter, beliefs are what is mainly enacted in a ritual, or what is reinforced by prayers and meditation. In general, it was considered the pivotal modality through which practitioners relate to superhuman dimension. Alternatively, as in Marxist perspective, it was seen also as a tool of legitimation (500-1).

Contemporary approaches in the field have grown increasingly skeptical and critical on the centrality of this concept (Vasquez 2011) and now beliefs are considered to be a part of a more complicated picture of lived religiosity, which involves a complex of both sensorial, intellectual, and emotional experiences. For Bivis (2016, 503), no longer the compass of the study of religion\s, beliefs can be understood

> as a mode by which religionists recognize and articulate their own identities and experiences, and as a conceptual habitus which facilitates the pursuit and understanding of particular practices and social location.

For Jensen (2014, 60-76) beliefs are still a viable category in terms of complex mental phenomena, that could be defined as "propositional attitude", in the sense of an attitude (that may be emotive, cognitive, volitional, and so on) toward a certain proposition (not necessarily involving superhuman dimension). More importantly, the limited conception of belief as private and/or as an epistemologically impermeable affair must be re-examined. Indeed, beliefs are also social facts, in that they are discussed, redefined, cultivated, etc. – in a word, *externalized* among people. Afterwards, they are *internalized* again through both cognitive and emotional channels, then further externalized, and so on.

Notwithstanding these recent academic developments, since religion is a category often unconsciously linked with interiority and the private sphere, the preeminence of beliefs is still culturally present, especially when it comes to demographic surveys, or to issues related to the legal and political recognition of religions. Often such recognition requires that beliefs are 'sincerely' or 'genuinely' held as key criteria, for example in the UK or US (cf. Agrama 2015, 304; Sherwood 2015, 36). Not to mentions, of course, that in the Euro-American context beliefs are still pivotal in the self-understanding of many religionists (Bivins 2016, 503). Therefore, it makes sense to speak about a widely current stereotype of religion as essentially a "system of beliefs" (McCloud 2017). In what follows, I would like to show how illusory it could be to look for 'typical' or 'coherent' traits of a religious tradition by focusing on its allegedly orthodoxy of beliefs persistent throughout time.

3.2.2.1 Resistance to the Application of the 'Belief' Category

If this stereotype shows its limitation even in the contemporary American context (McCloud 2017, 15-20), much more discrepancy is to be expected when it comes to the extra-Euro-American context. Let us start with an example concerning Sri Lankan Theravāda Buddhism, as it tangibly shows the obstacles that the Euro-American epistemology of religion actually encountered in looking for a logically and tidily systematized set of beliefs. Then we will argue that these observations would apply to many other cases, with Japan being the foremost example.

Lopez (1998) has aptly illustrated how the preconceived idea of 'religion=beliefs', when forcibly imported and applied as it is in Sri Lankan Theravāda Buddhism, clashed at first with the native cultural *milieu*. This is the case of Henry Steel Colcott (1832-1907), co-founder of the Teosophical Society,[16] when he came to Sri Lanka because it was considered the land in which the original teaching of the historical Buddha had been preserved. Being shocked by the "ignorance of the Sinhalese about Buddhism" (Prothero 1996, 100), he set out to produce a *Buddhist Catechism* (1881), which was articulated in 384 'articles of faith' in the form of questions and answers. Interestingly, initially he sought some Sri Lankan monks to lay down such articles of faith, but since he found no one willing to undertake such work, he ultimately endeavored to write the Catechism by himself.

Furthermore, reception and dissemination of this work proved very difficult: the Sri Lankan monk that initially attested the 'orthodoxy' of this work later withdraw his certification. Moreover, in order to prove the 'value' of his *Catechism*, and to gain trust for the Theosophical Society's activities in general, Olcott had no choice but to perform healing practices through his knowledge of mesmerism, attributing the healing magical properties, ironically, to his version of Buddha's teaching 'purified' by superstitions. Additionally, Olcott's disdain for those 'superstitious practices', which he considered a later corruption of Buddhism's fundamental principles, drew the wrath of local Buddhist leaders who were offended by his mocking of their practice of worshipping the tooth relic of the Buddha at Kandy (Lopez 1998, 29-32).

Eventually, the Teosophical Society's modernized version of Buddhism proved influential in Sri Lanka, but this was basically thanks to the involvement of the dawning native bourgeois elite represented by Anagārika Dharmapāla (1864-1933). However, this latter was more interested in presenting Buddhism as a scientific philosophy than as a set of propositions of faith (Obeyesekera 1992, 6 ff.; cf. also *infra*, § 3.3.3).

16 Cf. more *infra* § 3.3.2.

3.2.2.2 Fluidity of Beliefs in China and Japan

Shifting to the Chinese context, Bell (2002) observes how a strict, regulatory idea of belief overshadows empirical variety and incoherence, and even self-perceived diversity. Bell takes the example of the widely accepted notion that "the Chinese believe in ancestral spirit" and argues that, if this is to be understood in the same way in which

> Christian colleagues believe in a central doctrine like the divinity of Jesus Christ, then the statement that the Chinese believe in ancestral spirits is, at best, a very vague generalization that ignores everything interesting. (110)

Indeed, as Nadeau (2012) explains, gods, ancestors and ghosts are actually interrelated concepts. Ancestors are not limited to familiar context and revered out of filial piety (*xiao*), but they may also be contacted by 'shamans' or 'spiritual mediums' (*wu* or *wushi*) hired by families for the purpose of curing an illness or resolving a dispute within the family. If ancestors are venerated dead, ghosts (*gui*) are unvenerated dead who, due to the lack of offerings, are 'hungry' and resentful. Dealing with this threat is one of the main duties of the ordained or religious specialist class, be they Buddhist, Daoist (even Confucian, cf. Sutton 2004), etc. This fact also makes us notice that such ghosts can be treated within a variety of different metaphysical frameworks and with different ritual practices.

Furthermore, 'spirit beliefs' may evolve and spread as well. Many gods (*shen*), especially in the so-called 'Chinese popular religion', are actually deified spirits of the dead. One of the most famous is the Goddess Mazu (cf. Bosco, Ho 1999). According to historical records, she was originally a female *wu* born in a coastal area of Fujan region during the Song period, and allegedly she was able to send spirits to save fishermen in distress. Upon her death at young age, instead of becoming a ghost due to the lack of descendants to provide ancestral cult, the local custom of invoking her powers for help in times of misfortune made her a tutelary god. Furthermore, the burgeoning mercantilism during the Song created a network that disseminated her worship (especially as protector of sailors), so that even nowadays she is known widely not only in the coastal regions of China, but also in Taiwan and in other sea-faring communities of Chinese diaspora, each one with their local practices and peculiarities.

Even in loftier literary and intellectual contexts it is difficult to find any 'orthodoxy' concerning spirit beliefs: if Confucius (551-479 BCE) is known for his reluctance to speculate about them, Mozi (c. 470-c. 391 BCE) argued that the 'unbelief' towards spirits is a cause of social ills, while Wang Chong (27-c. 97 BCE) explicitly denied their existence through an argumentation, the rational and critical stances

of which are quite appealing to modern standards (Bell 2002, 110-11; Nadeau 2012a, 380-93). Bell further reinforces her argument adding that "any village or urban neighborhood in China, Taiwan, or Hong Kong also yields a wide spectrum of positions on spirits" (Bell 2002, 111), and that such differences are acknowledged without any particular problem, evidencing that positions on spirits are often a matter of individual choice and deliberation, instead of adherence to certain text or any explicit indication.[17]

'Spirits' are an elusive matter also for what concerns Japan. Rambelli (2019, 10) affirms that in Japan "ontology, agency, and representations of spirits and energies [...] are very different, if not even in contradiction with each other". While it is safe to consider ancestor's worship a salient feature of Japanese religiosity, one should not overlook the changes due to historical, social and cultural shifting contexts. Satō (2019) shows that in medieval times the dead were believed to be rescued and transferred to an other-worldly Buddhist Pure Land, thanks to the intercession of powerful Buddhist super-empirical beings. The only 'spirits' to be concerned about were those left behind in this world, whom humans had to take care of because they were malicious presences, such as the above cited *onryō* (§ 3.2.2.2), whose ties with this world need to be severed by Buddhist specialists.

This changed by the early modern period, when the Buddhist metaphysics of powerful, other-worldly beings who took care of the dead had gradually weakened. The task of assuring a smooth and long transition from corpse to unharmful spirit was thus entrusted to humans. Important factors in this shift were also the introduction of Buddhist funerals within a framework of Neo-Confucian filial piety towards ancestors, the establishment of the already cited temple-parishioner

17 These observations do not imply that in China a certain kind of authority with the role of overseeing 'orthodoxy' has never existed. It has been, and still is, the state. In pre-modern times it has been so in the form of the empire, informed by Confucianism and its own worship system of the emperor as mediator between *Tian* (Heaven) and *Di* (Earth). Nowadays it oversees religions in the form of the PRC, informed by its peculiar interpretation of Marxism. However, unable to impose its own orthodoxy and to monitor 'violations of system of faith proposition', the empire system always sought convergence with established traditions, especially Buddhist and Daoist ones, by exchanging patronage for legitimation. Concerning popular practices, as the above cited Mazu worship, most of the time the state employed strategies of control, accommodation and cooptation, instead of censorship, granting honorary titles to these deities and inserting them in a celestial bureaucracy (such as the City Gods, cf. Gossaert 2015) to avoid potential subversive interpretation. From the fall of the Qing (1911) onwards, the influence of modernization and Marxism actually resulted in a stricter control of the five institutional religions (Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism) and a harsher censorship of the popular practices now termed 'superstitions' (*mixin*). However, since the beginning of the reform period in 1978, a gradual resurgence of both ancestor worship and local cults has been observed, together with more accommodating tendencies of the local administrators. On these issues cf. Yu 2005; Laliberté 2011; Clart 2012, 232-4. Cf. also *infra*, § 3.3.1.

system *jidan-seido* (§ 3.2.1.1), and a stable system of land ownership which also allowed commoners to build enduring extended households, which were ideologically sustained by ancestor's worship.

Towards the end of the early modern period a further theological consolidation of the idea of an invisible world parallel to the visible world can be seen in the influential work by the *kokugakusha* Hirata Atsutane (1776-1843). He argued for the existence of the *kamigoto*, an invisible realm shared by both *kami* and the soul of the departed, in which the latter gain a *kami*-status so they can bring blessing to their offspring (Zhong 2016, 123-4). Hirata's ideas gained a wide audience, which was already acquainted with a world of invisible entities able to intervene directly in human affairs through the influence of Chinese Ming and Qing popular supernatural tales (Rambelli 2019a, 5). In the modern period, especially during the apex of the nationalistic regime, such ideas 'theologically' sustained the government's ideology by envisioning a common ancestorship linking all Japanese to a divine root embodied by the emperor and the *kami* Amaterasu, as well by enshrining the soul of the fallen in war as national protective *kami*, as in the case of the controversial Yasukuni Jinja (Breen, Teeuwen 2010, 241-5).

However, in present day this is still undergoing a change. There are instances of funeral practices such as scattering of ashes in natural settings, which means that the dead are no longer enduring entities, identified by a posthumous Buddhist name and to be collectively worshipped. Instead, they become more a matter of personal remembrance with less connection to traditional religions. This is clearly a consequence of a shift toward smaller nuclear families in urban settings (Satō 2019, 25-7).

Let us shift from the case of beliefs concerning a super-empirical being to the beliefs involved in a specific practice, taking as example the beliefs involved in the practice of the so-called *kōshin* night. We have already seen the presence of the Daoist deity Siming, the 'Director of Fate' in Japan. His role as religious object in Japan was important in that he was directly connected with the belief of the three 'corpses' (Ch. *shı*). In Chinese and Daoist contexts, these three malicious entities were said dwelling in the human body and monitor the misdeeds of their host. Every *gengshen* (Jp. *kōshin*) night, they would leave their host during his/her sleep and ascend to report to Siming, who would accordingly shorten the lifespan of that person. To avoid this, people would observe dietary restrictions in order to weaken these three entities, as well as many other means such as concoctions, meditations, and so on. Another widespread method was to hold night-long vigils to prevent the corpses from leaving the body (Kohn 2015, 148-54).

The interesting point for our discussion is the fact that the practices linked to *kōshin* night actually shifted doctrinal context through-

out history. There are proofs that in Medieval Japan a Daoist version of a *kōshin* ritual was existent, which explicitly named the three corpses (Kohn 2015, 154-5). However, this practice was readily absorbed by Buddhism, probably because, in order to constrain the three 'corpses', the power of a sort of protective deity was necessary. This role was taken by a Buddhist deity associated with healing rituals, Shōmen ('blu faced') Kongō (Sk. Vajrapāṇi).

Aristocrats (and later, warriors) usually enjoyed *kōshin* night as cheerful assemblies in which stories and poems were recited in order to pass the night, supposedly abstaining from misdeeds and bad language, and often in connection with Buddhist lectures. In monastic contexts too the practice was adopted, and vigils comprehended purifying rituals, vegetarian meals and worship of Shōmen Kongō. In time, the Daoist idea of three corpses gradually was eclipsed, leaving in its place a more general idea of healing disease and warding off misfortunes. However, some influxes still remain, such as avoiding sleep and certain aliments and maintaining a strict moral behavior during the *kōshin* night (Kohn 2015, 171-2). By the Edo period with the strengthening of *kami* worship, the *kōshin* cult spread among the general population and came to be associated also with the *kami* Sarutahiko, depicted as a wanderer who protected people from baleful influences, and whose name contains the word 'monkey' (Jp. *saru*), the Chinese zodiac animal associated with the *kōshin* day. Ethnographic data in present-day Japan shows that participants in *kōshin* vigils

> have no particular concern for the exact nature and iconography, or even the identity of the god but are more interested in performing health-supporting rituals and enhancing social coherence. (Kohn 2015, 166)

3.2.2.3 Fluidity of Beliefs in Japanese Main Traditions

It might be objected that what has been discussed this far in the Chinese and Japanese cases has regarded 'general' or 'periferal' topics such as spirits, ancestors or the *kōshin* night, and that we could expect more coherent belief statements from established religious tradition such as Buddhism or Shintō. Quite the contrary, the studies of Faure (2016a; 2016b) on Buddhist divinities in medieval Japan help to further prove the point of this section. On a first glance, the Japanese esoteric Buddhist pantheon envisions a hierarchical set of various typologies of 'gods': buddhas, bodhisattvas, 'wisdom kings' (Sk. *vidyārāja*, Jp. *myōō*), *deva* from Vedic pantheon (Jp. *ten*), astral deities, earthly deities, 'shining deities' (*myōjin*), 'temporary manifestation' (*gongen*), and *kami* (cf. chart in Faure 2016a, xii). However, as we have already seen above (§ 3.2.1.1), Japanese *mikkyō* is based

on a discourse whose logic is omni-embracing, absorbing all the other ideas, deities, concepts and practices by means of creative hermeneutical strategies. The point is that the same deities of esoteric Buddhism are not immune from this logic: instead of clear individualized entities, they should be seen more as "ever-changing nodes within a network constantly in flux" (Faure 2016a, 10). In fact, they are linked to each other through a "kind of free association, although not quite free" (28), triggered by various hermeneutical devices: semantic (e.g. the meaning of the name), symbolic (e.g. the meaning attributed to colors), thematic (e.g. the motif of the center), metonymical (e.g. snake linked to rain), numerological (e.g. seven stars of the Big Dipper linked to other groups of seven items) and many others (30-1). These links may entail strong ontological identity as well as mere affinities, such as temporary metamorphosis or functional resemblance, in the sense that, instead of identity, the relation between a certain deity and another one expresses their articulation, rather than their merging or confusion. These 'cross references' repeat themselves as if in a sort of loop, reinforcing patterns that lead to situations in which each deity can rise to a kind of henotheistic status in which s/he subsume all the other ones. In the 'explicit theology' of official religious texts this kind of association may maintain a certain systematicity, especially in binary combination – which suits the Buddhist concept of nonduality and the *yin-yang* logic (Faure 2016b, 10). However, there is also an 'implicit theology' of ritual practice or literary works in which they are even less structural and free. In these contexts, metaphysical buddhas, by becoming local, tend to become more 'mundane' *kami*, while certain local *kami* can rise to the status of bodhisattvas or buddhas, so that "ultimately, both buddha and *kami* are shorthand for highly polysemic, fluid, and elusive realities" (Faure 2016b, 6). Let us briefly examine one example.

Fudō Myōō, despite his Indian origins as Acala, became in Japan a "thoroughly naturalized citizen" (Faure 2016a, 118) and spread as an important deity. According to one of the main texts of *mikkyō*, the *Dainichikyō*, he is a servant of the Buddhas, as his dark skin and slavish appearance would confirm this. However, in subsequent commentaries he rises to the status of a tamer of those who oppose the *Dharma*, subjugating 'competitor deities' such as Daijizaiten (Sk. Maheśvara)[18] or other obstructing entities, such as personifications of passions which hinder enlightenment (120-2, 129). This ability led to the development of other functions which helped to further his dissemination. From protector of the Dharma, he also became a protector of the state in apotropaic rituals. Alternatively, he is the protector

18 Lit. 'great lord', title through which, in India, important deities such as Śiva were referred to. The motif of taming of Śiva may refer to the competition between Buddhists and Hinduists within the Indian esoteric *milieu*.

of the individual practitioner: since in esoteric Buddhism the practitioner must discover his/her identity with the main Buddha Dainichi, Fudō becomes automatically also the 'servant' protector of the practitioner. In the tradition of mountain ascetics (Shugendō), this protection occurs by means of a ritual merging between the practitioner and Fudō, who is in fact one of the major deities in this context (Faure 2016a, 134-6). The motif of ritual merging relates with that of possession, and Fudō is indeed also invoked in cases of exorcism (134). Among other factors that fostered his 'career' we can cite his name: since its meaning is 'unmovable', it came to be variously interpreted around the motifs of 'center' or 'origin'. He thus acquires a uranic nature through the association with the Big Dipper (which rotates near the Pole Star) (143). This brings then a connection with the Buddhist astral deity of the Pole Star, Myōken, which in turn, notwithstanding his initial lower rank (probably due to its Daoist origin as Siming), eventually gained the status of supreme judge of human destinies thanks probably to his cosmic position in which he symbolically escapes the karmic transmigration that binds inferior deities and humans alike (Faure 2016a, ch. 2). Back to Fudō's name, 'Unmovable' may refer also to the mind, in the sense of being unfettered by passion: this links Fudō to various key concepts of Buddhism, such as the ninth consciousness, *amarashiki* (Sk. *amala-vijñāna*, 'unsullied consciousness') – termed also as fudō*shiki* 'unmovable consciousness' (Faure 2016a, 146) – which is considered to correspond to the buddha-nature inherent in each being and, ultimately, to the enlightened mind of Dainichi, which the practitioner must actualize. In this way the former servant Fudō becomes his master Dainichi, of whom he is in fact said to be an emanation (132). Paradoxically enough, Fudō's aspect and dark skin also symbolize ignorance, and he is thus equated with one of the 'arch-villain' of Buddhism, Goutama's cousin Devadatta. However, this paradox is resolved through the esoteric doctrine of *bonnō soku bodai* ('afflictions equate with awakening') (147). Adding his iconography to the equation, since he is placed over a (unmovable) rock, he is revered as an earth-quelling deity (a noteworthy function in an earthquake-prone territory). This chthonian nature brings him to be the essence (*honji*) not only of the earthly deity and positive food dispenser Kenrō Jijin (Faure 2016a, 126, 149 ff.; 2016b, 191), but also of the fierce deity, or class of deities, "elusive yet omnipresent" (Faure 2016a, 116) named Kōjin.

If we have just seen how ideas concerning Buddhist deities were 'systematically unsystematic', any attempt to find a supposed 'immutable essence', especially in theological terms, fails even more bla-

tantly when we consider the historical development of Shintō.[19] Many scholars argue that it can be seen as a sort of 'onion', in the sense of being formed by layers and layers of various influences that cover a 'core' which does not exist (Havens 2006). At any rate, what I want to point out is the plasticity of the concept of *kami*, that, far from being fixed in a set of beliefs, aptly fits into various intellectual and ritual frameworks, while retaining a certain identity which eventually coalesced in a self-aware religious tradition.

As we have already hinted above (§ 3.2.1.1), early in the seventh century, *kami* worship came progressively and inextricably linked to Buddhism. But this latter has been only one of the influences that determined Shintō's development. Indeed, the very conception of *kami* and related practices can hardly be deemed strictly indigenous. Archeological evidence from the Yayoi (500 BCE-300 CE) and Kofun (300-600 CE) periods reveals elements of continental religiosity such as *yin-yang* thinking, ideas of immortality, divination using animal bones, burial practices and cosmological animal imagery (Deal 2017, 191-7; Hardacre 2017, 17-45). In the fifth century Korean emigrants fleeing from wars brought to Japan, among other things, literacy, Buddhist ideas and Confucian statecraft, which were eventually inserted into the first 'constitutional document' of Japan. Due to

19 As anticipated above (§ 3.2.1.1), my take on the term Shintō is highly heuristic, and with it I indicate in general terms those practices, institutions and ideas linked to superhuman beings defined as *kami* and worshipped in places called *jinja* or *jingū*, translated here as 'shrine'. To what extent Shintō can be used to identify a precise religious tradition is still a disputed matter among scholars. On one side, scholars uphold Kuroda's perspective (1981), and find no sense in searching, outside Buddhism, for a coherent system of ideas or practice related to *kami*, which are said to emerge out of Buddhism only in the seventeenth century. One of the monographs I draw from for my brief account of Shintō (Breen, Teeuwen 2010) follows this line, albeit with the acknowledgment of the existence of substantial *jingi* (heavenly and heartly deities) cults predating Buddhism. Nonetheless, they argue that this cult did not develop in a sufficiently coherent and distinct way from other traditions, and that Shintō was originally a Buddhist term indicating practices addressed to *kami* as *avatāra* of Buddhist deities (Teeuween 2002). My other main source (Hardacre 2017) argues instead that "it is reasonable to speak of Shintō in recognition of the watershed represented by the Jingikan, a structured ritual calendar, Kami Law, and the incorporation of Kami priests into the government. By comparison with this ritual, institutional, and social system, doctrinal and philosophical expositions came later and were transmitted in esoteric frameworks restricting their transmission to initiates" (Hardacre 2017, 44; cf. also Mizue 2003, 13). She affirms this also considering the restoration of the Jingikan in the modern period. In this context I limit myself to observing that this controversy basically relies on how one defines religions (what counts more? Doctrine or institutions?) and on how one defines a religious tradition (does a tradition need to self-consciously distance itself from other traditions? What degree of coherence is required?). From a didactical perspective, it is more fruitful to address this controversy not with the intention of siding with one interpretation or the other, but in order to reflect on issues such as the performativity of the concept of religion, on how and why it may be employed to make sense of the empirical data, on how and why certain interpretations of religion have been applied to phenomena predating this very concept, and which kind of indigenous terms we can side to religion (e.g. Jp. *dō* of 'way' or *kyō* of 'teaching').

its highly coherent and structured nature, Buddhism was strongly felt as foreign, and this engendered political clashes, especially over which practices, Buddhism or 'indigenous' *kami* worship, were most efficient for both the practical and metaphysical needs of an increasingly developing government. Both traditions were eventually officially adopted, and Buddhism became institutionalized in the sixth century. This was the context of the first attempt to systematize *kami* worship, carried out through the institution of a governmental apparatus, the Jingikan ('council of heaven and earth deities'), which oversaw the calendar of public rites and a network of related shrines. These rituals were focused on various agricultural blessings, expulsion of evil influences and protection of the country, with the overarching theme of the absolute authority of the recently established emperor (*tennō*, a Daoist term) over *kami* affairs. *Kami* at this point in time had a relatively simple character, related to blessings upon offerings, and with curses (*tatari*) upon the breachings of taboos. Laws regulating these activities heavily drew from Chinese models such as the important *Book of Rites* (Ch. *Liji*) (Hardacre 2017, 31). Rituals, especially those aimed at protecting from, or soothing vengeful *kami*, employed a *yin-yang* framework (Breen, Teeuwen 2010, 36-8). Nonetheless, as Hardacre argues,

> the court's promotion of Kami rites as part of its drive to extend its territorial control involved a *rhetoric* of indigeneity as a means to distinguish Kami ritual from its parallel promotion of Buddhism. (Hardacre 2017, 45)

However, the Jinjikan's control over *kami* matters roughly spanned only from eighth to tenth century. Instead, from tenth to the thirteenth century, new networks of shrines emerged, which were, furthermore, all shrine-temple complex (*jingūji*) except for the Ise shrine. This indicates both the growing control of local powers over *kami* affairs, and the influences of Buddhism. This affected the ways in which *kami* were conceived and engaged. From institutional deities to be publicly revered to obtain national protection there was a shift toward private worship, especially among aristocrats who visited shrines to obtain personal blessing from *kami*, which were now endowed with moral character, and were blessing or punishing ethical and unethical conduct (125-8). Buddhist priests brought other deities from India, Korea, and China to Japan. Some of them were quickly 'naturalized' and became very popular. Notable examples are Benzaiten, Shinra (Kr. Silla) Myōjin and Daikokuten (Sk. Mahākala), all of which are still worshipped today (Rambelli 2004, 769). More importantly, *kami* came to be understood as manifestations of higher Buddhist divinities, as explained in the doctrine of *honji suijaku*, and inserted in the framework of *kenmitsu* Buddhism (cf. above, § 3.2.1.1).

Kami thus progressively transformed into agents of salvation, a process that reached its peak during the medieval period in which the interaction with them as well as their theological understanding relied almost exclusively on Buddhist terms, symbols and themes. *Kami* were portrayed as compassionate beings guiding towards their hidden truth, that was, ultimately, salvation in Buddhist terms, such as karmic deliverance, rebirth in pure land, or attainment of buddhahood. Often, guidance given by *kami* was present in the form of moral lessons instead of abstract Buddhist doctrines, following the logic of 'dimming the light' (*wakō*) of Buddhist teachings (Hardacre 2017, 197-202).

However, further developments in theological thought concerning *kami* were carried out, notably by Watarai priests of the Outer Shrine of Ise, who put the concept of obtaining ritual purity, necessary to enter in contact with the *kami*, and the Buddhist concept of fulfilling one's original enlightenment through unification with the supreme Buddha Dainichi at the same level. In this way, though still firm in the *kenmitsu* framework, the *honji-suijaku* hierarchy of Buddha over *kami* started to be questioned (Hardacre 2017, 169-72). The complete reversal of the *honji-suijaku* paradigm was accomplished by Yoshida Kanetomo (1435-1511), who is credited with the first development of Shintō 'self-awareness'. He indeed used the term *shintō* to indicate a well-defined body of doctrines and practices: *yūitsu shintō* ('the one and only Shintō'). He preached that *kami* (one in particular, Kuni no Tokotachi) are the source of all creation, including also Buddhism and Confucianism. The Buddhist framework is still largely employed, for example, when he argues that Amaterasu "dim her light and become like dust" to be born as Shakyamuni in India, or when he says that the Kuni no Tokotachi created "the one-great-three thousand realms", a Tendai term (Breen, Teuween 2010, 47-9). These teachings, moreover, were still transmitted with esoteric initiation. At the start of seventeenth century, the Tokugawa shogunate gave the supervision of all *kami* affairs to Yoshida family.

During the Edo period, however, there was a growing rejection of Buddhist exo-esoteric discourse in favor of Confucianism-based paradigms. In fact, out of Yoshida Shintō new theological views developed, such as those of Yamazaki Ansai (1618-1682), who strongly criticized Buddhism and discussed *kami* in terms of *ri* and *ki*, the two Confucian moral-metaphysical principles governing the universe (Browing 2017, 93-103). He, together with other thinkers such as Hayashi Razan (1583-1657) or Yoshiwara Koretaru (1616-1694), upheld the idea of an ultimate deity, Yoshida's Kuni no Tokotachi, standing behind a vast, unorganized pantheon of lesser *kami*. Humanity's oneness with this ultimate deity is to be attained through ritual purification, moral cultivation and reverence towards institutions. Yamazaki's Shintō, in particular, preached loyalty to the emperor lin-

eage (Hardacre 2017, 245-62). On a more popular level, certain *kami* and shrines became the objects of privileged practices. The Ise shrine became the destination for *okage mairi*, 'thanksgiving pilgrimages', after abundant harvest, related to the idea of Amaterasu as the sun – and therefore, agricultural – goddess (Breen, Teeuwen 2010, 57-60). Other *kami*, such as Inari, originally related to the theme of rice and the image of the fox, a trickster animal, due to the influence of urbanization and commercial economy, become a popular deity bestowing any kind practical benefits that fitted urban society needs (Hardacre 2017, 264-76).

During the same Edo period, another influential intellectual tradition, called Kokugaku ('national study'), endeavored to uncover what was the real 'essence' of Shintō, hidden in ancient and relatively forgotten texts such as the *Kojiki* (c. 710 CE). After studying them, Motoori Norinaga (1730-1801) argued that ancient Japan was a golden age of harmony between *kami*, emperors and people. He focused on the deity Amaterasu, founder of imperial dynasty, claiming that she was the source of what he considered the 'way' of Japan, based on "emotional and poetical spontaneity", and therefore different from the analytic attitude of foreign ways such as Buddhism and Confucianism. Another *kokugakusha*, Hirata Atsutane, developed Shintō theories of the soul, the afterlife, and the cosmogony under the influence of also Christian ideas. He put precise higher deities, taken from *Kojiki*, in charge of creation (Ame no Minakanushi) or of the care of the dead (Okuninushi). Deceased people were believed to become *kami* themselves, thus ancestor worship could not be done in Buddhist terms (Zhong 2016, 89-130; Breen, Tewueen 2010, 60-5). These influential ideas coalesced, near the end of Edo period, in a grass-roots movement, usually called by scholars Fukkō Shintō ('Shintō Restoration') The practices and doctrines of this movement

> were close to everyday life, full of fertility imagery, idealizing a linked harmony between the earth, human fecundity, and fulfillment of the 'imperial way.' They wrote with palpable urgency during a period of increasing unrest in village society. (Hardacre 2017, 348)

This powerful repertoire of concepts and practices became swiftly co-opted by the newly established imperial government right after the Meiji Restoration (1868) due to its strong focus on the special status of Japan as land of the gods and on the role of the emperor. These ideas fed into the construction of a strong state ideology, especially in contrast with Christianity, since at that time Japan had been forced to open to foreign influences. In fact, in 1868 the old Jingikan was (briefly) revived to exert strong control over all shrines; priest nominations were centralized; shrines with *kami* unconnected

to the throne were forced to change deity; any connection with Buddhism was abruptly severed and the Ise shrine was put at the apex of a new network of shrines. However, those were years in which the modern Euro-American concept of 'religion' was circulating (cf. *infra*, § 3.3.1), and when asked to formulate concise doctrines of Shintō in these terms, *kami* specialists reached no agreement. Buddhists took a chance and campaigned against Shintō as mere 'rituality' and not as a religion in the now accepted 'Western' sense (Breen, Teeuwen 2010, 10). Thus, the idea of establishing a creedal aspect and of considering Shintō officially as a 'religion' faded during the 1880s. This allowed the government to combine freedom of religion as requested by Euro-American powers and guaranteed in the Constitution of 1889 with a continued official state cult to be administered through shrines and state mandated observances,[20] which were to be followed irrespectively of one's religious (in modern terms) belonging. However, it must also be noted that other traditions which focused on particular *kami*, sacred places, practices or worships were legally identified as sectarian (*kyōha*) Shintō and distinguished by 'non-religious' Shintō shrines. Similarly, Japanese academicians were not all convinced of the non-religiosity of Shintō (Hardacre 2017, 410-12). Indeed, it is possible to discern a certain 'theology' embodied in Shintō shrine practices. Especially during the years of the World War II, the most preached themes were imperial divinity, its roots in Amaterasu's charge to his descendants to rule eternally over Japan, which in turn grounded the idea of Japan's superiority, of its mission to rule Asia (if not the whole world), and of the family-state connected through common lines of ancestors-patriots (Hardacre 2017, 439).

The postwar occupation of Japan dismantled all the government apparatus which controlled shrines and priests, and Shintō became officially a religion within a constitutional framework of a strict state-religion separation. Shrines had thus to be registered as religious juridical persons. The Jinja Honchō or National Association of Shrines was founded as a new umbrella organization in 1946. However, no consensus over the nature of this 'new', 'depoliticized' Shintō were reached. Positions ranged from indicating Shintō's role as unifier of the Japanese people under the spiritual guidance of the emperor, to equating it to the local rural tradition of *kami* worship, or to gradually transforming it into a universal religion (Breen, Teewen 2010, 5-6). While the latter two gained prominence, still today no theolog-

20 Some of them are still widely practiced in present days. For example, the popular *hatsumōde*, the new year visit to a shrine. This latter is actually a modern development born out of two previous practices: the medieval *onmyōdō*-related custom of visiting a shrine located in an auspicious direction, and the custom of early visit to shrines dedicated to the Seven Gods of Fortune to pray for luck in the coming year (Bocking 1997, 38; Breen, Teeuwen 2010, 12).

ically clear position can be found. Actors outside the Jinja Honchō also play active roles in re-describing Shintō character, even for touristic purposes. Furthermore, prominent shrines or shrine networks, such as Inari's one, are not presently members of the association. One of the latest of Shintō's self-representation, widely disseminated also beyond Japan, is what Rots (2015) calls the "Shintō environmentalist paradigm", which stresses Shintō as being basically animistic, worshipping the force of nature and preaching a harmonious coexistence between men and environment. Key symbols and ideas are the woodland which often surround the shrines (*chinjū no mori*, lit. 'protective forest'), and their preservation for ecological as well as cultural heritage related reasons.

3.2.2.4 The Problem of Identifying Core Traits in Hinduism

Our survey of Japanese Shintō failed to find a stable system of beliefs, even if it is a tradition that appears to be circumscribed by a brief history and a limited geographical context. What about religious phenomena which have been described as having much larger extension in time and space, are they proof of the presence of a 'core' structure of beliefs which maintains the coherence of the tradition throughout history, or an invitation to probe instead the flexibility of the system which allowed multiple developments? An exemplary case for this discussion is provided by the religious landscape of India. As we will see in § 3.3.1, our idea of Hinduism as something self-consciously aware and as an unitarian and coherent religious phenomenon is mainly a modern construct, which nonetheless also influenced the way other East-Asian traditions came to be self- and hetero-represented. Therefore, it is worth examining briefly how the epistemological lens of 'system of belief' would apply in this case.

It has been variously observed how Hinduism contains both "uniting and dispersing tendencies" (Flood 2003a, 4). The former are usually identified with the Brahmanical traditions centered on the *Veda*, the correct ritual procedures, the maintenance of caste boundaries, the interpretation of scriptures, the use of Sanskrit, and a pan-Indian scope and influence. The latter are identified with a proliferation of decentered traditions, often with local influence, founded by charismatic teachers (*guru*), or communities which expressed themselves in vernacular languages and often rely mainly on oral transmission.

Rodrigues (2017, 16-19) speaks of three main components of Hinduism, namely Āryan, Dravidian (in the sense of high culture linked to non-Sanskrit-related languages, such as Tamil), and aboriginal tribal groups. Rigopoulos (2005, 25-41) lists five 'components' of Hinduism: 1) the "brāhmaṇical civilization", linked to the ritual culture, to the *Veda* and other Sanskrit foundational texts; 2) the tra-

ditions of renunciants (*saṃnyāsin*), linked especially to Yoga beliefs and practices; 3) the devotional *bhakti* traditions developed around the deities of Viṣṇu, Śiva and Devī; 4) the "rural religiosity" and 5) the "tribal religiosity", whose deities and practices where originally external to the brāhmaṇical culture, but have been progressively incorporated through the concept of *avatāra*. Next, he goes on to discuss some "largely shared assumption" about human and divine conditions, largely based, but not limited, to the *Upaniṣad* (cf. Rigopoulos 2005, 43-88).

Indeed, scholars often identify a cluster of the main traits of Hinduism. Flood (2003a, 2) indicates

> shared ritual patterns, a shared revelation, a belief in reincarnation (*saṃsāra*), liberation (*mokṣa*), and a particular form of endogamous social organization or caste.

Knott (2016, 114) points to "the caste system, the authority of the *Veda*, the concept of *dharma*, and Aryan identity", along with "the popular narrative traditions of the *Rāmāyana*, reverence for the *Bhagavadgītā*, the presence of the divine in many names and forms, the place of the guru, and the sacred land of India". Doniger (2009, 39) indicates belief in the *Veda*, in *karma* and in *dharma*, a cosmology centered on Mount Meru, devotion (*bhakti*) to one or more members of an extensive pantheon, the ritual offering (*puja*) of fruits and flowers to a deity, the ideal of vegetarianism and nonviolence (which does not necessarily exclude blood sacrifices).

However, the same scholars would all quickly add that these traits are often fuzzy and problematic: while the centrality of *Veda*'s revelation may be distinctive, theological confrontations among and within the six orthodox *darśana*, plus the theological discourses of, e.g. the Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava traditions, disputed quite different metaphysical positions, such as monistic or dualistic ones (Flood 2003a, 5-6; cf. also Flood 2003c; Colas 2003; Clooney 2003). Other foundational ideas such as *karma*, *dharma* and *mokṣa* resonate with those of Buddhism and Jainism (Doninger 2009, 39). Therefore, such elements are best treated through the concept of family resemblance which, as Knott notices, is useful since the human metaphors of the family help to see the importance of power within it.

> Just as family members try to make their voices heard, even to get the upper hand in day-to-day disputes, so do Hindu individuals and groups struggle by whatever means to assert their beliefs and commitments, their caste interests, and sectarian viewpoints (Knott 2016, 115),

such as in the case of Hindu nationalism.

In Doninger's polythetic approach, there is no single central quality that all Hindus must have. She notes the telling case of Babur (1483-1530), founder of the Mughal dynasty, who singled out the belief of reincarnation as the defining Hindu belief but did not ascribe this belief to all Hindus (Doninger 2009, 42). She also observes that the above-cited "uniting and dispersing tendencies" do not necessarily translate into polarized groups of people: "a single person would often have both halves (as well as non-Hindu traditions) in his or her head" (Doninger 2009, 44), a kind of open-mindedness supported also by the "tendency of Hindus to be more orthoprax than orthodox" (Doninger 2009, 58), with each tradition acknowledging the existence of gods other than their god(s), suitable for others to worship. She thus concludes that "Hindus might therefore best be called polydox".

3.2.2.5 Conclusion

In the previous section I pointed out how in Japanese and many East-Asian contexts it makes little sense to ask which religion a person belongs to, as well as to expect a clear-cut affiliation and a strict maintenance of purity and distinction between religious traditions. With the cursory glances of this section on certain general as well as particular aspects of Japanese and Asian religions, I wanted to highlight instead how focusing on the category of beliefs, particularly if expected to be logically and tidily systematized, actually fails to bring to the surface 'typical', 'defining', 'core' traits – provided in the first place that they actually exist – and that this notion actually clashed with non-Christian-based self-understanding of being religious, as the case of Olcott showed.

Shifting to a broader point of view, we may argue that this focus on belief is actually part of a more general preference for the 'inner', 'rarefied', 'disenchanted' dimensions of religion, i.e. those aspects more acceptable from a modernist point of view, and therefore much more palatable for educative purposes.

3.2.3 Inadequacy of the Paradigm of The Primacy of Inner and 'Disenchanted' Dimensions in Religions

We have seen in ch. 1 (§ 2.1.8) that the discursive developments of the concept of religion progressively emphasized religion as pertaining preeminently to the inner private sphere and the other-worldly dimension, thus leaving the social sphere and this-worldly dimension to the progressively developing 'religion's twin': secularization. I add here some more nuances to this topic by briefly hinting to other important intellectual developments that further shaped and influenced both academic and folk conceptions of what is – and what ought – to be a religion, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (and that to some extents have not completely waned). These two are evolutionism, as adopted in the dawning field of the study of religion\s, and the famous Weberian theory of progressive rationalization and disenchantment.

For 'evolutionism' here I mean not only a method but also a set of assumptions that were shared by three key thinkers in the field of the study of religion\s: Edward B. Tylor (1832-1917), William Robertson Smith (1846-1894) and James Frazer (1854-1941). Generally speaking, these three thinkers shared the view that human minds and cultures evolve following the same direction, so that some civilizations are more advanced than others, and this also applies to religion, which, as we have seen, was one of the main terms of comparison with non-European people. This happened also in concert with the contemporary liberal protestant theological program. This latter aimed at reconciling the biblical announcement with the contemporary *Zeitgeist* by accepting Darwin's natural selection theory and adopting historical criticism and a more humanistic view of Jesus Christ (cf. Woodhead 2005, 193-7; Lupi 2015, 92 ff., 140-4). Religion was thus conceived as moving from:

> Polytheism to monotheism, from priesthood and sacrifice to prophecy and ethical purity of heart, from hieratic and hierarchic religious structures to a godly egalitarianism, from ritual to morality, from myths to beliefs, from superstitions to rational beliefs. In short, in the nineteenth century and earlier, the religious program of the Protestant Reformation of evolution and progress in religion was simply assumed as given as a 'quasi certitude'. (Strenski 2015, 50)

The aim of the evolutionist scientists of religion was to individuate the various steps of such evolution, starting from the very beginning (e.g. animism in the case of Tylor) and to establish, especially in the case of Frazer, an evolutionary line from 'magic' to 'religion', and finally to 'science'. While it seems that Tylor and Frazer's intellectual agenda was meant to undermine religion and Christianity in particu-

lar (Strenski 2015, 45-8, 70-2), Robertson Smith, with his *Lectures on the Religion of Semites* (1889), sought to show that the 'primitive' aspects of the ancient Hebrew religion, recognizable within the Bible and in some practices still present among nomadic Arabic tribes, were able to evolve into "'higher', 'healthier', 'modern' form of spiritual religion'" (Strenski 2015, 60). We have already seen (§ 2.1.5) how such a discursive *milieu* also elicited the transformation of Buddhism from 'heathenism' to a 'world religion', insofar as it was understood as the intellectual, spiritual, 'protestant' offshoot from Brahmanism, and as a tradition that degenerated only after its expansion in Asia.

A similar line of thought can be found in Weber, albeit without the straightforward optimism in progress of the earlier cultural evolutionists. According to Gane (2002, 15-22), in Weber's sociological studies of religion one can find an account of how the rise and spread of instrumental rationalization and the accompanying disenchantment shaped Euro-American culture. This process started first with the displacement of prehistoric and naturalistic forms of magical religiosity through the systematization of a functional pantheon of symbolic gods, which then came to be substituted by a universal monotheism. This was characterized by a progressive rationality, in the sense of envisioning a fully transcendent God, immune first to any magical manipulation (as in the case of Judaism), then immune even to any kind of invocation or prayer, such as in the case of the God of Puritan Calvinism described in Weber's *Protestant Ethics and the Rise of Capitalism* (1905), whose will can only be fathomed by carrying out a rigorous ethical life.

Given (among other factors) this narrative of disenchantment,[21] it does not come as surprise that the epistemological emphasis on religion came to rely primarily on the notion of experience. As Sharf noted (2000, 268-71), the rhetoric of experience has a strong appeal, especially since it shields the idea of religion from the eclipse due to disenchantment. For the religionist it is a defense from rational/scientific critiques, while for the scholar, especially the phenomenologist, it provides the justification and primary object of enquiry, because experience becomes the *sui generis* phenomenon irreducible to any other perspective (e.g. sociological) and – most importantly – common to all the other religions. This last point also appeals to the religionist as s/he may argue that all religions stem from a common human experience, thus justifying her/his affiliation on a 'natural' base. At the same time, this discourse about a common layer of experience

21 Recently, some scholars have questioned the descriptive value of this narrative also for what concerns the modern Euro-American context. Josephson-Storm (2017) qualifies it more as a prescriptive 'myth', arguing that its various protagonists, usually considered as representatives of the progressive defeat of religion by rational science (from Giordano Bruno, to Newton, to Freud, even to Vienna neopositivists) actually entertained more nuanced relationships with magical and esoteric thought.

provides the ground on which to argue that one's own tradition is the one which expresses more truthfully this very universal experience. As Martin explains (2016, 527-31), this last strategy has characterized theologians and scholars alike, i.e. they employed a normative notion of experience. For example, William James (1842-1910) in his *Variety of Religious Experience* (1901) deprecates the outward/institutional dimension (implicitly endorsing his protestant cultural background), and subordinates it to the inward/personal dimension, the only deserving analysis, which is considered basically a matter of feeling, understandable only by undergoing the same kind of experience. Rudolph Otto argues for the superiority of Christianity, since it is the tradition where the experience of *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* is reached in the most complete way, through the mystery of God and the need for atonement (cf. above, § 2.1.1). We will see in § 3.3.4 the pivotal role of this rhetoric of inner experience in shaping both hetero- and self-understanding (and, to a certain extent, also the 'marketing') of East-Asian religious tradition in modern and contemporary times.

In what follows, I will provide some examples in which the disenchanted or inward 'model' of religiosity proves very partial or even distorting. I will develop my discussion around some interrelated keywords of this model, such as 'experience', 'psychologization', 'de-ritualization', 'de-somatization', 'transcendent', 'individual', 'rationalization', and so on.

3.2.3.1 Zen and the Myth of Pure Experience

Probably, the first East-Asian tradition that most people in Euro-American context would associate with such model of religiosity, especially for what concerns 'experience' and 'de-ritualization', is Chan/Zen Buddhism. This has recent cultural-historical reasons (cf. *infra*, § 3.3.4), but also relates to the very development of this tradition. From being a scattered movement still not incorporated in a distinct monastic tradition in the late Sui (581-618) and early Tang (618-907), it gradually transformed into an institutional one with an established lineage (and inner competing schools) during the Song. During this period it established the famous phrase attributed to the mythical patriarch Bodhidarma as the statement representative of its foundational approach:

> A separate transmission apart from the teachings, not relying on scriptures, pointing directly at the human mind, seeing the nature and attaining Buddhahood.[22]

22 Ch. *Jiaowai bieyun, bu li wenzi, zhi zhi renxin, jian xing cheng fo*; Jp. *kyōge betsuden, furyū monji, jikishi ninshin, kenshō jōbutsu*.

To this the idea of "transmission of the mind (of the historical Buddha) through the mind" was also added.[23] Such rhetorical devices not only served to give a peculiar identity to the Chan tradition, but also to differentiate it and put it in competition with the Tiendai tradition which clearly identified itself as the 'teachings lineage' (*jiaozong*) based mainly on scriptures (cf. Foulk 2007; Copp 2012; Chao 2012).

It is easy then to interpret Chan as championing a mode of simple, inward-oriented religiosity aimed at reenacting the same, ineffable experience of the Buddha. As a matter of fact, there have been instances of practices advocating an a-rational, un-mediated approach. The most known example is the influential master Dahui Zonggao (1089-1163) and his method of *kanhua* (Jp. *kanna*): 'viewing the (key) phrase' (of a *gong'an*, Jp. *kōan*, renowned riddle-like short narratives). However, it appears that such simplifications were more functional to obtain patronage of lay practitioners who did not have time or occasion to master both ritual and doctrinal intricacies (Chao 2012, 103-6). As a matter of fact, Sharf (2007) has showed that at least during the Song and Yuan periods (1279-1368), the *gong'an* practice not only required a thorough knowledge and understanding of the literary canon of Chan, such as the *lunyu* ('recorded sayings'), but also of *sūtra* and other treatises, as well as being versed in the relevant doctrinal debates at the time, for example those concerning the topic of buddha-nature within insentient beings (cf. Sharf 2007, 210-29). Even if Dahui's *kanhua* ultimately became the mainstream practice in late imperial China it also spread widely in Japan through the Rinzai school, as Hori (2000) observes:

> In the Rinzai monastic training curriculum, the many *kōan* are categorized and ranked; the monks progressively learn more and more sophisticated ways of seeing them; they learn how to write their own commentary to the *kōan* […]. If it were true that the *kōan* is nonrational, neither a *kōan* text tradition nor a monastic curriculum would be possible. (Hori 2000, 286)[24]

Furthermore, as the name implies ('public cases') the *gong'an* practice should be understood as a *social* practice in which the practitioner had to prove his enlightenment in front of the master. According to the monastic regulations (Ch. *qinggui*, Jp. *shingi*, 'rules of purity'), the master-disciple sessions, which often involved *gong'an*, were structured in such detailed protocol (prostration, incense offerings) that they can be interpreted as "a ritual re-enactment of the encounters

23 Ch. *Yi xin chuan xin*; Jp. *Ishin denshin*.

24 For a recent, multi-layered interpretation of *kōan* that eschew mystical or a-rational explanation, cf. Heine 2014, esp. 70-97.

between Chan masters and disciples that were contained in the flame histories" (Foulk 1993, 181).[25] A similar analysis can made for another central Chan/Zen practice, the ritual of 'ascending the (Dharma) hall' (Ch. *shangtang*, Jp. *jōdō*), in which the abbot of the monastery, on formal occasions, delivers a public sermon on Chan doctrine while seating on a highchair in the Dharma hall (Poceski 2008). This ritual was, on one side, an "elaborately choreographed event in which the monastic community and visiting patrons came face-to-face with a living buddha" (Sharf 2005, 265). On the other, it required the Chan/Zen abbot to master "a considerable body of canonical literature and internalize the complex rhetorical logic of Buddhist dialectic" (Sharf 2005, 266), which was required to perform the '*chan*nish' standard of contents and teaching style.

In other words, those facets of Chan/Zen that came to be considered as the pinnacle of anti-ritualism or non-conformity, such as the sudden enlightenment of the practitioners or the eccentric behavior of the masters, are actually results of careful study and ritualized performance. Indeed, one should not overlook all those ritual elements present in both the 'rules of purity' and the training curriculum that have been integral part of Chan/Zen monasteries up to contemporary times. In contemporary Japanese Zen, every-day life within a monastery is thoroughly formalized and ritualized. From a doctrinal point of view, such religious/ritual articulation of all activities throughout the day can be interpreted as an application of the idea of the 'every day mind is the way' (*heijōshin kore dō*) – which is found in a well-known *kōan* – in the sense of cultivating Zen practice in all aspect of life (Borup 2008, 162-3). On the other hand, this ritualization of monastic life helps also to give structure to the rigid protocols of life in the monastery, as well as to ease the embodiment, through rote learning on the part of the trainee, of the right conduct, language and ritual codes which are pivotal in many aspects of the life of the Zen specialist, especially when it comes to ritual services for the parishioners. We have already seen that the standard form of Buddhist funerals has been introduced by Chan monks. Indeed, nowadays they represent the staple activity (and financial sustenance) of the majority of temples and require a mastery of many ritual segments as well as proper ritual conduct towards parishioners (Borup 2008, 254-73).

Rituality applies even to *zazen* ('seated meditation'), which is undoubtedly the symbol of Zen, as it is constantly depicted in Zen discourses and rhetoric as a 'non-instrumental' practice which consists

25 'Flame histories' in this context refer to biographies of individual masters and their encounter with their successors, which are the subject of the genre known as 'records of the transmission of the flame (or lamp)' (Ch. *Chuandnglu*, Jp. *dentōroku*), in which many *gong'an*/*kōan* can be found.

of merely sitting (*shikatanza*) and is to be practices anytime, anywhere. In reality, there are designated times and places for this activity, which is foremost a bodily and a communal ritual practice. It is mostly enacted in collective session (*zazenkai*), where designated persons check and correct the right bodily posture in harsh but still formalized manner, by hitting the practitioners with a stick. The application and even the request of this 'corrective' actions are punctuated by bows and other hand signals. The communal and ritual dimension is also enacted in other ways: in most meditation halls a statue of the bodhisattva Monjū (Sk. Mañjuśrī) is enshrined, which must be revered when entering and leaving the hall, and it is considered as the most senior practitioner present, followed by the abbot. Accordingly, the individual places of each practitioner are arranged by seniority. Other ritual segments are often added, such as chanting and walking meditation around the statue of the bodhisattva. Also, the occasions in which *zazenkai* are held hints to social and performative functions of this ritual. When carried out during the *rōhatsu sesshin* ('meditation retreat of the eighth day of the twelfth lunar month', i.e. the period in which Śākyamuni reached awakening) it is best seen as a mythical reenactment of the founding event of Buddhism (cf. Dan Leighton 2008). Similarly, *zazenkai* are held in conjunction with events commemorating important masters or temple founders. In other occasion *zazenkai* are open to the laity, in which further elements such as Buddhist sermons, *sūtra* chanting and ritual labor (*samu*) are added in order to involve lay people in experiencing monastic life, but also to stress the uniqueness of the latter (Foulk 2008, 61-2; Borup 2008, 205-9).

Sūtra chanting amounts to much of the time in a Zen monastery and punctuates many moments of daily life. It also points to a certain 'enchanted' religious worldview at work. For example, the morning *sūtra* chanting protocols in Sōtō Monasteries explicitly states that the merit (Jp. *kudoku*, Sk. *puṇya*) acquired thanks to this activity are devolved to Śākyamuni, to the founders Dōgen (1200-1253) and Keizan (1268-1325), as well as the dharma-protecting *deva*s and the temple-protecting spirits, going further to expand the recipients of the merit to all sentient beings, including the most unfortunate ones such as the *gaki* ('hungry ghosts') (Foulk 2008, 62-5). Even meals are thoroughly formalized: "The monks must set out their bowls, receive the food, make a small offering of rice to hungry ghosts, eat, and finally clean and put away their bowls, all in a minutely prescribed manner" (Foulk 2008, 65), all punctuated by chants.

3.2.3.2 Ritual Manipulation of Body and World

Relying on an inward, de-ritualized and de-somatized model of religiosity seriously runs the risk of overlooking what is probably one of the most widespread religious phenomena in East- and South-Asia, namely 'tantrism'. Sticking to a polythetic and heuristic usage of this term,[26] scholars have sorted out working definitions or at least a series of persisting traits of Indic origins.[27] Among the traits relevant to our discussion, we may start from a metaphysical conception of the universe widely associated with tantrism. This metaphysical view is conceived as the emanation, from subtler to coarser forms, of a dynamic principle which can take the form of a supreme deity, of impersonal primordial energy or consciousness, or all three at the same time, which inform all that exists. No being is therefore ontologically separated from this principle, and human beings in particular are the microcosmic equivalent of this very essence-manifestation continuum. The key point here is that human beings have the potential to "ritually appropriate and channel" this principle, in "creative and emancipatory ways" (White 2000a, 9). Furthermore, it is the whole body-mind complex of the practitioner to be actively involved in this process. Indeed, according to many scholars (Faure 1998, 61; White 2000a, 10 ff.; Flood 2006, 11 ff.), the physical body is not an impediment but the privileged 'tool' for religious goals. As microcosmic manifestation of the supreme principle, the body is thought to host various kinds of 'energies' (such as *kuṇḍalinī* or 'she who is coiled', *prāṇa* or 'breath', *prajñā* or 'wisdom') and 'en-

26 The term 'tantrism' is surely a 'hot' one, and not only because of the commonly attributed connection with the sexual sphere, but due to its contested and discussed nature. On one side, it has been judged by early Indologist as the epitome of superstitious and bizarre magic. On the other side, past and present practitioners considered it the pinnacle of religious experience, comprehensible only to initiates. In the middle, scholars argue instead on the extent in which the Sanskrit emic term *tantra* (lit. 'loom' or the 'warp' of a loom, it refers to a certain type of ritual and doctrinal texts, often affirming to expound 'secret' and 'higher' teaching) can be conceived as indicating a well-defined and distinct tradition. In this case an artificial category 'tantrism' would be applicable, but there are also scholars arguing that it should be better considered as a sort of 'approach' or 'technique' which has been applied within Hindu, Buddhist and Jaina traditions (cf. White 2000a, 4-5; Flood 2006, 9). Moreover, the closely related category of 'esoteric Buddhism' further stirs up the debate with the question of whether or not it should be conceptually separated from 'tantrism' (Orzech, Payne, Sørensen 2011a). Such taxonomic difficulties are not surprising given the fact that religious phenomena usually associated with tantrism can be found, often in thriving forms, throughout all Asia since the first millennium CE (White 2000a, 7; Orzech, Payne, Sørensen 2011a, 3).

27 Among other peculiar traits we can cite the very common use of the *homa* fire ritual, of Vedic origins, in which offerings are made to a deity through ritual burning. Another constant is the widespread belief of the extraordinary power of language in its phonetic aspect, which is a common feature of Indian philosophies of language. This also explains why many formulae have been preserved in Sanskrit language throughout East-Asia (cf. Payne 2011).

ergetic knots' (*cackra*), whose configuration refers to hierarchies of various deities, often symbolized by Sanskrit letters, whose sounds are thought to reproduce the power of said deities. Activating these energies or godheads within the body brings to one of the most common traits of Asian 'tantrism', i.e. the identification of the practitioner with a deity. In Indic context this means to obtain *jīvanmukti*, 'liberation during life', also in the sense of corporeal immortality (Rigopoulos 2005, 262), while in Buddhist context, notably Japan, it enables the practitioner to "become a buddha with this present body" (*sokushin jōbutsu*; cf. Raveri 2014, 186-92, 205-9). The ritual devices through which to engender such process are utterances of specific formulae named *mantra* ('mental devices'), performance of hand or bodily gesture named *mudrā* ('seal') and *āsana* ('seated position'), and contemplation of diagrams symbolizing the metaphysical structure of the universe, called *maṇḍala* ('circle') and *yantra* ('instrument of restraint'; 'machine'). Especially in a Buddhist context, these three devices correspond to the three fundamental modes of action (through body, through speech and through mind) of the human being (Orzech, Sørensen 2011).

The body and bodily functions are also powerful metaphors. Very often the supreme principle is conceived as having a twofold nature, a feminine and a male one, whose separation triggered the manifestation and dispersion of energies in the phenomenal world. The goal for the practitioners is thus to re-unite these two principles, a process which is very often conceived, represented and also enacted in terms of sexual union. This interpretation further reinforces the fundamental non-dualism of the tantric worldview: the 'pure divine' can and indeed must be sought also in the most 'impure' acts of sexual intercourse, engaging the 'lowest' senses (touch, smell) and sentiments (carnal desire) (cf. White 2000a, 13-18). However, actual examples greatly vary in terms of performance and the meanings of the sexual tropes, in accord with historical and social circumstances. For example, in Kashmiri tantrism we find a ritual which, in the seventh century, involved the offering and consumption of sexual fluids to appease and control divine powers. By the tenth century, these kinds of ritual become gradually aestheticized and intellectualized, through the equation of sexual pleasure with the 'bliss' of liberation (Flood 2006, 162-70).

In a similar vein, we can find in medieval Japan rich reservoirs of sexual and reproductive imagery and concepts that underlines the pivotal role of the body in religious discourses. Initially, the scholarship on these themes concluded that it was mainly a matter of heterodox practices and teaching. The most 'infamous' example was a ritual involving the creation of a wish-fulfilling artifact made up by a skull, semen and menstrual blood. Such ritual was attributed, with clear derogatory aims, to a branch of the Shingon tradition of esoteric Buddhism, called Tachikawa-ryū (cf. Raveri 2014, 392-401).

However, it seems that these were later critiques of the fifteenth century at the expenses of a seemingly 'normal' branch which developed from the eleventh century onwards (Iyanaga 2011). Dolce (2015) argues instead that Buddhist embryological discourses usually attributed to 'heterodox' lineages were instead part of a mainstream soteriological topic. There is a common pattern in medieval Buddhist understanding of human gestation which employed many symbols and ideas from Buddhism, Chinese medicine and esoteric interpretations. The paternal and maternal fluids are represented with two 'A' Sanskrit letters, a powerful symbol which indicates both the idea of beginning (it is the first letter of Sanskrit alphabet), but also the Buddhist concept of vacuity, as in Sanskrit the 'a-' prefix correspond to negation. The fetus then develops in a two-pointed shape which is linked to the two *maṇḍala* of *mikkyō*. The next phase consists in a three-pointed shape (head and two shoulders) which is linked to the three fundamental modes of action (through body, speech and mind). The fourth phase represent the fetus as a *stūpa* constituted by five segments. Here doctrinal connections and symbology abound. First, the *stūpa* symbolizes the supreme Buddha Dainichi, then the five segments connect to the five elements (earth, wind, fire, water and ether), the five wisdoms and other correspondences (five sense organs, five colors, etc.) of *mikkyō* theory. Additionally, further connections are made with the Chinese anatomical model of the five organs which are again inserted in a whole framework of macro-microcosmic correlation. In other words, the fetus is imagined as being naturally harmonious both in its material and non-material aspects and thus epitomizing the idea – pivotal in East-Asian Buddhisms – of original enlightenment (*hongaku*). In fact, in the last phase the fetus is depicted as a completely formed human being seated in meditative position, signaling an awakened status. The birth is then interpreted as the bodhisattva vow to descend into a lower form in order to save the other sentient beings (Dolce 2015, 257-77).

This process is not employed as a mere theory only to understand conception and gestation but has also soteriological relevance to Buddhist practice and beyond. Archival research retrieved *maṇḍala*-like images depicting two figures having sexual intercourse accompanied by schemes and commentaries connecting this act with doctrinal points. While these images have been associated with heterodox teachings, other rituals pertaining to orthodox lineages instruct how to ritually represent the sexual intercourse and gestation through various uses of *mudrā* and *mantra* associated, for example, with the female and male bodies, or with the cries of pleasure during the intercourse (277-97).

We can see that corporeal and sexual tropes were well-ingrained in the religious and cultural *milieu* of medieval Japan (cf. Porath 2021), such as in the commentary *Ise monogatari zuinō* (Essence of

the *Tale of Ise*) written around the 1320s, or in the *Ise shōsho Nihongi yushiki honshō nin denki* (Transmitted Record of the Nihongi, of the Consciousness, Fundamental Nature, and Humanity, produced by Ise), colophon of 1537. In these works (cf. Klein 1997; Faure 2000), the contents of famous poetic and mythical-historical works such as the *Ise monogatari* (late ninth century) and *Nihonshoki* (720) were interpreted in tantric, non-dualistic term: the focus of both commentaries is on Izanami and Izanagi, the two creator deities of imperial mythology. These are interpreted as representing both the two *maṇḍala* of Shingon and the two principles of *yin-yang*. Their sexual union is said to bring about not only the creation of the cosmos, but also to represent enlightenment. For example, the *Ise shōsho Nihongi yushiki honshō nin denki* contains the above-mentioned embryological chart of five phases (Dolce 2015, 268), while the *Ise monogatari zuinō* more in general refers to a primordial, non-dual enlightened state of the embryo, as well as to an idea of merging of bodies and minds of the two lovers at the apex of their intercourse. Through the trope of sexual union, these commentaries conflate the theme of macrocosmic emanation with that of microcosmic soteriology. Accordingly, also the erotic desire expressed in the love poems of the *Ise monogatari* is reinterpreted under the terms of the *mikkyō* idea of *bonnō soku bodai* ('afflictions equate with awakening') as the driving force (instead of a hindrance) towards enlightenment (Klein 1997, 450 ff).

Another, somehow complementary role played by the body in religious discourses and practices in Japan can be observed in the phenomenon of *miira* or self-mummified ascetics, a practice recorded from the fourteenth till the onset of twentieth century (Raveri 1998). We are still within the framework of *mikkyō* and, in particular, of the idea of 'becoming buddha with this very body' (*sokushin jōbutsu*), a term often used to refer to the mummies themselves. In fact, legends depict Kūkai as the first monk to have successfully undertaken self-mummification (Abé 1999, 398). Additionally, it must be noted that also in China there are many hagiographic accounts of self-mummified monks or in general of ascetics (from both Buddhist and Daoist background) whose body remained uncorrupted after death (Sharf 1992, 7-9).

Still now, especially at Mount Yudono, there are temples which enshrine mummified corps of ascetics who underwent long and harsh austerities, such as eating only tree bark and forest nuts and chanting sutra under a cold waterfall. The key moment in this ordeal took place when, after a final fast of only salt and water, the ascetic drank lacquer and was buried alive, meditating in a stone chamber metres below ground, with a bamboo pole to supply air. After three years, disciples would unearth the ascetic whose body, if the practice had been successful, allegedly would not present sign of decay. The ascetic is then celebrated as the tangible example of the ideal of be-

coming 'buddha with this very body': he has overcome the suffering and decay of *saṃsāra* while maintaining his material presence within it. Accordingly, the *miira* is richly dressed and made an object of worship. There have been various scholarly interpretations of why such an extreme phenomenon exerted a noteworthy impact on Japan. A common theme seems to be the materiality of the *miira* which – literally – embodies a taxonomic contradiction between corruptibility of the flesh and the incorruptibility of a mummifying process which occurred spontaneously, i.e. it has not been performed by any external agents. This contradiction opens a variety of possible interpretations among devotees, especially in times of crisis (Raveri 2014, 408-10; Castiglioni 2019, 39-46).

However, it is difficult to distinguish between history and hagiography, and Castiglioni suggests that many *miira* displayed today are probably "ad hoc manipulations of the ascetics' corpses" (Castiglioni 2019, 25) by devotees instead of superhuman effort by solitary ascetic. However, this further reinforces the importance given, by the social contexts involved, to the bodily and tangible manifestation of religious practices, in both past (Castiglioni 2019) and present Japan (Dahl 2020). For example, Dahl (2020, 11-12) reports of a monk who vehemently affirmed the value of the *miira* enshrined in his temple and its difference from other similar phenomena such as Egyptian mummies or other *miira* precisely on the basis of its material characteristics, i.e. not having had organs extracted or its not having been treated with preserving substances.

3.2.3.3 The Body in Daoism

Speaking of the role of the body in religious theory and practice of East-Asia, one cannot avoid briefly touching on the tradition of Daoism which, as we have seen, exerted its influence on discourses and practices also in Japan, and not necessarily in connection with institutional Daoist lineages.

In very general terms, the religious aspirations of this multifaceted tradition can be summarized as pointing to an 'attunement with the Dao' in various ways (individually, collectively, cosmologically) and through various methods (meditation, rituals, scriptural study, etc.) (cf. Komjathy 2013, 12-13). However, since the body is understood as consisting of *qi* or cosmic vital energy, which is the material aspect of Dao, it follows that longevity, and even more immortality, are conceived as a proof of such superhuman attunement (cf. Penny 2000). Therefore, physicality and aliveness can be seen as fundamental concerns throughout the entire history of Daoism and beyond (Komjathy 2013, 190). Chinese life-prolonging (*yangsheng*) techniques, including breathing exercises, sexual hygiene, thera-

peutic gymnastic, massages, dietetics and drugs ingestion have a long history as pan-Chinese medical tradition since the fifth century BCE. While they developed in a distinct medical tradition, since the first formations of organized Daoism in the second century CE, these practices have always been integrated, discussed and refined in almost every Daoist school, becoming "a key foundation of Daoist practice, being located between 'Heil and Heilung', salvation and physical wholeness" (Engelhart 2000, 75).

On a theoretical level, also in Daoism we can find a focus on the body as a trope for macro-microcosmos correlations, albeit in different style. The earliest and most prominent texts are the *Huangting jing* (Scripture of the Yellow Court) and *Laozi zhongjing* (Central scripture of Lao), both dating to around the second and the third century CE. In both texts the human body is seen as animated by inner gods which are depicted, in a bureaucratic metaphor, as 'officers' (*guan*) overseeing the functioning of the viscera. These texts instruct the practitioner to visualize these deities, making petitions and feeding them by moving the various inner 'energies' (*qi*) or 'essences' (*jing*) of the body. This was meant to attain not only health and longevity, but to expel calamities, communicate with the external gods (of an equally bureaucratic pantheon), and ultimately to attune with the Dao (cf. Pregadio 2006; 2008b, 75-85).

3.2.3.4 This-Worldly Enchantments in Buddhism

In the examples sketched above we have seen a strongly somatic and ritualized religiosity, offered as a way of contrast with the inner and disenchanted protestant stereotype. I have, however, mostly focused on 'lofty' practices and discourses, revolving around issues of metaphysics and soteriology, thus implicitly endorsing another tenet of the protestant view on religion, i.e. the centrality of the theme of 'transcendence' (cf. Smith 2017) or on what Tillich would term as "ultimate concerns" (cf. above, § 2.1.2, fn. 5; Lorusso 2017, 136 ff.). Instead, reconnecting with our discussion of tantrism, White warns us about this:

> The transcendent/pragmatic religion typology is just that: an ideal construct employed to classify types of Tantric practice. In fact, the world of Tantric practice is a continuum that draws on both the transcendent and the pragmatic approaches. (White 2000, 30)

Indeed, it has been argued that one of the reasons behind the spread of esoteric Buddhism (Davidson 2002, 113-68; 2011) and *tantra* in general is the affinity of this tradition with concepts and imaginary of warfare and political power. In fact, esoteric Buddhism developed

during a period of political turmoil in medieval India, after the fall of Gupta-Vākāṭaka hegemony in the sixth century, characterized by increasing feudalization of institutions, Buddhist monasteries included. These latter responded to this situation through a renewal of their doctrinal and ritual approaches which increasingly absorbed "concepts of power relations, ritual authentication, aesthetics, gift-giving, clan associations, and sense of dominion" from the feudal world (Davidson 2002, 115). Paired with other extra-Buddhist influences such as rites concerned with this worldly needs, like the *homa* fire rituals, it is easy to see how one of the appeals of esoteric Buddhism lays in its being a kind of instrumental *techne*, especially in service to rulers. Indeed, tantric promises of the manipulation of cosmic energies through ritual did appeal to lords, king and emperors. Accordingly, they would ascent, through specific initiation,[28] to the status of a 'sorcerer sovereign' (Sk. *vidyādhararajā*) endowed with superhuman powers (Sk. *siddhi*, lit. 'perfection').

The device of the *maṇḍala*, with its function of visually organizing the cosmos, its deities and energies in geometrical and hierarchical patterns, seems to be particularly susceptible of being endowed with political meanings. Winfield (2011) argues that the geometric pattern of the two *maṇḍala* of Shingon show influences of Chinese and imperial topography. The *maṇḍala* of the womb can be read, on one hand, as closely imitating the plans of early Chinese palaces. On the other, it seems to recall a section of the important *Book of Rites* which posits the height of culture at the center of the metropolis, locus of imperial power, and depicts a gradual descent into savagery when moving towards the periphery. The same pattern appears in the *maṇḍala* of the womb, with Dainichi at its center and the outermost sides filled with lesser and fierce-looking deities. The *maṇḍala* of the diamond, instead, shows strong resemblances with both ideal and real city plans. The division in nine squares of the *maṇḍala* recalls the nine square grid plan of the prototypical imperial city, allegedly built with the supervision of the mythical Duke of Zhou (eleventh century BCE). Here we have both a convergence and a discrepancy. Concerning the former, in the imperial city plan and in the commentaries of the *maṇḍala*, the central square is indicated as the most important one. Concerning the latter, we can clearly see that in the top centre square of the *maṇḍala* there is a prominent big image of Dainichi. Interestingly enough, however, also the real city plans of Chinese and Japanese capitals of Chang'an, Heijō, Nagaoka and Heian feature a nine wards division with the imperial palace located precisely at the top centre. Through these observations Winfield also makes sense of

28 In fact, the specific term for tantric initiation, *abhiṣeka* ('anointing'), "originally used to refer to the anointment of an Indian king or the investiture of a crown prince" (Lopez, Boswell 2014, s.v. "*abhiṣeka*").

Kūkai's statement that both paintings were "as useful to the nation as walls are to a city" (Windfield 2011, 721), especially when considering that, differently from Chinese esoteric Buddhism, he aimed to adopt both *maṇḍala*, which recalls another bilateral trope, that of the division of the Japanese imperial government in the Ministry of the left and the Ministry of the right.

Outside political interest, tantric *techne* was applied to various pragmatic ends. For example, in the Japanese Shugendō tradition of mountain ascetics, which is strongly linked to esoteric Buddhism, the identification with Fudō Miyōō (cf. above, § 3.2.2.3) enables the ascetic practitioners to gain superhuman powers (*genjustu*), and therefore to meet the requests of the patronizing local communities in terms of 'worldly benefits' (Jp. *genze riyaku*), such as adverting misfortune, exorcism, soliciting good fortune, divination, and so on (cf. Miyake 1989; cf. *infra*).

As we will see in § 3.3, such 'magical-superstitious' traits of Hinduism and Buddhism were seen by the early Indologists as later and spurious accretions to the originally 'pure' doctrines of the *Veda*, or of the *Sutta* and related Pāli texts attributed to the historical Buddha and his first community. However, as De Caroli (2004) has shown, this reading of early Buddhism as inherently disenchanted, 'psychological' and 'rational', clearly overlooked textual and archeological evidence.[29] According to these latter, we know that the Buddhist *saṃgha*, from its earliest developments, acknowledged and adopted various beliefs and practices involving different sorts of spirit-deities or *genii loci*, notably those termed *yakkah* (Sk. *yakṣa*). In the texts, Buddha and monks do not forbid the making of offerings to such beings but simply prohibited the use of meat and alcohol as this would be against precepts of not harming living creatures and avoiding intoxicants. In a certain sense, this can also be read as a Buddhist appropriation of pre-existing rituals. These, in fact, as seventh century Chinese pilgrim monks attested, were actually performed by monks in India. These spirits were believed, among other things, to haunt monks who break their vows, or at least to report their deeds to the Buddha. This ambiguous malevolent-benevolent nature of *yakkah* is reflected in the way monks generally dealt with these beings. They were treated as unenlightened and potentially dangerous beings who, after conversion to Buddhism, would become tutelary spirits of the community or monastery. Such power held by monks, furthermore, helps greatly in gaining support from local lay communities. Japan, as we have seen above (§§ 3.2.1.1 and 3.2.2.3), is an exemplary case in which Buddhism strongly interacted with the local *kami* worship

29 Such as statues and notably the widely disseminated narratives of Buddha's previous lives known as *jātaka*.

endowing these traditions with further ideas and practices that eventually crystallized into a self-conscious religious system.

Some readers may object that the above discussed examples refere mostly to pre-modern cases. Indeed, nowadays we may find plenty of examples of East-Asian religious phenomena featuring 'rationalized', 'protestantized' discourses or practices, and there are historical-cultural explanations for this (cf. *infra*, § 3.3). However, more often than not, these discourses and practices involve actors coming from religious or intellectual elites, possibly speaking with an apologetic aim, and focusing mostly on philosophical, metaphysical and soteriological aspects. But once we turn to lived, everyday religiosity, the inner and disenchanted model shows again its limit.

It is a commonly held conviction that Theravāda Buddhism of South-East-Asia has remained most faithful to the original, supposedly 'pure' early Buddhism[30] (which we have just seen it was not). As a matter of fact, the religious life of *theravādin*s, especially lay practitioners, revolves around dimensions and topics certainly not limited to the soteriological goal of *nibbāna* or the practice of meditation. First of all, the concepts of *kamma* and meritorious actions (*kousala*) do not exclusively revolve around the moral conduct (*sīla*) of the individual. Instead, karmic merit can be seen as a sort of 'spiritual currency' (Gombrich 2005, 126-7) which, furthermore, goes beyond the fate of the individual. Walters (2003) has in fact labeled "sociokarma" all those many religious phenomena in Theravāda countries in which *kamma*-related discourses and practices embrace the dimension of the family, the community or even the national group. For example, the 2004 tsunami in Asia has been interpreted by Sri Lankan Buddhists as the result of the corruption of the government and the continuing warfare between the government and the Tamil Tigers (Crosby 2008, 64). This 'spiritual currency' can be earned and transferred in various way: by making donation to the *saṃgha*, by sponsoring the recitation or the copying of religious texts, by listening to sermons or to the recitations of *pāli* texts (mostly incomprehensible to the laity and even to some monks), by observing filial piety, and so on. The most common modality, however, remains the worship and

30 As we will see in the next chapter, the forms of Buddhism taken in consideration in English RE usually belong to the Theravāda cultural sphere. This equation of Theravāda Buddhism with early Buddhism is due to various factors: the preservation of a Canon in the *pāli* language, the historical self-consciousness of Sinhalese *saṃgha* itself as being directly linked to the third Buddhist Council sponsored by the convert Emperor Aśoka (304-232 BCE), and some other aspects such as the treatment of the figure of the historical Buddha in rather simpler terms, compared to the much complex pantheon of Buddhas of Mahāyāna. However, the present situation is the result of various historical processes and notably those changes engendered by the encounters with westerners. Even the adoption of the term *thera-vāda* as representative of the Buddhism in Sri Lanka and of South-East-Asia is a modern development (Crosby 2013, 1-4).

the offerings to the Buddha, particularly in occasion of annual holy days, of pilgrimage to important sites, and of the annual processions of relics. Important and common recipients for the transfer of merit are the deceased, to ease their rebirth and avoid their coming back as ghosts (cf. Crosby 2013, 118-22). Apart from *kamma*-related practices, "at the heart of many Theravāda rituals is the chanting of *paritta*" (Crosby 2013, 125). These latter are texts mainly extracted from the Pāli Canon and are regarded as having great powers such as, for example, being able to convert any kinds of malevolent spirits in any kind of place or situation because they are in *pāli*, which is considered a *lingua franca*. Another reason is because *paritta* are Buddha's words and thus are the most efficacious (in karmic sense) examples of 'right speech'. They are recited by monks and lay people alike in consecration ceremonies, funerals, death anniversaries, and so on, in order to advert misfortune or ensuring prosperity. Therefore, they may be also used in occasions such as at the opening of a new business or during weddings (Crosby 2013, 125-8). We may be tempted to consider these latter 'non-Buddhist' practices, but, as we have often observed in this chapter, to think of religious traditions as separated boxes is an epistemological bias which hinders a more comprehensive understanding.

3.2.3.5 Worldly Benefits in Contemporary Japan

In our discussion on the limits of an idea of religiosity based on individual inner-world, disenchanted and focused on transcendent goals, an exemplary case is provided by contemporary Japan. As a matter of fact, different scholars have argued that it is possible to sort out certain common patterns, across the bewildering number of Japanese religious phenomena and their mutual entanglements, so that we may speak of a "common religion" (Reader, Tanabe 1998) or "primal religion" (Pye 1996) of Japan. The point here is that the characteristic trait of these patterns is to be centered on the dimension of practice.[31] Furthermore, such practice-oriented religiosity has a strong focus on the material, communal and pragmatic aspects of everyday life.

According to Pye (2009), the patterns of this Japanese "primal religion" can be set out in four main fields of practice, each one linked to an emic key word. The first field is space, linked to the practice of *o-mairi*, 'humbly visit' to a special place, irrespectively of it being

31 It has been suggested that focusing on practice as the privileged object of enquiry (instead for example on doctrinal texts) could be the most fruitful approach to understanding Japanese religiosity, as it would allow us to explore religion as a process of interaction between various ritual, narrative, institutional, political, textual and discursive components (Dolce 2015b, 48 ff.).

a Buddhist temple, a Shintō shrine, a mausoleum or even a particular natural spot whose special nature is duly signaled. The second field is time, linked to the key word of *nenjūgyōji*, the 'annual events'. Every kind of religious organization, from local communities to nation-wide shrines or temples networks, has its own version of them. "Yet the people know that any one of such lists is simply a version of something which is generic, and indeed shared by all" (Pye 2009, 49), with the New Year as the constant common element. The third field of practice are socially integrative events, and the key word is *matsuri*, a religious festival consisting of various public events of a ritual and merrymaking nature. This is usually considered the foremost expression of Shintō religiosity, in which local *kami* are believed to take part, in order to renew the mutual interdependence between them and the participating community. However, it is often endowed with further layers of meanings, from valorization of local culture (even to attract tourists) to national identity building, highlighting e.g. an imaginary of the mythical rural roots of Japan or valorizing food-symbols such as rice and fish (cf. Bulian 2018, 27-9). *Matsuri* is therefore not an exclusive term to Shintō but pertains also to Buddhist *nenjūgyōji*, with the *hana matsuri* celebrating the birth of Buddha or the *obon matsuri* celebrating the ancestors. Notwithstanding the relaxed atmosphere, "some kind of participation is more or less obligatory" (Pye 2009, 50). The last field of practice is related to the life of the individual within society, whose critical or pivotal moments – not only most 'conspicuous' ones, such as birth, marriage, death, but also weaning, the first social appearance, or coming to adolescence or old age – are accompanied by related ritual measures. In addition, these ritually controlled stages do not end with the physical death of the individual, but continue after the funeral to ensure that the recently deceased reaches the status of ancestor without any trouble (Raveri 2006, 93-102; Bulian 2018, 119-32, 144-63). In fact, Pye (2009, 50) marks this field with the key word of *senzo kuyō* ('care of ancestors'). The pivotal point is that in all these four fields the focus is on what Pye calls "transactional rites" (Pye 2009, 48, 50-1), whose basic structure is an exchange between practitioners and a counterpart (a temple, a god, an ancestor) to receive benefits in this life. In fact, the key word here is *genze riyaku* ('wordly benefits') and, according to Reader and Tanabe (1998, 14-32), this concept and the pursuit of such benefits is what forms the bedrock of common Japanese religiosity. *Genze riyaku* relates to basically any potentially critical aspect of everyday life[32] and can be divided fundamentally into *kaiun* ('opening good luck') and *yakuyuk*e ('preven-

32 Traffic safety, recovery from illness, making a good marriage, safe childbirth, business prosperity, successful career, prevention of theft, success in study, and many others (cf. Reader, Tanabe 1998, 45-9).

tion of danger'). In order to obtain them, there can be various practices, often involving material artefacts: buying talisman or amulets (*ofuda* or *omamori*), writing petitions on votive tables (*ema*), drawing and tying divination slips (*omijuki*) onto a tree branch, or praying to a deity, usually enshrined in sites specialized in specific benefits. These practices may be performed by individuals alone, or with the involvement (and payment) of ritual specialists. These latter are hired especially on behalf of larger groups such as family or companies, and their services include, among other things, conducting *kitō* rituals ('prayer') or performing *goma* rituals, which nonetheless conclude with the petitioners usually receiving a material artefact endowed with the beneficial properties asked for.

Although being a concept crosscutting all religious traditions in Japan, the term *genze riyakyu* has Buddhist origin,[33] and figures notably in prominent *sūtra* such as the *Lotus Sūtra of Wonderful Law* (Sk. *Saddharmapuṇḍarīkasūtra*, Jp. *Myōhōrengekyō*), the *Garland Sūtra* (Sk. *Avataṃsakasūtra*, Jp. *Kegonkyō*), the *Sūtra of the Golden Light* (Sk. *Suvarṇaprabhāsottamasūtra*, Jp. *Konkōkyō*), and the Chinese apocryphal *Sūtra of the Benevolent King* (Ch. *Renwangjin*, Jp. *Ninnōkyō*). Modern Japanese insider interpreters usually try to explain (or explain away) the contradiction between world-affirming and world-denying aspects in Buddhist doctrine and practice by resolving to the *Lotus Sūtra*'s idea of *zenkō hōben* (Sk. *upāyakauśalya*), 'skillful mean'. That is, a 'trick' to draw practitioners towards otherworldly salvation through initial material benefits. However, Reader and Tanabe argue that even the earliest Buddhist sources – not differently from what we have also seen above – "affirm the power of Buddhism to produce practical benefits" (Reader, Tanabe 1998, 100, cf. 71-102). On the other hand, it would be misleading to address such religiosity as 'frivolous'. On the contrary, the logic of practical pursuit implies strong personal commitment in terms of a logic of exchange between petitioner and deity (cf. Reader, Tanabe 1998, 107-36, 192-205; Bulian 2019, 103-5). For example, to benefit from an *o-harae* ritual for traffic safety at Yahiko Shrine (Niigata prefecture) implies automatically a promise from the beneficiary to the *kami* to "drive while strong in body and mind, correctly and without mistake, for the benefit of the world and its people" (cit. in Pye 2008, 26). To cite another example, talismans for money-making sold at the Sōtō Zen temple of Saijōji are accompanied by a card which includes, together with the ways for accumulating wealth, the reminder to "maintain the mind that venerates the gods and buddhas", to "make your work your hobby", or to "never put your faith solely in money". Indeed, the enchanted ethos which permeates

33 As a matter of fact, we read in the *Nihonshoki* (Cronicle of Japan) that when Buddhism was officially introduced to Japan through Korean embassies in the sixth century, it was its potential for pragmatic benefits that was highlighted (Deal, Ruppert 2015, 13).

genze riyaku practices paradoxically aligns with motivations and basic values expressed in secular societies: happiness, assurances about the future, success and solace in exchange for hard work, duty and diligence (Reader, Tanabe 1998, 256-8). Since the quest for practical benefits is also considered to be conductive to the strengthening of *shinkō*, i.e. (affective) faith in a deity's power, to psychological benefit such as *anshin* ('peace of mind') and to a general idea of *kyūsai* ('salvation') (Reader, Tanabe 1998, 17-20), such religiosity, far for being 'shallow', may furthermore be considered to be pivotal when it comes to making "life shaping decisions" (Pye 2008, *passim*).

3.2.3.6 Conclusion

In this section I offered a rather arbitrary account of various 'enchanted' modes of Japanese and Asian religiosity in order to show how they would not fit the well-ingrained idea of a prototypical religion which emphasizes the individual, inner, psychological, de-somatized, experience-based, other-worldly religiosity, at the expenses of social, exterior, material, somatic, ritual-based, this-worldly religiosity. However, the increase of preference, in Euro-American contexts, for the psychological, disenchanted and de-mythologized aspects of religiosity, coupled with the relegation of religion to the private – and by definition non-institutionalized – sphere, paradoxically brought about a concept which is often considered to be in contrastive terms with religion: 'spirituality'.

3.2.4 Questioning the Distinction Between 'Religion' and 'Spirituality'

Empirical findings, particularly in Anglo-Saxon contexts, show a raising popularity of the term 'spirituality' and a growing trend of identifying oneself as 'spiritual' (Streib, Klein 2016, 73). In the US this word is used in increasingly contrastive terms to religion, as more than a quarter of Americans describe themselves as spiritual but not religious (Lipka, Gecewicz 2017). As we will see in ch. 4, 'spirituality' is a key term also in English RE and beyond, inscribed in the overall school mission of providing "spiritual, moral, social and cultural development" (Ofsted 2004b, 6), and described as

> the development of the non-material element of a human being which animates and sustains us and, depending on our point of view, either ends or continues in some form when we die. It is about the development of a sense of identity, self-worth, personal insight, meaning and purpose. (12)

Therefore, it is worth discussing it more in detail.

Just like the term 'religion' (cf. above, § 2.1.5), 'spirituality' also has its own genealogical development, that can be sketched in this way:[34] the term *spiritus* is the Latin translation of Hebrew *ruach* and Greek *pneuma*, which in the Bible indicate both the divine element of God and the vital breath donated to mankind. In Paul's epistles, *pneuma* concerns what is guided by the God's spirit, or *pneuma Theou*, and thus morally good, whereas *sarx* or 'flesh' is what hinders this divine influence. Hellenistic influences in early Christianity also introduced the ontological distinction between spirituality and materiality (Gr. *hyle*, Lt. *materialitas*). In medieval times, the semantic field expanded to indicate matters related to ecclesiastical jurisdiction and proper Christian conduct. In early modern times, starting with the *Exercitia spiritualia* (1615) of the Jesuit Ignazio of Loyola (1491-1556), 'spirituality' began to indicate a retired, contemplative religious activity, opposed to corporeal activity. Due to the weight given by Protestantism to interior faith as the individual's unmediated relationship to God, and through the influence of authors such as Schleiermacher and his emphasis on religious feeling, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century the term 'spirituality' became more widespread, and its meaning

> was expanded beyond Christian theological and ecclesiastical discourse, to refer to the individualistic and subjective core of universal religion. (Huss 2014, 49)

In summary, at least till the early twentieth century, spirituality is what is concerned with metaphysical, moral, subjective, private, experiential matters. As such, it is considered the reverse of the secular realm (physical, material, public, social, economic). In other words, its development is still consistent with the genealogies of religion and secularity we explored above (§§ 2.1.5 and 2.1.8).

However, according to Heelas (2008, 25-46), Romanticism greatly influenced the way in which spirituality came to be understood in contemporary times. He identifies the following relevant romantic themes: first, an underlying neoplatonic paradigm of a primordial 'Absolute Unity' which disintegrated into multiplicity. This caused suffering and fragmentation, concretized in political divisions, industrial revolution, Enlightenment's emphasis on individuality, and so on. However, this fall is an opportunity to achieve a higher state by transfiguring oneself and reaching an 'Absolute'. This latter is often conceptualized, differently from a distant God, as a vital force residing in an immanent frame, often in the form of divinized 'Nature',

34 Cf. Principe 1983; Carrette, King 2005, 30-47; Huss 2014, 48-9.

which is an active principle behind the formation of one's own very self. In fact, one of the best paths to reach such an 'Absolute' is the individual, subjective, artistic expression, in which the romantic 'Genius' should appear (the other being philosophy). This principle that flows in various lives remain the same, so that the others are 'manifestation' of a same whole. At the same time, however, each manifestation is unique because it flows from specific life experiences. One striking example is Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions*:

> I am unlike any one I have ever met; I will even venture to say that I am like no one in the whole world. I may be no better, but at least I am different. (1954, 17, cit. in Heelas 2008, 38)

Romantic themes influenced the spheres of health, agriculture and education. Macrobiotics and holistic practice aimed at well-being began to develop. In education, the idea of the positiveness of letting the inherent natural attitudes of children flow free developed. This led to the child-centered or self-centered educative philosophy later expounded by Steiner (1861-1925) and Montessori (1870-1952). In summary, around the 1910s, the general motif of a contrastive duality between, on one side, the sacrality attributed to the depths of inner life, and on the other side, the 'profane' external world filled with malfunctioning social, cultural and old-traditions-bounded arrangements was well attested (Heelas 2008, 45).

In the second half of twentieth century, the above-mentioned romantic ideas greatly contributed to a discourse shift in the field of spirituality, which started to include themes such as absolute individuality, inner awareness, personal integration, non-rational meditative practices, sense of connection to a whole, sacralization of the self through various kind of experiences, and so on. This field of discourses and practices is generally referred to with the umbrella term of New Age (cf. Chryssides 2007; Sutcliffe, Gilhus 2014, 1-6), whose participants often defined themselves as 'spirituals' (Huss 2014, 49-50). The counter-cultural movements of the 1960s reinforced the ideas of freedom and of rejection of any kind of institutions, seen as forces hindering the individual quest for self-realization. This latter, furthermore, was often understood in terms of an expansion of consciousness to be obtained with various experiential practices such the use of hallucinogens and certain kinds of music. From the 1970s onwards the duality of subjective experience *versus* the constrains of society faded, and the quest for a 'higher self' began to be more 'psychologized' and more 'mainstream-affirming'. For example, the obstacles to spiritual growth are not found anymore in society, but within one own's mind. 'Mainstream-affirming' tendencies intensified in the 1980s and early 1990s, when wealth accumulation and career development even came to be seen as manifestations of a thriv-

ing inner spirituality (Heelas 2008, 51-2). Heelas argues that present day spirituality can be briefly described as "well-being spirituality", in the sense that the lingering romantic theme of regaining unity can be seen in the quest for 'balance' or 'harmony' under various aspects: harmony of body and mind, harmony among emotions, harmony in interpersonal relationship, harmony between humans and the natural environment, all of which can be subsumed in a general idea of harmony between self and a holistic whole (52-3, 60-78).

Streib and Klein (2016) summarize the semantic stratifications of the term 'spirituality' in the following way. There is a general idea of connectedness and harmony with a living 'Cosmos/Nature'. Individuals endeavor a personal quest for meaning, for inner peace and higher self, which reflects the societal process of individualization. There are beliefs in higher powers and beings, but with a general refusal of characterizing them in detail as traditional religions do. This is linked with the idea that 'Truth', 'Life's Meaning' or 'Wisdom' are beyond rational understanding. This also adds an esoteric component, in the sense that an extra-ordinary insight is deemed necessary to be aware of a spiritual dimension behind materiality (in the sense of something hidden, invisible, subtle). However, there is a difference between this and the most common forms of esotericism, in which the authentication of having reached the 'Truth' is bestowed by external authority such as a master. By contrast, in contemporary spirituality the authority sanctioning the righteousness of the spiritual path is often the subjective experience of the practitioner itself. This is linked to a general strong opposition to mainstream religions, seen negatively as fossilized traditions, full of dogmatic rules, static and based on fixed, objective sets of beliefs, incompatible with a dynamic, subjective, experiential-based spirituality. This is consistent with the understanding of spirituality as an individual praxis. Being experiential and subjectively based, spirituality is conceived as 'doing' and 'living' certain experiences, rather than mere adhering to a system of beliefs.

Many scholars (cf. the review of the debate in Heelas 2008, 81-96) argue that discourses and practices of spirituality can be highly consistent, even functional, to the dominant forms of culture informed by consumerism and neoliberalist ideology. The centrality of the self and its spiritual realization resonates with the individualistic and competitive *milieu* of contemporary capitalism (Altglas 2014, 271-9; Huss 2014, 53-5). Privatization and personalization of one's spiritual path automatically involve the birth of a market that supplies the demands of diversified objects (e.g. books) and services (e.g. yoga lessons) necessary to carry out one's own spiritual praxis. Carrette and King (2005, 123-68) contend that, given the extreme ambivalence in the meanings of spirituality, this concept has been easily taken over by corporate ethics and management techniques, resulting in discourses that 'spiritualize' the corporate ideology of profit (i.e. giving

it additional, emotional layers of meaning), or in the invention of religion-inspired management practices, such as meditation for stress relief or the use of the *Yijing* for decision making.

Given its recent discursive construction and its strong connections with modern and contemporary Euro-American culture, Huss (2014, 52) argues against the use of 'spirituality' as an etic term, where instead it should be understood as an emic notion, developed in well-defined historical, cultural and geographical circumstances. Similarly, Streib and Klein do not see any value in considering spirituality as an analytical term distinct from religion, and propose instead to see it as follows:

> 'Privatized experience-oriented religion', which gravitates toward a segment in the religious field where access to the ultimate is not mediated by tradition, institution, or clergy, but characterized by immediacy for the individual, and where the symbolization of transcendence is not necessarily vertical (heaven; God or gods), but may include horizontal transcendence. (Streib, Klein 2016, 79)

How is this discussion on spirituality relevant to our treatment of Japanese and other Asian religions in education? My point is that East-Asian religions have come to be represented as the finest expression of a free spirituality, resonant with the 'spiritual needs' of contemporary (Euro-American) world, but exotic enough to became fashionable and commodifiable. In order to understand how this happened and what its significance is when discussing Japanese and other Asian religions and education, we need to address the impact of modernity and coloniality on East-Asian religious traditions, an impact that engendered a series of pivotal and stratified processes of Orientalism, Self-Orientalism and Occidentalism.

3.3 Second Challenge: The Historical Legacy of Modernity and Colonialism: Orientalism, Self-Orientalism and Occidentalism

We have seen above (§§ 2.1.5 and 2.1.8) how, in the construction of the Euro-American concept of 'religion' as a distinct and universal phenomenon, a pivotal role was played by the information about religious practices and doctrines coming from extra-European regions and their interpretation. This input stimulated a series of self-reflections on the identity of Christianity in front of various instances of diversity: diversity within Christianity, diversity of the Jews, of the Mohammedans, and of the 'heathens'. Thus, it gradually developed a universal *genus* of religion, a "taxonomic system of equivalence" (Mandair 2016, 186) modeled after Protestant Christianity.

In this way the various discourses and practices around the concept of 'religion' (and its opposite twin, 'secularity') actively contributed to the construction of orientalist imaginaries of non-Euro-American regions. They provided in fact a model that, being based on Christianity, but employed towards other 'religions', has been instrumental in establishing the superiority of Euro-American civilizations. In other words, we have seen how the study of religion\s has been instrumental also in the orientalistic enterprise, because it posited the 'others' in an evolutive line between 'modern' and 'primitive', empathizing their ab-normal aspects, generalizing such ab-normal aspects as their constitutive norms, and denying any historical evolution of these aspects. This, argued Said (1978), justified colonial and imperial exploitation.

However, Said's thesis has been subject to various reflections and developments. Among them, there is the idea that the phenomenon of Orientalism was not uni-directional in the sense of being engendered by Euro-American agency alone. Instead, in order to become effectively hegemonic, Orientalist discourse needs two intertwined processes.

The first one is Occidentalism. The notion of Occidentalism can be employed in two ways. The first basically refers to the "dehumanizing picture of the West painted by its enemies" (Buruma, Margalit 2004, 3). The second one is upheld by scholars such as Coronil (1996), and refers instead to Occidentalism not as the 'reverse' of Said's Orientalism, but "its condition of possibility, its dark side" (Coronil 1996, 56), in the sense that the possibility of discourses concerning an homogeneous and completely opposite 'East' (i.e. Orientalism) has to be grounded by discourses *from and about the West*, starting from the very idea that there exists a 'West' which is a 'bounded unit'. That is, a view of a 'West' whose relational histories with external elements as well as inner variability have been silenced (cf. Coronil 1996, 57 ff.).

In this sense, the orientalist discourses are no more a simple justification for exploitation. Euro-American regions possess, in their availability of colonized or even simply influenced cultures, a sort of reverse-mirror in which projecting all

> what is or should be other to the 'West', including the unconscious removal or nostalgic desire for native Euro-American traditions and its own non-modern past. (Miyake 2015, 98)

In other words, Orientalism, as the 'offshoot' of Occidentalism, works through erasing inner differences and inflating external differences in order to confirm

> a Self-centered standpoint from which difference is turned into Otherness either through Self-confirming objectification or Self-questioning exoticization. (Coronil 1996, 73)

This works in tandem with self-Orientalism, i.e. the processes in which all the various orientalist discourses that establish 'East' as the 'Other' came to be *actively*, not *passively*, accepted, interiorized and even tactically implemented and re-elaborated by the people who were the object of these discourses. These people constructed thus their new subjectivities as the 'Others' in contrast, or at least in reference to the 'West'. In this way it engendered, and still is engendering,

> a sort of mirror game in which specular identity and alterity representation enforce one another, reproducing the 'West' as the ultimate and universal point of reference. (Miyake 2015, 101).

It must be noted, however, that all these phenomena are "embedded in a historical process whereby negotiation and disjunctions are always at stake" (102) and the universal, and often implicit or unmarked notion of the 'West', actually varies. It does so in accord with the way in which it depicts its 'Other': as something to be

> (re)discovered and explained (academic Orientalism), to be educated and reformed (paternalistic Orientalism), to be despised and hated (racist Orientalism), to be fantasized and desired (exoticistic Orientalism). (98)

With these theoretical reflections as our background, we proceed now to an historical review of the dynamics and the outcomes of the historical-cultural encounters, debate and negotiations, between modern Euro-American and Asian socio-cultural realities, on the issue of what Asian religious traditions are, or should be. We must start from the effects of the introduction of the modern concept of religion. The interiorization of this concept has been the first instance of self-Orientalism, as it entailed the acceptance, by Asian people, of their status of an inferior people who need to get rid of their superstitions *tout court*, or at least they need to wipe away these superstitions from the 'authentic' core of their religions (cf. *infra*, § 3.3.1). This latter case is a clear instance of what has been called the "invention of tradition" (Hobsbawm 1983). Indeed, the Asian people's "responses to novel situations" (2), such as colonialism or the threat of colonial rule, has often taken the form of fictitious, or at least largely selective re-construction of native religious traditions, in which a set of practices and rules of ritual or symbolic nature were highlighted and posited in historical continuity with an allegedly 'mythical' past.

These processes originated out of three needs: firstly, religious institutions, in order to keep their political positions, felt compelled to contribute to the production of an identity base for the formation of a modern nation, understood as an "imagined community" (Anderson 1983); secondly, a renewal of these religious traditions into

certain forms was deemed necessary in order to make them 'fit' for the modern configuration of these imagined community; and thirdly, there was the need to promote on religious ground these imagined communities in front of Euro-American powers which had previously despised them especially for their religious backwardness.

However, these operations have to be read in tandem with the historical development of the imagery of 'oriental religions' produced in Europe and America, which was actually inextricably entangled with various native concerns such as critiques to Christianity, critiques to scientific rationality, the need for universal truths, and so on. At any rate, all these concerns revolved around the 'big' question of the place of the 'West', with its 'religion', in an increasingly larger and connected world (cf. *infra*, § 3.3.2). Asian actors, consciously or not, took with due consideration these Euro-American imagery and interpretations, and accordingly produced their self-orientalist versions of the concept of 'religion' in the sense of universal phenomenon, and of their own religious traditions.

These exchanges engendered a series of mutually confirming representations that nonetheless varied through history, following changes in contexts and relative tactical and hermeneutical operations (cf. *infra*, § 3.3.3). The newer representations did not necessarily erase the older ones, thus creating a stratification of representations which may also have contradictory aspects, e.g. Buddhism as rational philosophy but also as the irrational practice followed by nonconformists.

As preliminary argued in ch. 1, and as it will be shown shortly, these processes of orientalistic self- and hetero-representations involved a series of similar patterns throughout Asia, as well as the construction of an imaginary landscape, which included India, China Japan, and other Asian religions, both as a unitary whole, and in a hierarchical manner in which certain countries, depending on the circumstances, appeared to be more or less representative of the 'Orient'. Therefore, to understand the modern construction of Japanese religions, especially in consideration of a general RE discussion, we need to see a larger picture, because all representations must be taken into serious account when dealing with the issue of teaching any example of East-Asian religious traditions.

3.3.1 The Introduction of The Concept of 'Religion' in East-Asian Contexts. Three Examples

We have already touched the issue of Hinduism as a modern discursive construct in the field of religion. However, it would be highly reductive to state that it was a complete invention of the colonizers subsequently imposed upon a passive colonized population. As I have hinted above (§ 2.1.8), the Indian sub-continent offers a case

for examining the dynamics of 'inner colonization', in the sense that

> Hinduism was the result of a dialectical collaborative enterprise, with the colonials and Indians mutually contributing to the construction of this edifice. (Keppens, Bloch 2010, 5)

Furthermore, Hinduism could not have been constructed out of thin air. Scholars such as Lorenzen (2010) argue that prior to the emergence of British colonialism there existed a certain consciousness of a collective identity as 'Hindu', such as in the verses of the poet Kabir (fifteenth century), who distinguished it from 'Turks' or 'Muslim' (*hindu*, *turka* and *musalaman*).

However, it was during the colonial period (1757-1947) that this initial identity awareness was exploited by various actors and framed into a construct named 'Hindooism'. Roughly speaking, three colonial actors looked for the 'foundations' of what seemed to be the religions of the colonized: the first orientalists, guided by both exotic curiosity and romantic expectations; missionaries (who often were themselves orientalists), in order to be better prepared in native religion which abled them to proselytize more effectively; last but not least, East India Company (later British Empire's) officials, who were in need of clues for taking census and distinguishing the local population from Muslims and other traditions (Jews, Christian, Buddhist, Sikh), and were in need of finding indigenous laws and ideological systems in order to standardize and better control the socio-cultural fabric. Due to the uncontested protestant paradigm of religion, all these actors sought the interlocutors who better fit their ideas of standard religion. Therefore, they addressed the brahmans (and to a lesser extent, Muslim law-doctors), i.e. those who mostly resembled a specialized, priestly class devoted to the exegesis of ancient sacred texts. Out of these choices developed a process that Torri (2000, 361-4) calls the "brahmanization" and Sugirtharajah (2010, 72) calls the "textualization" of the Indian traditions. That is, the translation and domestication of certain texts, such as the religious-legal tractates of the *Manusmṛti* (firstly translated in 1794) or the *Bhagavadgītā* (firstly translated in 1785) and their election as the foundations of the Indian legal and religious system. The ancient legal tractates, in particular, become swiftly incorporated and applied (perhaps for the very first time) through the British legal codes,

> to nearly the 80% of the population of colonial India in matters of marriage and divorce, legitimacy, guardianship, adoption, inheritance, and religious endowments. (Doninger 2009, 596)

All this came at the expense of other texts such as the *Purāṇa* or other religious expressions such as rituals, art or dance. This 'sanita-

tion' towards undesired elements applied notably to Tantrism. The renowned sanskritist, Monier-Williams (1819-1899), who was the first to employ the term 'Tantrism' as indicating a distinct entity, disparaged it as the most degenerate form of Indian religion. By representing Tantrism as a tradition characterized basically by orgies with wine and women, where sanguinary sacrifices are enacted and meaningless formulae are uttered with the aim of acquiring magical power and destroying one's enemies, Monier-Williams considered it no more than mere 'witchcraft' (Urban 2003, 67).

Together with this incorporation and purification of long held Brahmanical views in the gradually developing idea of 'Hinduism', also foreign elements, such as universalistic tendencies, rationalizations or standardization of doctrines and practices, and the emphasis of creedal beliefs, gradually start spreading. In this way, ideas of 'Religion' and of a unitary religion called 'Hindooism' entered in the public debate and were readily negotiated and adopted by Indians. This fostered discussion and debates in which there was an increasing awareness of belonging to a unitary tradition, or at least to traditions in need of being unified. One of the most famous examples is the foundation of the Brāhmo Samāj (Society of *Brahman*) by Rāmmohun Rāy (1772-1833), a Bengali intellectual. He came from a brahmanic caste and was well-versed in his own tradition and equally proficient in English, European culture and Christianity. He was the first to publicly using the word 'hindooism' in 1816, seen by him as morally decadent, due to the peculiar practice of Hindoo idolatry which was nonetheless considered alien to the 'real', 'ancient' 'hindooism'. In his interpretation 'real hindooism' is a universalistic monotheism, whose God is fundamentally non-dual (*advaita*) to human beings, and whose truth was to be found in all scriptures of the world, if properly interpreted through reason and morality. His writings and Brāhmo Samāj initiatives were especially aimed at reforming India society. For example, they strongly endorsed the 1829 ban on the practice of *satī*, the immolation of the widow on the funeral pyre of the husband (Killingley 2019). Similarly, Rāmmohun despised *tantras* as a pernicious departure from the authentic Hindu tradition and endorsed only a highly purified version of Tantric doctrines or practices. These latter expounded an impersonal image of the Absolute, or an image of Kali as a loving mother, and mentioned sexual practices to be permitted only with one's own wife (Urban 2003, 80-3).

The Queen's proclamation of the British Raj in 1858, including the enshrining of the idea of religious practice as a 'right' of subjecthood in colonial India, had an intensifying role in the proliferation of modern organizations focused on one or the other aspect of the issue of religion (Zavos 2010, 63-4). European emphasis on the idea of 'creed' as being the main components of a religion, highly influenced indigenous terminology. In fact, by the end of the nineteenth centu-

ry, a term like '*dharma*' had come to have almost the same meaning as 'religion' or 'religious creed'. As a matter of fact, another society, called Ārya Samāj (Society of Arians, founded in 1875) sought to unite all Hindus, beyond any sectarian and caste boundaries, under a reformed religion. This was based on *Veda*, rejected idolatry and, most notably, actually required its adherents to subscribe to the Ten Principles (Oddie 2010, 46-7).

These reformist attempts engendered also opposite reactions, such as those published in the Calcutta newspaper, *Samchar Chandrika* (first issued in 1822). The ostensible conservatorism of these reactions, silent in matter of doctrine and deities but focused on "patterning a general structure for Hindu action, social and ritual", was in reality driven by

> an urgency to shape a modern, popular Hinduism through emergent discourses promoting a centralization of authority and a common, socially cohesive Hindu identity. (Pennington 2005, 140)

Other similar self-proclaimed defenders of orthodoxy focused on other issues of symbolic value such as cow protection and the traditional ritual roles of images (*mūrti*).

Shifting our discussion toward the Chinese case, discourses about religion in the modern sense of the term began to develop in the historical context of the Qing empire at turn of the century. The government was in a crumbling state, bankrupt, militarily humiliated by Western powers by the two Opium Wars and by Japan through the war over Korea. From the second half of the nineteenth century, thanks to the intellectual exchange between westerners, especially missionaries, new ideas started to circulate. At the same time, there was a pressing fear that if advanced foreign technical knowledge was the only necessary means to survive, it would be useless without a more profound ideological reform (cf. Cheng 2000, 656-60), which of course would also include the newly imported concept of religion.

We have already seen (§ 3.2.1) how the concept of a well-defined corpus of teaching and practices that requires exclusive belonging is quite different from a traditional understanding of the ways of doing religion. The emic distinction concerning what we now label religion in the Qing China was, especially from a political point of view, between 'orthodoxy' (*zhengjiao*) and 'heterodoxy' (*xiejiao*) or 'illicit cults' (*yinci*). The former included a wide range of institutional traditions such as Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism, plus an even wider range of all the various worships, practices and doctrines on a local level, especially those closely adhering to a patriarchal order of society (territorial communities, lineages, guilds), and those that were not deemed as threats to the imperial authority and social cohesion by local governors (Gossaer 2005, 3). This traditional con-

ception of the state-religions relationship, as well as the traditional way of relating to religions came to be strongly questioned and seen in need of a reform. A reform clearly inspired by the modern protestant idea of religion.

In 1898 Kang Youwei memorialized the throne for the establishment of a sort of 'state-religion' (*guojao*) which was a

> wild hybridization of Confucian fundamentalism and Christianity under the influence of, notably, the Scottish Baptist missionary Timothy Richard (1845-1919). (Gossaert, Palmer 2011, 46)

Youwei proposed the creation of a network of state-managed 'Confucian churches', in which all Chinese should be compelled to attend weekly Confucian masses where Confucian classics would be read by a Confucian pastor. His intended plan was meant to rectify the lax morality of a population that for two millennia has built temples to all sorts of immoral deities, which had caused them to be despised as barbarian by foreigners.

Shortly after 1898, new words began to appear in the discourse on religion, usually introduced in newspaper articles. The most important ones were *zongjiao* for 'religion', and *mixin* for 'superstition', popularized especially by Liang Qichao (1873-1929), a disciple of Kang Youwei. These two pivotal terms are generally considered by current scholarship to be adaptations of the Japanese neologisms, *shūkyō* and *meishin*, which had been invented a few years earlier. However, recent research (Barret, Tarocco 2012) shed light on the indigenous developments and combination of the terms *zong* ('main ancestral line', 'origin', 'principle') and *jiao* ('teaching'). The renowned Buddhist exegete Zongmi (780-841) used *ad hoc* combinations of the terms to indicate, with *jiao-zong*, "a doctrinally distinct strand of Buddhism" (Barret, Tarocco 2012, 312), and with *zong-jiao*, "something more inclusive, the teaching of the entire lineage of Zen masters stretching back through Bodhidharma to the Buddha himself" (Barret, Tarocco 2012, 312). This usage by Zongmi, still as *ad hoc* combinations and not as a common regular words, seem to have been passed down to the nineteenth century and appear in the writings of the lay geographer Wei Yuan (1794-1856), where "*zong* and *jiao* seem to be used by Wei to cover those activities that were proper to the Buddhist clergy" (Barret, Tarocco 2012, 314). Such connection between *zong* and *jiao* and matters related to Buddhist clergy resurface in the 1838 writings of missionary Karl Gützlaff (1803-1851), who indeed chose the term *jiaozong* to indicate the unusual status of the Papal state in Italy, described as a *jiaozong* state and clerics as *jiaozong* persons (Barret, Tarocco 2012, 315). In this sense, *zong* and *jiao* came to be furhter associated with "beliefs and practices of the relatively few religious professionals" (Tarocco 2008, 45).

In such context, it is not surprising that the first use of *zongjiao* referred to Christianity. "Religion was understood in the Western post-Reformation sense of a system of doctrine organized as a church separated from society" and "was considered a strong, moralizing, and unifying force behind the Western nation-states" (Gossaert, Palmer 2011, 50). In fact, in his essays from the early 1900s, Liang Qichao described *zongjiao* as "the root of Western civilization" and, accordingly, he sought for a native equivalent as an alternative to Christianity. He thus decided on Buddhism, since it showed traits more akin to 'rational belief' (*zhe xin*) than 'superstition' (*mixin*) (Tarocco 2008, 50).

Although the religion-superstition formulation may recall imperial-era categories such as 'orthodoxy' *versus* 'heterodoxy', its very premise was rapidly changing. Instead of Confucian righteousness and moral emperorship, the new dichotomy was based on claims of universal scientific truth (Nedostup 2008, 90), which became the measure in dividing between 'religion' (compatible with science) and 'superstition' (unscientific). This latter term indicated all that was not "grounded in and strictly limited to the spiritual and moral self-perfection" (Gossaert, Palmer 2011, 51). In this sense, it is not difficult to understand slogans such as "Destroy temples to build schools" (*huimiao banxue*), because the religious discourse and the educational one were entangled in terms of both moral and knowledge improvement (Gossaert, Palmer 2011, 49-50).

Eventually, the modernist rhetoric overwhelmed even those who wanted a strongly reformed tradition as a new ideological base of China, such as Kang and Liang. The newly established Republic of China clearly set itself in rupture with the traditional past, and exchanged its previous theological authority in matters of religion with authority over scientific discourse. In fact, from 1912 to the present days, legislators and administrators, when faced with the task of differentiating religion from superstition, have constantly called in academic experts to assist in this work (Gossaert 2005, 11). These measures in religious policy were clearly targeted against all those practices deemed superstitious, such as funeral rites, temple festivals, the worship of statues of any kind, and geomancy. For instance, by abolishing the traditional lunar-solar calendar in 1912, Republicans tried to replace (or at least 'rationalize') all those recurrences, especially the deities' birthdays, characterized as 'unproductive', 'hot and noisy' sociality (Nedostup 2008), with a new set of civic rituals. At the same time, 'freedom of religious belief' (*xinjiao ziyou*) was stipulated, but still within the strict frame of religion/superstitions, that is, freedom was permitted only to those traditions that fit the *zongjiao* paradigm. For such religions this meant adopting and indigenizing "Christian models of clerical training, community organization, confessional identification, and social engagement" (Gossaert, Palmer 2011, 74).

For the first time, Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, and Islam attempted to organize themselves in the form of central, hierarchical, and nationwide organizations. A difficult task, since most activities were carried out by relatively independent specialists in service to local temples, mosques and schools. Due to its strong relation with imperial past Confucianism did not manage to be recognized. Eventually, five official religions were established, Buddhism, Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism and (later) Daoism (Gossaert, Palmer 2011, 79-89). They shared such common traits as the

> bureaucratic control of religion, assimilation of political ideology into the religious discourse, anti-ritual rhetoric, and attempts at the national unification of each religion, contributing to the unification of China itself. (76)

These groups, however, represented only the tip of the iceberg. Many other religious groups or individuals actively engaged in the challenge of modernity, such as the so-called redemptive societies, which proposed new communal forms of universal salvation, or those movements which tried to modernize various body cultivation and healing traditions involving meditation, martial arts, and traditional medicine (91; cf. also 91-121).

Similar to China, the pressure by Euro-American powers in East-Asian left a clear impression on the Japanese. Already near the end of Edo period, they strongly felt the urgency to take both the technical and cultural resources of the Euro-Americans into serious consideration[35] and to implement strong reforms accordingly to avoid the same fate as China (cf. Kitaoka 2017, 11-24). The issue of unequal treatises also signaled the need of being recognized among 'civilized people', and, consequently, of adopting certain cultural forms and values. Among these new cultural forms, Christianity and the modern idea of religion were pivotal components (Isomae 2012, 228-9).

The first cultural engagement by the Japanese with the modern concept of religion was primarily a matter of diplomacy and translations of diplomatic treatises with Euro-American powers which were compelling Japan not only to open its borders to commerce, but also to establish freedom of religion. This latter issue, however, was primarily focused on lifting the ban on Christianity, an aim that Japanese noticed. The first attempts to translate religions, in fact, signal the "influence of the Christian prototype on the process of choosing

35 We can see these tendencies, for example, in the institution of the Office for the Investigation of Barbarian Books (*Bansho Shirabesho*) in 1856, in the use of the slogan *tōyō dōtoku*, *seiyō geijustu* ('eastern ethics and Western science') coined by Sakuma Shōzan (1811-1864) and in the various travels abroad to study Euro-American knowledge which had already been conducted by the 1860s (Gordon 2003, 73-4).

what to include in the category of religion" (Josephson 2012, 93). The words chosen for the first translation of 'religion', in the 1858 Treaty of Amity and Commerce concluded with the US, were *shūhō* ('lineage' or 'school's law') and *shūshi* ('lineage' or 'school's principle'). The former originally indicated those practices and regulations that are specific to a given Buddhist school, and was here used for 'religion'; the latter originally indicated the doctrine specific to a given Buddhist school, and was here used for 'religiously'. In this treaty 'religion' as a concept still does not seem to be applied also to the Japanese religious situation, and thus seems not to have a universal scope. In fact, what in English is rendered as 'Japanese religious ceremonies' and 'objects of their worship' corresponds in reality to *shinbutsu no raihai* (rituals for *kami* and *buddhas*) and *shintai butsuzō* (embodiment of *kami* and Buddhist statues) (105-7).

In following tractates there is still no fixed terms concerning 'religion', and the chosen terms vary consistently. Isomae (2012, 231-2) individuates two trends. The first focused on religion as ritual action and the terms used pertained originally to the institutional Buddhist parishioner system of the Edo period, as reflected in terms like *shūmon* ('gate of the lineage'). The other focused more on the doctrinal side and drew from the cultural area of intellectual debate between Buddhism and Confucianism, with terms like *seihō* ('sacred law') or *seidō* ('sacred way').

One of the intellectual workshops in which the nature and role of religion was debated was the influential but short-lived *Meiroku zasshi* (1874-1875), which popularized various Euro-American concepts. Here intellectuals who had been studying abroad proposed various views about religion, as well as additional proposals for translation, like *kyōmon* ('gate of the teaching'), *hōkyō* ('law and teaching'), and *shūkyō* ('teaching of the lineage'). Positions varied. For example, Nishi Amane (1829-1897) saw religion only in terms of private, emotional beliefs concerning the unknowable, beliefs that should be both protected by the state but excluded from public space, while Tsuda Mamichi (1829-1903) regarded religion as essential for public morality and the promotion of civilization, and maintained that Christianity could be a feasible choice in this regard. Kashiwabara Takaaki (1835-1910) argued for guidance by the state towards the right religion and away from 'heresy' or savage religion, a way similar to what the 'West' had already done. In fact, several thinkers distinguished between 'religion' and 'superstitions', especially those concerned with warding off supernational influence, which were defined as *meishin* ('delusionary beliefs') (cf. Josephson 2012, 228-42).

Concerning these latter, it must be noted that already from 1870 the new Meiji government had issued various regulations aimed at suppressing all those 'old evil customs' in order to avoid being considered uncivilized and thus being in the position of asking for modifica-

tions to unequal international treatises. These suppressing measures addressed both everyday-life customs, for example bans on public nudity, as well as on popular customs linked to religious practices such as dancing *nembutsu*, dancing and lighting fires for the Bon festival, certain forms of divination, phallic statue worship, and so on. More incisively, what became outlawed were practices such as divination and ritual healing, beliefs in fox and *kami* possession, or persons such as *itako* shamans and magicians. Initial motivation, however, was not based on scientific refutation, but on the necessity of not having imperial subjects bewitched and under the control of other form of (supernatural) authority (Josephson 2012, 185-202).

In summary, religion was not seen anymore as a 'Western' peculiarity to be permitted, but as an essential aspect of Euro-American civilization, especially for morality aspects. Such an aspect of civilization pertains to the inner sphere, and should be safeguarded, but also regulated and guided by the state in order to unify the morality of the nation and to avoid letting it go astray. Given this idea of religion as a marker of, and path to, civilization, it engendered a field of competition between Buddhism, Christianity and the newly created Shintō (cf. above, § 3.2.2.3). This situation further contributed to the configuration of the meaning of the idea of 'religion' which become eventually translated with *shūkyō* in the 1881 reference book called *Tetsugaku jii* (Philosophy Glossary) (Isomae 2012, 231-3).

While intellectuals where debating on religion, in 1870 the Meiji government launched the Great Teaching Campaign, aimed at contrasting Christianity and at unifying the newly envisioned state under a common doctrine to be preached in both Shintō and Buddhist institutions. This doctrine revolved around the three loose principles of: 1) respect for the gods, love of country; 2) making clear the principles of Heaven and the Way of Man; 3) reverence for the emperor and obedience to the will of the court. However, it basically combined ideas concerning the need of modernizing reforms with very general theological and eschatological matters (Isomae 2012, 234; Hardacre 2017, 376). Given this ambiguity, debates among shrine priests during the Campaign showed how there was no agreement in terms of pantheon and doctrines. Buddhists, on the other side, protested against the very campaign. This situation gave a chance for the Buddhist intellectual Shimaji Mokurai (1838-1911) to make a petition in 1872 against the Great Teaching Campaign, arguing that *shūkyō* should be a complementary, yet separated dimension from governmental policies. Shintō, being primarily rituals and practices, pertains to this latter, while a

> depoliticized Buddhism could then enter into free competition with Christianity for alternate religious 'space' in the heart of the Japanese people. (Josephson 2012, 243)

Accordingly, by 1884 the Campaign ended, and the 1889 Constitution enshrined the freedom of religion, however using the term *shinkyō* (lit. 'belief into teaching'), thus further emphasizing the private, inner nature of religion. This permitted the establishment of compulsory shrine-related rituals, pertaining to the public dimension of *dōtoku*, 'morality' (Isomae 2012, 237, 239-40). In the 1880s, moreover, further notions concerning religion came to Japan, such as the idea of the clash between science and Christianity, and the theory of a universal evolution from the 'religion of nature' to the 'religion of civilization', and then finally from religion to ethics (cf. above the first paragraphs of § 3.2.3). These ideas made the previous fascination with Christianity fade as marker of civilization, and introduced the notion of a common, *sui generis* category of religion subsuming all individual religions, which were now not only in competition as 'tools of civilization', but in competition for being the most 'advanced' or science-compatible religion.

In this context, Shintō was institutionally elevated (and confined) to the status of morality. Confucianism, initially repressed by Meiji state because of its strong connection with the past Tokugakawa regime, was then reduced to the status of philosophy by influential thinker Inoue Tetsujirō (1855-1944), also because of the that, as we have seen (§ 3.2.1.2), Confucianism fits with great difficulty into the taxonomic frame of the modern idea of religion/*shūkyō* (Paramore 2016a, 141-53). What remained were just Christianity and Buddhism. In such a situation Buddhists felt a strong need to self-reform in order to compete and to attest that they were fit for a modernizing nation. Both laymen and affiliates to monastic institutions created associations and journals upholding a new Buddhism (*Shinbukkyō*), sharing ideas such as critiques to doctrinal rigidity, interest in self-cultivation and Western thought, and the goal to present Buddhism as the religion best suited to modern times. For example, Shin Buddhist Kiyozawa Manshi (1863-1903) proposed a Buddhist reform based on spiritualism (*seishinshugi*) – in the sense of self-cultivation based on introspection and ascetism – and a return to the original writings of the founder Shinran, but open to any other school. He also emphasized the need for fulfilling social responsibilities and assuring one's own self-well-being, in order not to lay burden on organized Buddhism or on the state. Another common claim among *Shinbukkyō* proponents was the compatibility between science and Buddhism, often through the interpretation of the doctrine of *karma* as a rational mechanistic, cause-and-effect worldview (Deal, Ruppert 2015, 209-31).

Academic development such as the teaching course called 'Comparative Religion and Eastern Philosophy' (*Hikaku shūkyō oyobi toyō tetsugaku*) held by Inoue Tetsujirō at Tokyo Imperial Academy in 1891, or the foundation in 1898 of the religious studies (*shūkyōgaku*) by Anesaki Masaharu (1873-1949) at the same university, further consolidated the idea of a common, universal, *sui generis* essence of religion. These scholars viewed religion as fundamentally grounded in the inner, subjective experience of the individual – a "psychological towardness to unlimited beings", as Anesaki would put it (Isomae 2005, 236). Divine beings were seen as a projection of human feelings, desires, or of life forces. At any rate, religion remained basically a depoliticized dimension of existence (Fujiwara 2008, 197-8).

Through these academic developments Japan kept pace with the growth of religious studies in Euro-American context for some time. By the 1890s, papers written by Japanese intellectuals on Japanese religions were circulating in Euro-American academic and popular journals, while scholars and religionists alike were well prepared in showcasing Japanese religions, especially Buddhism, in important international arenas such as the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago (cf. *infra*, § 3.3.3). On the other hand, public and institutional discourses were further justified in regulating a normative idea of *shūkyō*, contrasted not only with *meishin* ('superstition') but also with *ruiji shūkyō* ('pseudoreligion'). This denigratory term was used often to refer to that host of so-called new religions (Astley 2006), founded by charismatic figures, that grew rapidly from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards, and for this reason were perceived as threatening by the government. Due to the large use of magical healing in their system of practices, they became one of the main targets of campaigns upholding the value of education, science and morality for molding national character, which banned the practice of these new religions as fraudulent and irrational (Josephson 2012, 260-9).

With this I conclude our short survey of the historical introductions of the concept of religion in three case-studies of India, China and Japan. It should be added that the history of the modern idea of religion in these countries does not end here but further develops in contemporary times. For example, the 1995 terrorist attack by the Aum Shinrikyō group in Tōkyō caused a strong disaffection by Japanese to anything *shūkyō*-related, while it did not affect the growing interest in the field of 'spirituality' (*supirichuariti*) or 'spiritual world' (*seishin sekai*) (Prohl, Nelson 2012b, 12; cf. also Shimazono, Graf 2012). In China the economic growth of the last decades has led to a relaxation of the control over religions and a new urban class is enjoying more religious freedom (Yang 2011). I have not provided further examples such as South-Asian countries as it would have taken up much further space, but these will be considered when examining the issue of the modern development of Buddhism in the next section.

What I wanted to stress in the first place is the depth of the influence of the modern concept of religion. Ironically, while such a concept is supposed to refer to something pertaining to a separate, inner and/or *sui generis* dimension of human existence (cf. above, §§ 2.1.5 and 2.1.8), it has instead been implemented, debated and negotiated as a standard of civilization. Faced with powerful and threatening interlocutors, Asian cultures tactically absorbed, elaborated and applied to themselves, along with other aspects, also the Euro-American religious framework, especially in relation to issues of national identity, morality and governance – an observation that further reinforces the thesis of the functional dialectic of 'secular' and 'religion' presented above (§ 2.1.8). I employ the adverb 'tactically' to indicate how this process did not consist of a simple imposition by active Euro-American powers over passive East-Asian subjects, but it entailed a careful selection of themes and perspectives on the issue of religions in order to exploit these external paradigms for their owns ends, for example, to present themselves in international contexts as modern interlocutors in religious (and political) matters. Similarly, in domestic contexts, to justify the social restrictions necessary for modernization on a new, much more compelling Euro-American religious ground. Moreover, as we will see, this tactical use of Euro-American conceptions of religion has also been pivotal when these newborn Asian nations presented themselves as actually superior 'Eastern' civilizations, because they embodied those 'eternal and universal spiritual values' that the 'material West' had lost. It will be in these processes that the interplay of Occidentalism, Orientalism, and self-Orientalism cited above (§ 3.3) comes starkly to the fore.

3.3.2 The Orientalist Representations of East-Asian Cultures in Modern Euro-American Contexts

We can trace a peculiar European fascination concerning cultures and religions of Asia already in the Enlightenment and pre-Enlightenment period. This was fueled especially by Jesuit reports from China, characterized by a high regard and admiration for Chinese civilization, in particular for Confucianism. To a large extent this was due to the Jesuit agenda, which in their interpretations of Confucianism wanted to demonstrate that the Chinese were sufficiently enlightened to be receptive to the Christian message. Consequently, a conspicuous number of Enlightenment thinkers developed a keen interest for Confucianism, seeing it as a model for moral and political reform based on established basic philosophical principles concerning morality, society and the universality of human reason. For them, Confucianism was a

> mirror in which to examine the philosophical and institutional inadequacies of Europe […] and strip Christianity of its pretensions to uniqueness. (Clarke 1997, 42)

These first encounters also represented the first steps in a quest towards a *philosophia perennis*, a term probably coined by Leibniz (1646-1716), who sought to combine and synthetize Chinese concepts such as *li* and *qi* with European philosophical concepts (Clarke 1997, 48). However, if 'enlightened' Confucianism was the proof that the Chinese were ripe for conversion, the competitive presence of Buddhism and Daoism was presented by Jesuits to justify the urgence of the conversion, and accordingly they were thus branded as the most idolatrous superstitions. This Jesuit perspective, especially on Daoism, would be the authoritative one for almost two centuries (Clarke 2000, 39-42).

By the end of eighteenth century this intellectual enthusiasm for China, together with other cultural trends such as the cult of *chinoiserie*, faded, probably due to the expulsion of the Christian missionaries from China in 1770 and for it being too inflated. However, another 'exotic' land began to stir up European imaginations and reflections about civilizations of the 'others': India. William Jones (1746-1794) is usually credited for having been the first to suggest the hypothesis of Indo-European roots of Greek and Latin, thus relating them to Sanskrit and not Hebrew. He and his colleagues thus advocated the importance of studying Eastern languages and texts in India, and for this reason were labeled 'Orientalists'. These latter were opposed by those whom Inden (1986, 417-18) calls 'Utilitarians', or 'Anglicists', because they argued that 'Western' knowledge in English should displace the 'Eastern' one. The most prominent of these was James Mill (1773-1836), whose influential *History of British India* (1817) refuted many of Jones's ideas. For Mill and other 'Anglistics', there are incommensurable differences between Europeans and Asian people. The former are temperate peoples of wide-ranging skills and organized into small or medium nations, characterized by constitutional monarchies or republics. Asian peoples, instead, are characterized by an extreme temperament and are organized into large empires whose normal and distinctive political institutions are the despotic rule of fear of all-powerful autocrats over a docile and servile populace.

However, if the view of India as the opposite of Europe was meant to justify the policies of the East India Company, the romantics saw this same opposition as something valuable. What was worthless for the utilitarian-minded was considered instead as the primordial source of universal civilization, still not stained by soulless rationalism, individualism, industrialization and urbanization. "Where China had been taken to heart as a political utopia, India came to be seen as the realm of Spirit" (Clarke 1997, 57). The first translation of the *Upaniṣad* from a Persian translation by Anquetil Duperron

(1723-1805) had a considerable impact, as Anquetil himself drew connections between Indian philosophy and Kant's transcendental idealism, on the grounds of the deep-belief in Enlightenment of the unity of the human mind. The *Upaniṣad* attracted the attention of the Romantics under many aspects. Among the most fascinating ideas was the monistic notion of *Brahman* behind the plurality of earlier *Veda* and its connection with *atman*. Equally attractive was the idea of the realization of the self through the identification with the absolute in order to go beyond an illusionary view of the world (*māyā*). All this seemed to harmonize well with some central and characteristic features of German idealist philosophy focused on the concept of *Geist*. The fact that many ancient Sanskrit texts, even on astronomy, were written in verse, further confirmed a Romantic theory of the origin of human speech in poetical form and thus reinforced the idea of Sanskrit literature as possessing a primitive, fundamental wisdom (Clarke 1997, 57-61). Critiques and domestication of ideas also occurred. Herder (1744-1803), for example, disliked the practice of *satī*, the caste system and interpreted the idea of *saṃsāra* as a false but albeit positive source for the idea of a fundamental unity of all living beings (Clarke 1997, 61-2). Similarly, the allegorizing of Vedic ritual in the *Upaniṣad* was read through anti-clerical and anti-ritualistic sentiment (King 1999, 122).

With the decline of Romantic trends, the rise of positivist and materialist philosophies, the growing appeal of the idea of progress, and the influence of the above cited Mill's *History of British India*, the enthusiasm for India as the spiritual fountainhead necessary to Europe waned. However, even if with condescending and racist attitudes, the rise of Europe as a global actor fostered an increased interest in 'Eastern' civilizations, also beyond the limited circle of a few intellectuals or scholars. The writings of these latter, in fact, were designed now for "a newly emerging class of readership which was eager to learn about the religion, culture, and history of the East" (Clarke 1997, 73). As anticipated above (§§ 2.1.5 and 2.1.8), one of the prominent 'discoveries' (or better say constructions) in this regard was Buddhism, sparked by the unearthing in Nepal of nearly 400 Sanskrit and Tibetan manuscripts, previously unknown.

It was the French scholar Eugène Burnouf (1801-1852) who mostly handled their translation. His work in this field held an immense impact, especially with his book *Introduction a l'histoire du bouddhisme indien* (1844), originally devised as a preface to the translated texts. Notwithstanding his judgment of a certain *naïveté*, Bornouf presented the Buddha as a human philosopher who offered his teachings of freedom through suffering to all members of society through the textual medium of Sanskrit. His original doctrine was purely moral and the extravagant metaphysics of the later *Prajñāpāramitāsūtra*, not to mention the *tantra*, are inventions of a later age. Burnouf was in fact

the first to establish the influential distinction between the northern and southern branches of Buddhism, and to give emphasis to the latter as being the more ancient and 'pure' version of the Buddha's teaching (Lopez 2008, 170-6). Bornouf's seminal construction of the Buddha as a thinker similar to the Enlightenment philosophers provided the tracks for other pioneering scholars to follow. Thomas W. Rhys Davids (1843-1922), who founded in 1881 the Pāli Text Society, translated with 'enlightenment' the central term *bodhi*, which literally means 'awakening', a translation that has now become standard. This choice was not without reason; in his view it was possible to detect in Buddha's teaching Enlightenment ideas and values such as reason, empirical observation, suspicion of authority, freedom of thought, and notably the absence of reliance on a divine plane.

> *Nibbana* is purely and solely an *ethical* state to be reached in this birth by ethical practices, contemplation and insight. It is therefore not transcendental. (Rhys Davids, Stede 1921, 427b, cit. in Snodgrass 2003, 106; cf. also McMahan 2008, 18)

Similarly, for Max Müller, Mahāyāna traditions such as Japanese Buddhism were "a corruption of the pure doctrine of the Royal Prince", because they relied on the "degraded and degrading Mahāyāna tracts [...] the silly and mischievous stories of Amitabha and his Paradise" (Müller 1900, 236, cit. in Snodgrass 2003, 110). This paradigm of the superiority of the older texts was also further reinforced in regard to Hinduism, and the romantic admiration for the speculation of the *Upaniṣad*, or the mythological imagery of the *Veda* as mitigated by the assumption that the present messy and chaotic situation was a subsequent degeneration from this ancient common textual root (cf. King 1999, 128 ff.).

The dissemination of knowledge about Buddhism in Europe was not a mere matter of exoticism, but also represented an input for contemporary debates linked to the ideological fissures, in the Victorian age, between Christianity, Biblical Higher Criticism, Positivism and Darwinism. Many saw Buddhism as inherently in tune with the scientific outlook, thus providing a mirror that allowed Christians to see themselves more clearly, and to cast off aspects no longer acceptable to the scientific worldview, such as the mythological and the miraculous. Other enthusiasts, upholding the superiority of Buddhism over Christianity on the grounds of the possibility of a morality without God, conjecture that the latter may be a decadent derivation of the former (Clarke 1997, 77-83).

Meanwhile, the expansion of European political and military power in Asia also gave new impetus to Chinese studies, with the appointment in 1815 of Abel Rémusat (1788-1832) to the first European Chair of Chinese Language and Literature at the Collège de

France. His work introduced and gave a certain philosophical value to the *Daodejing*. However, he nonetheless followed the old Jesuits' judgment, and interpreted the religious Daoism as degradation of this tradition of thought in the form of superstition (Clarke 2000, 43-4). Hegel (1770-1831), who read Rémusat (Wong 2011, 56-7), established this view almost as a dogma by designating the Chinese thought as the dawn of philosophy, but still stuck to its most elementary and infantile stage. Other influential sinologists such as James Legge (1815-1897), translator of the *Zhuangzi*, followed suit in dismissing contemporary Daoism as 'superstitious' and 'unreasonable' in comparison with the philosophical depth of the earlier Daoist texts (Clarke 2000, 44).

Another intellectual trend that actively shaped the reception of East-Asian religions was Transcendentalism. Being a sort of American outgrowth of English Romanticism, exponents of this current believed in an essential unity of the cosmos, which ultimately is of spiritual nature, together with a positive view of the human individual and its possibility to harmonize the intuitive dimension with the rational one. Similar to European Romantics, Transcendentalists found inspiration in the ideas of Advaita Vedānta, whose non-duality between *ātman* and *brahman* is clearly present in Ralph Waldo Emerson's (1803-1882) idea of an omni-embracing 'Oversoul'. Other Asian religions were involved, albeit in lesser forms. In fact, the universalist outlook was developed further by Samuel Johnson (1822-1882), a transcendentalist who published a popular three-volume work entitled *Oriental Religions and Their Relation to Universal Religion* (1873-77), in which he argued that Christianity will ultimately lay the foundations of this 'Universal Religion', but not before it is radically transformed by its encounter with the East. Daoism is also considered, and Laozi is sympathetically represented as a 'Chinese non-conformist' whose spiritual simplicity and spontaneity are a welcomed correction to ascetism or pessimistic worldviews. However, also Johnson ultimately laments that such enlightened teachings were transformed into superstitions such as astrology or alchemy (Clarke 1997, 83-7; Clarke 2000, 45-6).

As anticipated above (§§ 2.1.8 and 3.2.2.1), one of the most active movements that contributed to various cultural encounters, on many levels, between Euro-American worlds and East-Asian religions was arguably the Theosophical Society. It was founded in 1875 by Madame Blavatsky (1831-1931) and Colonel Olcott (1832-1907). The foundational writings of the former, *Isis Unveiled* (1877) and *The Secret Doctrine* (1888) revive the idea of a *philosophia perennis*, conceiving it as being secretly transmitted in esoteric fashion. Indeed, in those day occultism was a fashionable pursuit for many people interested in probing that grey area between science and religions, such as mesmerism or spiritualism. Blavasky conjoined Neoplato-

nism, Renaissance magic, Kabbalah, Freemasonry, ancient Egyptian and Greco-Roman mythology with Buddhism and Advaita Vedānta to present the idea of a secret wisdom handed down from prehistoric times by a chain of initiates. A wisdom that in Asia has still not been tainted by modernity (Gooddrik-Clarke 2008, 203-18). This contributed to the extensive dissemination in vernacular parlance of terms such as *māyā*, *karma*, 'reincarnation', and 'meditation'. Interestingly enough, notwithstanding their interest in esotericism, when dealing with Tibetan Buddhism Blavatsky did not identify this latter as 'Tantra'; on the contrary, following current orientalist conventions, "she went to some pains to distinguish it from the disreputable tradition of black magic and hedonism known as Tantra" (Urban 2003, 226). Beyond merely popularizing Asian religious and philosophical ideas in Euro-American countries, Theosophists were active in encouraging their view of the 'East-West' dialogue. They got in touch with Arya Samāj and Brāhmo Samāj in India, and with Buddhists in Ceylon and in Japan. Of the total number of 400 branches in India, Europe and America, more than 100 branches existed in India alone in 1884. The Theosophical Society in Asia was quite active, among other things, in the revival of Hindu and Buddhism self-awareness and self-respect. They held a contrasting attitude toward missionaries and colonialists, and have been greatly supportive of the independence of India. We may say that, in general, this Society endorsed a rejection of Euro-American cultural hegemony, an attitude which greatly encouraged and informed the ways in which East-Asian representatives portrayed themselves and their religious traditions in international venues, the most famous of these being the 1983 World Parliament of Religions in Chicago (Clarke 1997, 89-92).

3.3.3 Self-Orientalistic Representations of East-Asian Religions in International Venues

The World Parliament of Religions was an initiative held in 1893 in conjunction with the Columbian Exposition in Chicago. As many studies have observed (Katelaar 1990; Seager 1995; Snodgrass 2003), this event was organized in a context of growing positivistic and anti-Christian sentiments. Therefore, the basic assumptions and aims behind this gathering of representatives from the various religions of the world was to exploit the influential ideological framework of social Darwinism and to show that Christianity, once put in comparison with other traditions, would emerge as the most evolved religions into which all other traditions would eventually transform.

Many invited Asian representatives were aware or at least had strong suspects concerning this kind of agenda. Nonetheless, they were positive in their interpretation of their own native traditions

through the lenses of modern concepts and values already assimilated (cf. above, § 3.3.1). Therefore, they each felt confident in promoting their own religion not only as advanced and fit for a modern, globalized world but, most notably, also as a solution addressing the illness of Euro-American civilization, namely materialism, secularism and the increasing gap between science and religion. An idea that, following our theoretical scheme of interplay between Orientalism and Occidentalism (§ 3.3), basically echoed with Euro-American deep-seated convictions concerning East-Asian religions.

One of the most successful propagators – or better to say, confirmers – of the 'spiritual East *versus* material West' was Narendranath Dutta, better known as Swami Vivekānanda (1863-1902). He received an English Education at the Scottish Presbyterian College in Calcutta. In his youth he was involved in the Brahmo Samaj and was a disciple of the guru Ramakrishna (1836-1886). At the Parliament he embraced the orientalist myth of the East-West difference, adding the notion of complementarity:

> You of the West are practical in business, practical in great inventions but we of the East are practical in religion. You make commerce with your business; we make religion our business. (cit. in Burke 1986, 160-1)

In his presentation of Indian religious traditions Vivekānanda intended to introduce the doctrine of his master Ramakrishna, portrayed as a man who saw the inner unity of all religions in the encompassing vision of Advaita Vedānta, and as a man who was also comfortable in worshiping Jesus or Muhammad. However, it has been argued that Ramakrishna's teachings were less about the abstract and intellectual system of Vedānta than about an engagement with tantric and ecstatic practices, focused on sexual and violent images of the goddess Kālī. Consequently, it also has been argued that Vivekānanda was active in downplaying these aspects of his master, dismissing tantrism as a corrupted form of the pristine vision of the *Veda* and *Upaniṣad*, for which the influence of licentious rites of the Buddhists of Tibet must be blamed (Urban 2003, 173-6). Indeed, Vivekānanda's Vedānta was universal, both in the sense that all humans possess the same divine nature which fundamentally transcend all religions, and in the sense that such a divine nature can be expressed not only in ascetic practice, but also in this-worldly activities, and therefore Vedānta is applicable to all doctrines or rituals. These latter, at any rate, are but secondary details, while the most important thing is the application of some kind of individual, mental and/or physical discipline focused towards the manifestation of such divinity. This idea of the divine in each person resonated furthermore to the increasingly appealing values of self-realization and religious individualism (cf. Jackson 1994, 16-48).

Similar affinities with modern views of the individual and with the value of self-reliance were explained also by Buddhists delegates. Zen abbot Shaku Sōen (1860-1919) exploited the pre-existent high regard for Buddhist ethics by further connecting the karmic doctrine of cause and effect to the virtue of self-reliance, explaining in rational terms that, since future retributions depends on present actions, Buddhism relies on self-discipline and not on an external or divine authority. Ashitsu Jitsuzen (1850-1921), a Tendai scholar, emphasized the theme of altruism by explaining the Mahāyāna concept of the bodhisattva who, aware of the non-duality between *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra*, remains in the latter to help others (Snodgrass 2003, 212-13, 217-18).

In general, if Vivekanānda capitalized more on late-Romantic and Transcendentalist longing for a universal, mystical brotherhood among faiths, Buddhists focused more on the idea of compatibility with science which included, in those positivistic times, also the science of race and the science of religions.

Among these latter we must cite Anagārika Dharmapāla (1864-1933), born as Don David Hewavitharane in the English-speaking middle class of Colombo. His family was Buddhist, but he was educated in Catholic and Anglican schools. This figure and the consequent rise of Sinhalese 'Protestant Buddhism' is linked to the following factors: the birth of a new Sinhalese urban middle-class, educated and receptive to modern individualism; the presence of Christian schools and missionaries which disseminated Euro-American ideas and values but, with their criticism to Buddhism, also fueled, anti-Christian sentiments; and the arrival in Ceylon of the Theosophists Blavatsky and Olcott. In 1890 they formally embraced Buddhism by taking the Three Refuges and the Five Precepts. This was seen by Buddhist as a remarkable victory in the competition with Christian missionaries, as Olcott was a colonel and a judge (Gombrich 2006, 172-84). Similar to what they did in India, Theosophists founded various schools, modeled after missionary ones, but that were mostly led by lay personnel and endorsed a strongly protestantized version of Buddhism (cf. also above, § 3.2.2.1).

Dharmapāla met them in 1880 and was initiated into the Theosophical Society four years later. He accepted the modern Protestant view of religion as a personal, inner-worldly enterprise of the free individual. In fact, he was

> the first Buddhist to learn meditation from a book without recourse to a master. Moreover, he initiated the fashion for lay meditation, which has become so popular among the bourgeoisie of Colombo and Rangoon. (Gombrich 2006, 189)

In his mind Buddhism had to become a major force of Sinhalese society, uniting strong ethical and ascetic commitments without renouncing worldly activities, notably the political ones aimed at inde-

pendence (190). In order to do so and to compete with Euro-American Christianity-based civilizations, Buddhism should be retooled with an up-to-date scientific outlook. He presented his tradition as a scientific religion, characterized by individualistic yet altruistic ethics, philosophically grounded in a "psychological mysticism and a cosmogony which is in harmony with geology, astronomy, radioactivity and relativity" (Dharmapāla 1965, 27, cit. in Lopez 2008, 15). He also exploited the growing theories about Aryan origin of 'Western' civilization by referring sometimes to Buddhism as 'Aryan psychology' and by asserting that ancient Greeks thought like the ancient Aryans of India, that Greek gods were not semitic, and that the draped figures of Greek poets and philosophers are identical to of the statues of the ancient 'Aryan Bhikkhus' (Lopez 2008, 98).

Similar grapplings with science, including the dawning 'science' of Buddhism, characterized the Japanese Buddhist delegation to the Parliament. Japanese Buddhists had been formally invited as representative of what early scholars identified as the Northern Branch. While the newly formed Council of all Buddhist schools still held sectarian views in Japan, the delegates accepted this identification of Japanese Buddhism with a larger individualized unit called Mahāyāna. Therefore, they endeavoured to identify a set of basic Buddhist doctrines common to all schools and, to further appeal to the popular Euro-American perception, they chose a vegetarian lifestyle, thus avoiding to mention their practice of having eaten meat since 1872, when the government allowed it (Zheng 2019). They were in fact aware of the predilection, among scholars, of the Southern Branch as it was considered the closest to the original, rational Buddhism of the 'human philosopher' Gautama (Snodgrass 2003, 110). They thus tailored their presentations accordingly, with Sōen explaining that the law of cause and effect, as the Buddha taught it, was a complex system of interdependence where all the necessary causes are in an endless process of growth and decay, and that therefore it was consistent with science. The argumentation was that it is a view of the universe as a continual, but ultimately conservative, change of state of matter that does not need any external force, be it a first mover or Creator, as it points to an innate law within things themselves. A law that the Buddha, as a sort of early scientist, discovered. Therefore, he elaborated his other doctrines accordingly (Snodgrass 2003, 212-13). Ashitsu, and other delegates, on the other hand, took pains to demonstrate that – as Tendai orthodoxy would put it – Shakyamuni actually taught first Mahāyāna doctrines, and only afterwards adapted it in the form found in Pāli texts. This was meant to demonstrate that, in reality, Mahāyāna is the original teaching, whose progression from Hinayāna was planned by the Buddha himself (Snodgrass 2003, 207-9).

Another Buddhist reformer, who did not participate at the Parliament but in many ways sought to convince the Euro-American inter-

locutors of the compatibility between Buddhism and science was Taixu (1890-1947), one of the most famous figures of the Chinese Buddhist reformism at the start of twentieth century. Among his essays and lectures there also is an attempt to harmonize Buddhist and European cosmologies. He argued that Buddhist cosmology, traditionally construed with the Mount Meru as the *axis mundi*, was in reality a metaphor for the solar system (Lopez 2008, 57). Presentations of other Chinese traditions at the Parliament basically reproduced the rhetoric of contemporary Chinese religions as harmful superstitions. Delegate Peng Guangyu, first secretary of the Chinese legation in Washington, presented the Confucian perspective as being very unsympathetic to religious proselytism or to theological quarrels repeating the reforming instances of fellow Confucians against all those illicit 'cults' (*yinci*) or 'superstitious' (*mixin*), which held back the modernization of the decadent Qing empire (cf. McRae 1991, 28-9; Seager 1995, 104-5; cf. above, § 3.3.1). An anonymous paper on Daoism, on the other hand, reproduced the coeval scholarly stereotypes by lamenting the corruption of the virtues expounded by the philosopher Laozi occurred in the later transformation into a religion of magic and alchemy, and expressed the need of a restoration from these errors through a clarification of its real, original message (Seager 1995, 102).

Another focus of the discourses employed by Asian religious representatives was Christianity. Vivekānanda indirectly addressed this issue through the Hindu relationship to Buddhism. He explained that India, which gave birth to the oldest and most successful of the greatest missionary religions of all time, i.e. Buddhism, had eventually reabsorbed it, in the sense that Buddhism is presently just a 'sect' in India. Exploiting the linguistic theory of common Indo-European origin, he explicitly affirmed that the basic doctrines of Christianity and its missionary impetus originally derive from Buddhism, which is older. In this way Vivekānanda was implicitly aiming for an inclusivistic neutralization of Christianity. We can also see this strategy in the fact that, while he was preaching universal tolerance, openness, harmony and the synthesis of all the religions of the 'East and West', he also preached that this very program is the essence of Vedānta, which had come thus to be configured, not just as a particular religion, but rather as the fountainhead of all religions (Halbfass 1988, 236-8).

At any rate, we have seen how it was Buddhism which was to be perceived as the real 'contender' of Christianity, and Buddhist representatives acted accordingly. Dharmapāla, on the grounds of his presentation of Buddhism as inherently scientific, repeatedly contrasted the Buddha's rational spirit of inquiry and his rejection of priestcraft, with the opposite images of Christianity persecuting Galileo Galilei or Giordano Bruno. On the same line of reasoning as Sōen, Dharmapāla contended that the Buddhist view of an eternal and ever-changing cosmos not only is congruent with science, but also ex-

cludes any creator god, which proves the superiority of Buddhism over Semitic religions that "have neither psychology nor a scientific background" (Dharmapāla 1965, 26, cit. in Lopez 2008, 15). Japanese delegates, notably the layman Hirai Kinzō, further attacked Christianity on different aspects. He critiqued the equation of Christianity with civilization, and the relative labels of non-civilized heathens or idolaters which were attributed to all other religious people. He argued about the failure of the monotheist perspective to understand the tolerant syncretism of Japanese religion. He employed the Buddhist idea of *zenkō hōben* ('skillful means') to argue that what mistakenly appeared as idolatry, was only a manifestation of the one encompassing truth which adapted itself to the varying needs of the people. Therefore, the Japanese are not idolaters, but instead people who have a long-held attitude of non-sectarianism and progressive tolerance. On the other hand, he critically observed that the so-called Christians, i.e. Euro-Americans that came to Japan with a contemptuous attitude and that forced the Japanese to sign unequal treaties, were ironically lacking the supposed Christian spirit of charity, of brotherhood and compassion for the weak. Another issue that Hirai addressed was the frequent charge of nihilism in Buddhism, made by Christians and scholars alike. He tried to counter it by explaining that *nirvāṇa* is not

> annihilation, not even annihilation of the passions, which implied a detachment from the concerns of the material world, but a clear-minded and active realization of the nature of truth, an insight to the principles of law that could be used for the benefit of society at large. Japanese Buddhism, he explained, is neither world-denying nor archaic. (Snodgrass 2003, 189; cf. also 181-9)

On the base of these observations, both Dharmapāla and, more vehemently, Japanese Buddhists argued that Buddhism was the best candidate for being the final pinnacle of religious evolution.

Engagement with the themes of science and Christianity indicates how, for Parliament delegates as well as other religious reformers from Asia, issues such as nationalism and international policy were also at stake. Dharmapāla and Vivekānanda were struggling for the independence of their land, Taixu sought to prove the relevance of Buddhism to the new Republic of China, Shaku Sōen and the other Japanese argued, internally, that Buddhism can play an essential role in the expanding empire of Japan and, externally, that the Japanese were not heathen idolaters and therefore not deserving the unequal treatises.

The World Parliament of Religion of 1893, and with it the passage from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, can be seen as a sort of watermark from a textual-based, highly intellectual and scholarly orientalism, towards a more diffused dissemination not only of East-

Asian ideas but also practices, with the direct role of Asian disseminators through face-to-face interactions with interlocutors. For example, right after the Parliament, Vivekānanda spent two years in the United States, where the first Vedanta Society was founded in New York in 1895. He also traveled to France and England where he made other disciples (Jackson 1994, 48 ff.). However, at this point, we can see a shift in the motifs and modalities of both dissemination and reception of East-Asian religions and thought. As Clarke argues, this is consistent with the fact that this period saw an increased feeling of disenchantment towards not only traditional Christianity, but also towards the rationalist ideals of the Enlightenment and the faith in progress. Such feelings were accompanied by a sense of uncertainty and anxiety, if not degeneration and decadence, which pushed towards an unprecedented fragmentation of ways of thinking about the world, about values, and about matters of ultimate concern. These new trends were quite variegated and included positivism, psychoanalysis, social Darwinism and eugenics, artistic and literary theories associated with symbolism and expressionism, even a "variety of cults ranging from Tolstoyism and Wagnerism to neo-paganism, and occultism" (Clarke 1997, 96; cf. also 95-7).

3.3.4 New Interpretations of East-Asian Religions in Changing Contexts

Concerning Buddhism, in the short term the Parliament resulted in a failure for the Japanese effort in improving the reputation of Mahāyāna. In fact, the authority on Buddhism remained in the hands of Pāli philologists, who were still unconvinced and rather contemptuous towards the arguments of the Japanese delegation (Snodgrass 2003, 222-4). However, the situation would be rapidly evolving between and after the two world wars. Paul Carus (1852-1919) was a publisher and a philosopher upholding a rational monism, according to which all religions and the sciences were actually expressions of a same reality. Impressed by the speech of Shaku Sōen, Carus got in touch with him and Sōen in turn sent his disciple Suzuki Daisetsu (born Suzuki Teitarō, 1870-1966) to Carus as help in translation and dissemination of knowledge about Mahāyāna in American and Europe. Suzuki's first publications in English followed the themes of Japanese *shinbukkyō*, i.e portraying 'Eastern Buddhism' as a deinstitutionalized, deritualized, scientific and philosophical religion. However, we can see a remarkable shift starting with the article "The Zen Sect of Buddhism" (1906), provocatively published in the *Journal of the Pāli Text Society*. Suzuki flipped over the textual-based paradigms employed by the Euro-American Buddhologists by presenting a tradition whose system of legitimation was the heart-to-heart

transmission from master to disciple, in an unbroken lineage originating with Śākyamuni himself. Therefore, Zen is the quintessential teaching of the Buddha and, most notably, given its rhetoric of 'non relying on scripture' (cf. above, § 3.2.3.1), it goes beyond the blind acceptance of an outside authority, or the submission to conventionality. On the contrary, it further resonates with the themes of individuality and activity, and undermines the Euro-American charges of nihilism or passivity (Snodgrass 2003, 264-5). As an important corollary of the reversal of the textual paradigm, Suzuki increasingly emphasized the notion of the 'zen experience' in his writing, an experience which was linked to Zen technical terms such as *satori*, 'awakening, comprehension' or *kenshō*, 'seeing one's own (buddha) nature'. The development of this notion, Sharf argues (1993, 20-6; 1998, 96-103) is connected with the idea of pure experience as expounded by a Suzuki's friend, the renowned philosopher Nishida Kitarō (1870-1945), who in turn was inspired by the ideas of philosophers such as Henri Bergson (1859-1941) and William James on the role of unmediated consciousness and experience. As a result, Zen, thanks to its (often rhetorical) emphasis of direct experience through meditation and *kōan*, and (supposed) reject of textual study, came to be considered the most refined expression of an a-rational, experiential ground that is actually shared by all religions and philosophies in both 'East' and 'West'. In this way, we can see how Suzuki also flips over the rational paradigm held by Buddhologists. In fact, he put what was previously deemed as superior, i.e. the rational and systematic outlook of the original Buddhism, as something actually hindering a more profound comprehension, because the 'truth' of Zen is beyond the limits of rationality. This is also connected with the long history of discourses on Japanese exceptionalism (cf. e.g. the *kokugaku* phenomenon cited above, § 3.2.2.3), which now characterizes Japan as being the best representative of the 'East' thanks to its spiritual and synthetical nature, in antithesis toward the material and rational-analytical 'West'.

Suzuki's ideas started spreading from the 1920s onwards through his writings and numerous trips and conferences. Arguably, his ideas were greatly favored by the changed intellectual and cultural *milieu*. For example, as we have seen above (§§ 2.1.1, 2.1.5 and 3.2.3), in those years the burgeoning field of phenomenology was aiming at countering the discourses of disenchantment in regard to religious matters through the creation of the universal, sui *generis* category of 'the Sacred' and confining the religious matters in the realm of the inner psychological sphere and of the 'mystical' experience. This move permitted, on one side, the positing of a transcultural common ground to all religious traditions and, on the other, an epistemological shield from rational enquiry. For Suzuki, in fact, "to study Zen means to have Zen experience, for without the experience there is no Zen one can study" (Suzuki 1967, 123, cit. in Sharf 1993, 25).

Just as Confucianism or primitive Buddhism had been deployed before as means of critiquing the hegemony of Christianity or its lack of rationalism, now East-Asian 'spirituality', epitomized by Zen Buddhism, was meant to critique the pretentions and the failures of rational progress, such as the two World Wars, and the relative alienation of mankind. Buddhism, for its long history of deep psychological introspection, seemed well suited for this role. The popularizer of Buddhism, Alan Watts (1915-1973), for example, emphasized the transformational and liberating potential of 'Eastern religions' in influential works such as *Psychotherapy East and West* (1961). Other cultural influences such as Jack Kerouac's (1922-1969) *Dharma Bums* (1959), on the other hand, further established the idea that Zen, as well as other 'oriental wisdom', may represent an alternative to scientific rationalism, to religious traditionalism and to a materialistic lifestyle in the counter-culture movement, in the New Age movements, and beyond (Clarke 1997, 103-5).

In tandem to the general tendency of dismissal and disillusion for traditional modes of thought, there was a renewed interest for those East-Asian traditions which until that moment had been scarcely engaged or straightforwardly despised. Staring with Daoism, a host of thinkers such as Martin Buber (1878-1965), Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) and Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961) were drawn in various ways to Daoist ideas. Each of them saw important confirmation of their own particular visions which, remarkably, were themselves more or less an attempt to overcome the previous, problematic perspectives inherent in the 'West'. Heidegger, who attested his interest for the concept of *dao* in his *On the Way to Language* (1959), is well known for his philosophical project of going beyond the 'Western' metaphysical thinking and its negative outcomes, such as the dominion of *techne* over the world. He endeavored to translate the *Daodejing* with scarce success, while Buber managed a translation, with commentary, of some chapters of the *Zhungzi*. Jung, on the other hand, was drawn to translations of the *Yijing* and a Daoist inner alchemy text translated as *The Secret of the Golden Flower* in the late 1920s.[36] His commentaries greatly helped the dissemination of these texts. In the first work Jung saw the confirmation of his popular idea of 'synchronicity', i.e. an alternative understanding of nature and human nature in terms of meaningful patterns of events, while in the latter he exploited the visualization techniques of *yin-yang* binarism as a way of explicating his theory of the psyche as a process in which opposite forces seek mutual accommodation and balance. For Jung these works were not about divination or other supersti-

36 The original title is *Taiyi jinhua zongzhi*, "The Ultimate Purport of the Golden Flower of the Great One" (Esposito 2008).

tions, instead he understood them as therapeutic tools useful to explore the unconscious of his patients in analysis and, ultimately, to cope with what he saw as a spiritual crisis at the heart of European culture. It is worth mentioning that also Alan Watts held an enduring interest in Daoism (Clake 2000, 61-126, 143-75).

More remarkably, the tantric tradition now starts to be seen in a positive light, probably because, as Urban suggests, in the midst of the horrors of war, the Tantra was seen as the "most transgressive and violent path to the sacred – beyond good and evil, in violation of conventional law", so it came to be considered "the most appropriate – perhaps unavoidable – religion for this darkest, most violent of epochs" (Urban 2003, 185-6; cf. 185-205 for this whole paragraph). For example, the Indologist Heinrich Zimmer (1890-1943) considered Tantra as providing a much-needed antidote for the hyper-intellectualized world of the Judeo-Christian West, thanks to its affirmation of this material world, of sensuality and passions. From Zimmer's perspective, also influenced by the works of Jung, Tantrism reflected the archaic stratum of human civilization, an ancient matriarchal culture of goddess worship, in contrast with the patriarchal, life-denying Christian tradition. A similar predilection for Tantrism was entertained by Eliade, whose studies, we have seen above (§§ 2.1.1 and 2.1.5), were also meant to help modern man to re-discover a relation with 'the Sacred', which is expressed in various symbols from all religions, called hierophanies. What most intrigued Eliade were those symbols representing the *coincidentia oppositorum*, such as the androgyne, the golem, or the philosopher's stone of the alchemists. Therefore, for Eliade, the tantric tradition is one of the few ones still accessible to fallen modern man, thanks to its imagery of sexual intercourse as the most explicitly 'biological' and physical expression of *coincidentia oppositorum*, and thanks to its being ultimately a path that identifies the 'sacred' with the 'profane'. Finally, Tantrism was also interpreted by right-wind intellectuals such as Julius Evola as the solution to modern malaise, such as democracy being guided by weaklings and repressing unhealthy Christian morals. Tantrism offers the path of the "virile hero who dares to transgress the laws that bind other human beings" (Urban 2003, 196) and forces man to embrace both its sexual and violent aspects as a means of first liberation from the decadent times in which superiors are subjected to the rule of the many, and then towards the construction of a society of aristocratic and hierarchical rule.

Apart from the reception and re-elaboration on the intellectual and textual level, we can see a shift towards the 'technologization' of East-Asian traditions, especially after World War II, that is, as a sort of focalization of practice as a distinct element, or at least as the first step towards a secondary, non-compulsory doctrinal engagement. In the Euro-American reception of Buddhism, the grow-

ing appeal of the inner, psychological sphere combined itself with the common sense of 'technological neutrality' brought about by the advancement in applied science and consumerism. What resulted was the paradox that "while meditation is often considered the heart of Buddhism, it is also deemed the element most detachable from the tradition itself" (McMahan 2008, 185; cf. also Payne 2018, 10-14). A pivotal role in this sense has also been played by a peculiar development in Theravāda Buddhism, called the Vipassanā Movement. It emerged from the Buddhist traditions of Burma (Myanmar), Thailand, and Sri Lanka, and capitalized on the previous Buddhist reformist movements with their emphasis on meditation, their diffusion amongst the laity, and their insistence on the idea of experience as universal and nonsectarian. It became a kind of modern meditation tradition of its own. By focusing on a few precise texts such as the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (Sutra on the Foundations of Mindfulness) and the treatise *Visuddhimagga* (Path of Purification), reformers like the Burmese monk Mahāsī Sayādaw (1904-1982) offered a simplified version of the older forms of meditation. They cast off all those extensive traditional rituals, merit-making and initiatory elements integral to the Theravāda Buddhism as a whole, thus enabling the adoption of meditation by large numbers of lay and urban practitioners with little or no formal Buddhist training. This movement began to gain popularity throughout the Theravāda world before its broader global spread and it was connected, as in the case of other Asian religious reformers, to political independence movements (cf. Sharf 1995, 252-9; Crosby 2013, 157-69). Mahāsī's disciple, the German monk Nyanaponika Thera (born Siegmund Feniger, 1901-1994) coined the term 'bare attention' to highlight his master's focus on *sati* ('mindfulness' but also 'remembrance'), understood as non-judgmental awareness to whatever appears to consciousness *hic et nunc*. These kinds of interpretations contributed to meditation being seen more as a psychological method – a 'science of mind', as Thera called it – and which also lead to straightforwardly de-contextualized and 'technologized' outcomes such as the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Programme (MBSR). This was developed in the 1970s by professor of medicine, and Buddhism practitioner, Jon Kabat-Zinn (b. 1944) to reduce distress and to increase well-being. Other similar developments were also linked to the neurology- and cognitive sciences-based research on meditation that started appearing in the 1960s (Macmahan 2008, 204-7; Sharf 2015).

This modality in the reception of Asian traditions as being mainly practice applies well also to the case of the popularization of Daoism. From the 1960s onward, changes in the immigration laws brought more Chinese to North America, some of whom, while not being Daoist in terms of any formal institutional affiliation, were experienced in various forms of Chinese meditation and bodily techniques. One

of the most famous (and successful) of these practitioners is Mantak Chia (b. 1944), a Chinese born in Thailand who had a background in both Chinese and Euro-American medicine and also underwent training in traditional Daoist practices. In 1979 he opened a healing and acupuncture center in New York called Taoist Esoteric Yoga Center. Presently with the name of Healing Tao Center, it is one of the "most widespread institutional forms of popular Western Daoism" (Palmer, Siegler 2017, 119). Open to any kind of student, it teaches a simplified system of breathing, visualization, meditation, and postures based on the Daoist practice of Inner Alchemy. According to Palmer and Siegler, this popularized Daoism seems to be fitting rather well into the American alternative spirituality cultures, which are deluded by traditional religions, lament social atomization, but retain nonetheless a strong individualist component. Indeed, Daoist traditions do contain a rich repository of methods which have several practical aspects concerning issues of personal wellness, such as gymnastic, dietary provisions, meditation, even techniques to enhance sexual activity, all of which are presented in this popularized Daoism as requiring no belief or adhesion to a specific dogma nor membership. On the other side, they reflect a worldview which, once stripped of its rituals or mythological imaginary, offers an exotic holistic view of the interconnectedness of the body, mind and breath with the whole cosmos. An interconnectedness that must be cultivated in the right way to reach 'spiritual' transcendence, thus combining modern self-centeredness with a sense of 'cosmic' brotherhood with both human and non-human actors. All of this is further combined with the charismatic and liberating morals embodied by the figure of the extravagant or nonconformist Daoist sage from texts such as *Daodejing* and *Zhuangzi*, which safeguard the freedom and uniqueness of the individual (Palmer, Siegler 2017, 141-64).

A similar discussion applies also to the Tantric tradition, which burst into popular culture starting around 1960. The ground was prepared by previous scandals such as the foundation of the Tantrik Order already in the 1900s in America by Pierre Arnold Bernard (1875?-1955), or by the deeds of the (in)famous magician Aleister Crowley (1875-1947). The first, trained by a putative, immigrate tantric yogin, is remembered for having set up a chain of 'tantric clinics' in which he introduced the doctrine and practice of Tantrism to the American upper middle class. The emphasis on sexual topics, coupled with the charisma and popularity of Bernard among women, stirred up a series of scandals. The second is well known for his 'sex magic', in which themes of Euro-American occultism and Tantrism were woven into magical practices that involved sexual intercourse. Both men were key figures in the sensationalization of Tantrism as something countering the mainstream culture and social conventions. In this way, Tantrism was reinterpreted from a tradition that was concerned

with secrecy and power to one focused on valorization and optimization of sexual activity. As a matter of fact, Tantrism spread widely through successful publications such as *Tantra: The Yoga of Sex* (1964) by Omar Garrison (1913-1997), which depicted Tantrism both as a sort of a 'cult of ecstasy' and as a technique for enhancement of sexual pleasure, often in connection with other non-tantric texts such as the *Kāma Sūtra*. This reading fit well within the discourses related to the so-called Sexual Revolution, and the more general American counterculture. For this latter, the disturbing tantric image of a terrifying yet erotic Mother Kālī was a powerful metaphor to address the lack of the liberating role of sex and femininity in the repressive 'West'. These developments, in turn, triggered a wave of gurus who arrived in America in the 1970s, an example of such was the famous Osho-Rajneesh (1931-1990) who accepted the identification of Tantra with sex and taught a largely 'sexo-centric' brand of Tantra marketed as "the most exciting path to enlightenment" (Urban 2003, 249). At any rate, related scandals induced him and his 'spiritual business model' to embrace a more generic New Age host of ideas (on the issues of this whole paragraph cf. Urban 2003, 222-83).

As a way of concluding, not only this section but the whole discussion started at § 3.3, we may see a sort of 'evolution' in the interplay of hetero-Orientalism and self-Orientalism, which are both centered, we have argued, around the construction of an implicit notion of 'West' as the universal point of reference. We have in fact seen how, in resonance with the components of this 'West' presently under the spotlight, be it 'reason', 'Christianity', 'science', 'poetics', 'crisis', 'Aryan race', 'individualism', 'sexuality', and so on, corresponding other- and self-representations of the 'East' promptly emerged.

Consistent with the baseline thesis that representations of the 'Other' speak more about the 'Self', it should not come as a surprise that the last evolution of contemporary representations of Asian religions are characterized by the following elements: general holistic visions, individualism, self-realization, psychologism, aversion to ritualism, quest for body-mind harmony to be realized through a host of various techniques, and mainstream-countering tendencies, often condensable into the three 'E': exoticism, eroticism and esotericism. In other words, a series of characteristics that fit well within the contemporary discourses on spirituality (§ 3.2.4). These observations notwithstanding, we must not forget that orientalist other- and self-representations do not evolve in the sense of erasing the old with the new, but concur to create a series of stratified images which nowadays form a sort of common cultural asset, and therefore are highly impactful for the present-day conception, dissemination and also consumption of East-Asian religions. This observation highlights the relevance of these historical developments for our discussion of the didactic and educative issues in teaching Asian religions.

3.4 Conclusion

From a certain point of view, we may say that the consequences of the analysis of the two challenges explored so far point somehow in two opposite directions.

On one hand, by observing the epistemological difficulties that a certain paradigm of religion would encounter when dealing with Japanese and other Asian religious traditions, we implicitly affirm that there are certain phenomena, the characteristics of which tend to be overlooked by, or even 'resist' to, an epistemological domestication. Therefore, they should be studied and represented through different lenses. We saw in fact that an emphasis on what we have called the 'inner dimension', the intellectual/experiential/existential/psychological/moral aspects of religions, overshadow various key elements of the ways in which East-Asian religions are conceived and practiced, such as the importance of practical and this-worldly benefits, the importance of ritual and the role of the body (§ 3.2.3). Concerning the supposed key role of doctrine and beliefs, especially in relation to the taxonomical intent of distinguishing between religions as clear-cut socio-cultural phenomena, we saw the difficulties in defining the specific traits of a certain religion by looking for a well-defined, distinguishing set of beliefs. Many traditions, such as in the case of the Indian subcontinent, may partake, with different interpretations, in certain common tenets, while diverging in many others (§ 3.2.2.4). We have seen how many practitioners may actually engage simultaneously with different religious traditions. We have also examined the ways in which different beliefs and practices have interacted with each other, a process which, in the case of *kami*-related beliefs and Buddhism, resulted in a new self-conscious identification of a well-defined tradition, called Shintō. Again, we have also seen the difficulty, such as in the case of Confucianism, of delineating the borders between 'religion', 'political ethos', 'ethics' or 'philosophy' (§ 3.2.1.2). Furthermore, the historical sketch of the dynamic interplay of self- and hetero-representations of East-Asian religion (§ 3.3) has shown how the ideas and conceptual knots around which these partial representations were construed basically correspond to those concepts which were implied in the construction of the modern Euro-American paradigm of religion itself. Indeed, a paradigm, especially if it comes from a powerful context, has always a certain normative power, judging what should and should not be considered relevant – in this case, as a religion or not. When applied, it is logical to think that positive appreciation goes along with what fulfills the expectation of that paradigm, and deprecation goes with what eschews it. We saw for example the general positive reception of the 'original' Buddhism as an inner-world oriented, highly ethical religious tradition preached by a well defined founder who established

clear principles, such as the Four Noble Truths (§§ 2.1.8 and 3.3.2). There was, of course, other pivotal issues engaged by the nascent field of the study of religion\s, born in the cultural context of the Victorian Age, such as questions of universalism and particularism in a context of evolutionism, and the distinctions between religion, science and superstitions (§§ 2.1.5, 2.1.8, 3.2.3 and 3.3.2).

On the other hand, we should not forget that certain aspects of that paradigm, albeit stereotypical, may 'evolve' and switch to different configurations. For example, a positive appreciation of a religion as a clear system of beliefs that must be engaged in an inner-worldly, ethical modality by a rational individual, may shift, often with polemical intentions, towards a higher appreciation of a bodily component, and a less emphasis or outright refusal to rigid doctrine, while maintaining or even reinforcing the stress on individualism. We have seen, for example, the appeal of Daoist or Tantric bodily practices as a way of holistic self-realization in the context of contemporary spirituality (§§ 3.2.4 and 3.3.4). Even more importantly, we should also be wary of falling into an 'antiquarian trap' and denying or despising any kind of historical change in religions. We would not be dissimilar to those first orientalists who were deluded to see how their cherished, highly philosophical or mystical texts, ones such as the *Upaniṣad* or the *Daodejing*, gave birth to religions full of ritual trappings and superstitions (§ 3.3.2). In other words, we need to acknowledge that, in the contemporary, increasingly connected global context, the effect of nearly two centuries of mutual influences between Euro-American cultural spheres and East-Asian cultural spheres – albeit with a major role played by the former – has led to profound adaptation and modifications in the landscape of East-Asian religions, developments that actually fit within a modern paradigm of religion. To give a concrete, yet ideal example,[37] it may not be too difficult to find, especially in a urban area of Japan, China or Sri Lanka, a Buddhist monk, well inserted in his institutional organization, who would consider his religion to be a system of sophisticated philosophical, psychological, and ethical ideas that, differently from monotheistic traditions, are compatible with basic scientific principles, such as experimental verification, rigorous reasoning and principle of causality. He would value complex Buddhist rituals as a way to maintain community bonds and reaffirm commitments, however he would strive to simplify them in order to draw more lay people. He would be uncomfortable with those practices, often involving spirit worship or manipulation, aimed at seeking mainly prosperity and profit.

37 I cite here one of the ideal portraits drawn by McMahan (2008, 34-6, 41-2) as possible examples of contemporary Buddhist practitioners, that he "assembled rather unsystematically from interviewees, public figures, Buddhist authors, and scholarly ethnographies" (McMahan 2008, 27).

Therefore, he would try to disentangle popular spirit worship from the Buddhist *dharma* and *saṃgha*. For him, Buddhism should focus on practices, such as meditation, which is meant to cultivate higher states of awareness and universal compassion. He would also think of Buddhism as a social force that can foster peace, justice, egalitarianism and democracy. While belonging, in qualitative terms, to a minority in respect to other East-Asian Buddhists, he would be in a highly influential position, together with other renowned Buddhist leaders such as the fourteenth Dalai Lama or the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh.

In summary, trying to deal simultaneously with the 'epistemological' and 'historical challenges' represents an additional hurdle, which can be summarized in the following, somehow paradoxical consideration: what we are trying to do is to avoid the imposition of certain paradigms onto East-Asian religion, while admitting that these very paradigms have deeply entered in the development of these traditions, which are nowadays no more confined to their traditional regions, but are increasingly gaining a global and diffused character, not only through expansions carried by historical institutions, but also through the eclecticism of contemporary spirituality. In the next chapter, we will see if and how these challenges are engaged or at least acknowledged in some examples taken from English RE.

4 Case-Study: Critical Analysis of English RE

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4.1 Introduction and Model for Analysis

As stated in ch. 1, the aim of the present study is to address the theme of Japanese and other East-Asian religious traditions within the context of a RE which is supposed to be non-confessional, in the sense of not following the tenets of any particular religious traditions and of being open to any kind of pupil, irrespectively of their religious or non-religious affiliation. As Alberts and others observe (Alberts 2007, 2, 5; Cush 2016, 54; RE Council 2017, 33), the Europe-

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an countries which have pioneered such a kind of RE are England[1] and Sweden. England has nearly 50 years of experience in developing multi-faiths, inclusive religious education, going back to the first Shap conference in 1969 and the Schools Council's Working paper 36 in 1971 (cf. infra, § 4.2.1). The beginning of Sweden's Integrative RE can be dated back to 1962 with the provision of the compulsory subject of *Kristendomskunskap* ('knowledge about Christianity') on an explicit non-confessional basis, which subsequently developed into the present-day *religionskunskap* ('knowledge of religions') (Alberts 2007, 221-5).

In what follows, I will focus on English RE for various reasons. First, there is the practical consideration of linguistic accessibility of sources. Secondly, as we will see, the peculiar, non-centralized RE system in England features a dialectic between:

a. non-compulsory, yet-authoritative, indications from the central government;
b. the Local Education Authorities;
c. a rich and lively academic debate on RE pedagogy and didactics, documented in journals such as the *British Journal of Religious Education*.

It should be also noted that the scope of this journal is not limited to RE in UK, but is considered to be one of the main international academic forums concerning issues of education and religion.[2] England RE came thus to be a trend-setter for what concerns integrative RE in Europe not only thanks to the research findings published in this and other journals, but also for the international resonance of certain RE practices, such as the Syllabus of Bradford (cf. more below, § 4.2.1) and of such scholars as Robert Jackson, probably the most renowned RE scholar in the European context and beyond. As we will deal more in detail with his work (§ 4.5), it suffices here to say that, for example, in the Council of Europe's *Recommendation CM/Rec(2008)12 of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on the*

1 The reason why England is taken into consideration instead of the whole UK lies in the fact that Northern Ireland and Scotland have separate and different systems for religious education. Northern Ireland's system is particularly shaped by its own history and religious demography, in the sense that RE policy and practice continues to be influenced by Christianity to a greater degree. Scotland has a devolved Government which is responsible for its education system and is characterized by both denominational and non-denominational schools fully funded by the state. Concerning Wales, its state-maintained school system is close to that of England but has been increasingly diverging since 2006 (Jackson 2013, 2).

2 An influential publication at supra-national level such as the *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching About Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools* explicitly cites this journal as a reliable source of professional and scholarly information on RE (OSCE/ODIHR 2007, 41 fn. 48).

Dimension of Religions and Non-religious Convictions within Intercultural Education (CoE 2008b) – to which Jackson contributed – basically cites and endorses RE approaches pertaining to or originated within the English RE debate (discussed and presented especially in Jackson 2004). These are the 'phenomenological approach', the 'interpretative approach', the 'dialogical approach' and the 'contextual approach'.[3] It should be noted, furthermore, that the dialogical and contextual approaches can be seen as off-shots, or at least as approaches strongly inspired by Jackson's own original 'interpretative approach' (cf. more below, § 4.5.1). Another indication of the European influence of English RE in general, and Jackson's RE in particular, is the EU-funded project "Religion in Education. A contribution to Dialogue or a Factor of Conflict in Transforming Societies of European Countries" (REDCO), which explicitly draw from the interpretative approach (cf. REDco Project 2009, 18-20).

At any rate, apart from the interpretative approach, it should be noted that the English RE debate involves a noteworthy number of peculiar theoretical and methodological approaches (Alberts 2007 identifies nine influential RE approaches) and that, ultimately, English RE is a fruitful case study in which we can analyze in depth a fair number of the many 'shapes' and 'shades' of RE (cf. Jensen 2017b, 205) that we have quickly surveyed in ch. 1 and variously defined as 'life-world-related', 'cultural studies-related', 'learning about', 'learning from' or even 'small c-confessional'.

Conversely, in Sweden, notwithstanding a conspicuous number of publications, both in form of academic contribution or in form of teaching materials, it seems that the field of RE didactics is fragmented and lacking what concerns the 'big picture'. That is, it misses addressing questions such as what should constitute the core of the subject and what its overarching goals ought to be, leaving these issues to the national, centralized curriculum (Dalevi, Niemi, unpublished paper; Dalevi, Niemi 2016). As a matter of fact, several Swedish universities use international material, notably from England, in their teacher education programmes for teaching RE didactics (Dalevi, Niemi 2016, 77-8; cf. also Alberts 2007, 222). This does not mean that, in the elaboration of my personal RE concepts and recommendations, I will completely disregard any insight from the Swedish case and, when relevant, concepts and practices will be presented and discussed, drawing from secondary sources.

For our analysis of English RE we will draw insight from ch. 2 and formulate five lines of enquiry to be applied. For the sake of simplicity, I have regrouped the various questions in two macro areas, 're-

3 Some or very similar discussion of RE approaches can be seen in other CoE publications such as CoE 2007 and CoE 2014.

ligion' and 'education', each of them further divided into – strongly interrelated – key topics that will guide our exploration. Concerning the 'religion' area, the first key-topic is the *concept of religion*: is religion explicitly defined? If not, which kind of implicit concept can be surmised? Which is the degree of problematization of the concept of religion? What is the ontological and epistemic status of religion? Which are the dimensions these (implicit or explicit) theories of religion considered?

How religion\s are conceived will obviously influence the second key-topic, which is *representation of religion*: what are the aspects/elements taken into consideration or chosen as preferred focus? By saying 'aspects/elements', apart from the more 'canonical' categories such as texts, beliefs, rituals, I refer also to the degree in which internal variation is acknowledged, to the ontological status/epistemological value of division in more or less discrete traditions and subtraditions, and the historical character and development of religion. More in general, which is the degree of openness and inclusiveness of these representations, and conversely, how much they are stereotyped and modelled after a Christian-Protestant paradigm? In other words, how is the dialectic between universality and particularity, i.e. the need to generalize and at the same time to preserve diversity, addressed in this regard?

The question of how religion is represented is intertwined with the question of the *epistemological underpinnings* to the subject matter. For example, if representations of religions include economy-related issues such as the halal-product market or Islamic finance, an adequate epistemological perspective is needed. In general, under this key-topic the question is: how should religions be studied? Which could be subdivided into (but not limited to) questions such as: which are the epistemological devices (comparison, explanation, description, etc.) and how are they used? Is the insider-outsider issue addressed? Also, I intend to address here the degree of self-reflexivity in relation to issues put forward (not only, but especially) by the critical study of religion. Are 'religions' taken as natural entities or are their complexities and discursive genealogies engaged and connected to Euro-American historical background? Are power-related issues tackled?

The 'education' area is divided in two key-topics. I call the first *didactic transposition*, and it consists of asking which is the scholarly knowledge taken as reference for RE. What kind of transformation does this knowledge undergo, and which are the actors involved in these processes? Concerning the epistemological status of RE, what are the postulates, fundamental approaches, specific problems, languages and research methods taken from the knowledge of reference? Which *mindset* relative to the selected knowledge is privileged? Which are the general and particular objectives set?

The issue of the objectives leads us to the second key-topic, which is the *educational perspective*. Under this topic I intend to individuate, first of all, the general idea of education which is implicitly or explicitly endorsed by the RE taken under examination. Which value is attributed to RE in relation to the society at large? Which are the social practices evaluated as relevant and as desirable outcomes of RE? However, not only the broad educational ideas, i.e. in the sense of *Bildung*, will be examined, but also the more didactic-related elements, such as the actual teaching practices, the use of artifacts or the way in which that learning dimension from the point of view of the pupil is taken into account.

In what follows we will first briefly introduce the historical and institutional context of English RE, with a focus on the two so-called non-statutory frameworks for RE, plus an important 2018 report commissioned by the English RE Council. These documents constitute the general background of the six-authors involved in the academic debate on English RE that I have selected to be analyzed in depth in this chapter. Their works are among the most representative of the English RE discourses and I have classified them under three categories: 'Rational-theological', 'Existential-instrumental' and 'Interpretative-dialogical', which I think are well expressive of the diversity of views concerning what RE is all about and how it should be implemented.

4.2 English RE: Historical Context and Institutional Framework

4.2.1 A Historical Sketch of English RE

Historically, religions were the primary providers of free education in England as well as in the whole UK. Church schools predate the establishment of state education and began to receive state funding after the 1902 Education Act which granted free, compulsory Christian education up to the age of 11 and first established LEAs (Local Education Authorities) as local government bodies. In this way, most denominational schools were merged into what will become the state-maintained sector. After the 1944 Education Act the government took over the responsibility for providing full-time education to all children up to the age of 16. However, benefitting from state funds has been a long tradition for many religiously-run education establishments, usually defined as 'voluntary schools'. In 2007, about one-third of maintained schools in England still had an explicit religious ethos (Newcombe 2013, 369-70).

The 1944 Education Act stated that "religious instruction shall be given in every county school and every voluntary school" (RE

Council 2017, 29). Concerning the contents of this 'religious instruction', LEAs were required to convene ASCs (Agreed Syllabus Conferences) to produce RE syllabi to be implemented in the schools. These conferences were made of four committees. Two of them were formed by religious constituencies: the Church of England and 'other denominations' that, at that time, were basically other protestant Christians. The other two committees are still formed today by the local authority representatives and teacher representative. To support ASCs, LEAs were given the power, but not required, to establish SACREs (Standing Council on RE). Even if ACs and SACREs correspond to two different legal bodies, in practice the people involved have been mostly the same (RE Council 2017 70).

At this time RE was still about (and named as) 'religious instruction' on a Christian base, with an withdrawal option if parents wanted. However, during the 1960s and 1970s, academic debate started to engage with issues of religious education in correlation to secularisation and the increasing religious diversity within society. In 1969 the Shap[4] Working Party for World Religions in Education, a group comprising both RE and religious studies professionals, was founded to encourage the study and teaching of world religions and to provide reliable resources and teaching materials. One of the founders was the renowned scholar of religions Ninian Smart (1927-2001). Smart criticized confessional RE and called for a RE analogous to academic religious studies, which at that time were mainly based on phenomenology. He thus suggested enlarging the range of religions to be studied, by appealing to the concept of 'world religions'; to employ phenomenology bracketing and to consider the provision of knowledge of religions as the main task of RE, instead of moral education (Alberts 2007, 88-94). At the same time, contemporary liberal protestant theologians such as John Hick (1922-2012) offered a further theoretical underpinning for multi-faith education, albeit not strictly non-confessional, by proposing a pluralistic theology in which God is at the center of each religious traditions (cf. Cush 2016, 56-7). Another key idea came from Harold Lukes (1912-1980) who, in the early 1960s, considered that 'religious instruction' should be focused on the relevant existential problems of the pupils, instead of doctrinal matters (Jackson, O'Grady 2007, 193).

All these ideas proved influential and in the 1970s some local authorities started to interpret the legislation in ways that religions other than Christianity came to be included within the committee structure of SACREs and ASCs. One of the most famous experiments in this sense is the so-called Syllabus of Bradford, a syllabus for RE born out of the cooperation of various religious representatives of this city

4 Shap is not an acronym bur refers to the place where the working party was funded.

in the West Yorkshire, together with scholars and other local stakeholders of the educative system. It was one of the first syllabi aimed at ensuring that pupils would know and understand a range of religions and worldviews, including in each their internal diversity. It was meant to guide pupils towards an engagement with religions and worldviews in a dialogical manner, focusing on fundamental questions, potential positive solutions, in the perspective of enhancing mutual respect and enrichment. It has also been translated and disseminated outside England, e.g. in Italy (cf. Salvarani 2006).

The 1988 Education Reform Act included significant changes to the nature of RE. First, 'religious instruction' was changed into 'religious education', enshrining its multi-faith character (UK Parliament, Education Reform Act 1988, Section 8.3) and prohibiting the provision of such RE in form of "any catechism or formulary which is distinctive of any particular religious denomination" in state-funded schools (Section 84.8). The composition of SACREs was officially enlarged with the inclusion of members of other religions, but the Church of England maintained however a greater voting power. Also, in relation to the agreed syllabi, the Act stated that they

> shall reflect the fact that religious traditions in Great Britain are in the main Christian, whilst taking account of the teaching and practices of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain. (UK Parliament, Education Reform Act 1988, Section 8.3)

In 1994 the SCAA (School Curriculum and Assessment Authority) issued two non-statutory National Model Syllabi. They included material on six religions in Britain (Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism) and mentioned for the first time that the two well-known attainment targets for English RE, based on the work of Michael Grimmitt (1987): 'learning about religion' and 'learning from religion'. These latter were thus popularized, and have gained wide currency ever since (Alberts 2007, 99-104; Jackson 2013, 125-6).

These models were then superseded by further non-statutory frameworks in 2004 and in 2013. In 2018 a report in 2018 entitled *Religion and Worldviews: The Way Forward. A National Plan for RE* (CoRE 2018) recommended some quite substantial changes. While these recommendations still have not made their way into the legislative process, this report represents in any case an important development in the public and academic debate concerning RE.

4.2.2 The National RE Frameworks and Other Developments

In the 2004 non-statutory Framework for Religious Education, we do not find an explicit treatment of the concept of religion in itself. However, according to the attainment target 'learning about', to inquiry on the nature of religion means first of all dealing with "beliefs, teachings and ways of life, sources, practices and forms of expression" (QCA 2004, 11) relative to ethical issues and 'ultimate questions' such as "'Is God real?', 'Why are we alive?', 'What is meant by good and evil?', 'Why do people suffer?'" (11 fn. 3). Religion thus seems a 'reservoir' of theological-existential answers that also informs philosophy, ethics, arts and science (cf. 30). Indeed, such "important concepts, experiences and beliefs" are deemed "at the heart of religious and other traditions and practices" (14).

Accordingly, propositional beliefs occupy the main position in the representation of religions offered. KS1 pupils[5] are expected to learn about "different beliefs about God and the world around them" (24), and how these beliefs are expressed in festivals, symbols, by teachers and other authorities. Concerning KS3 pupils, they too are expected to engage with

> key ideas and questions of meaning in religions and beliefs, including issues related to God, truth, the world, human life, and life. (29)

Other themes include issues of truth in science-religion relationship and what different religions 'say about' (29) human rights, health, wealth, war, interfaith dialogue, etc. In other words, there is an underlying a-historical and monolithic conception of religions as having precise and different sets of propositions concerning various issues of public concern. Indeed, the theme of inner variability within religious traditions seems hinted at only for KS4 and KS5 pupils, who should "investigate issues of diversity within and between religions" (30). Concerning the historical dimension, the only mention is the "the extent to which the impact of religion and beliefs on different communities and societies has changed over time" (37). However, to recognize it is considered an exceptional level of attainment – that is, not necessary.

Also the epistemological underpinnings are not clearly presented, and the impression is that a 'theological-existential approach' is also here applied. One of the main educative contributions of RE is in the domain of "spiritual, moral, social and cultural development", to be gained through

5 The different key stages (KS) in English education are: KS1 (year 1 and 2, age 5-7), KS2 (year 3-6. age 7-11), KS3 (year 7-9, age 11-14), KS4 (year 10-11, age 14-16), followed by the post-16 non-compulsory education (year 12-13), informally labeled KS5.

> discussing and reflecting on key questions of meaning and truth such as the origins of the universe, life after death, good and evil, beliefs about God and values such as justice, honesty and truth. (14)

KS5 pupils are expected to use "religious, moral and philosophical vocabulary" (30), which may suggest that the chosen epistemological bases come from philosophy (including moral philosophy) and from the various religious tradition themselves.[6]

Such configuration is also coherent from the point of view of didactic transposition. If we look to the groups and associations which contributed to frameworks, the greater majority are religious groups or the educational divisions of these groups, followed by teachers' associations and educational authorities. In other words, at the level of the noosphere, the *savoirs* considered are, on one side, those of the insiders/practitioners of religious traditions, and on the other, those of the educational specialists/practitioners. Given this situation, it is more appropriate to label the English RE as presented in this document as 'multi-faith' instead of strictly non-confessional. As a result, we have much less didactic transpositions of disciplines meant to produce second-order discourses about religion (sociology, history, anthropology, and so on), and more didactic transpositions of first-order discourses about religion. That is, those discourses which revolve around the above cited 'ultimate questions' and use a conceptual vocabulary of "philosophical, moral and religious" character. In other words, we can say that the 'learning about' attainment is meant to develop cognitive competence of the religions *as themselves*. The only 'disciplinary lens' applied seems to be of 'theological-existential' nature.

Such a 'theological-existential' approach can be surmised also from the educational aims. The 'learning about' attainment is supposed to connect closely with the 'learning from religion' attainment. That is, pupils, while learning different religions, beliefs and values are expected to also explore their own beliefs and questions of meaning, and to develop their sense of identity and belonging (7), so that they may feel 'confident' and 'positive' about them and sharing them without fears. Educational objectives expect pupils to develop "their own ideas, particularly in relation to questions of identity and belonging, meaning, purpose and truth, and values and commitments" (11) or "recognising their own uniqueness as human beings and affirming their self-worth" (13).[7]

6 Indeed, given the conception of religion as a highly coherent set of propositions, it does not come as a surprise if religions are engaged as 'epistemological systems', in the sense of tools for knowing reality.

7 Other relevant 'theological-existential' traits of educative outcomes can be seen in the acknowledgment that "knowledge is bounded by mystery", the development of

These 'theological-existential' educational outcomes are then supposed to feed into intercultural skills also. In other words, the aim is to foster the positive resolution of conflicts in spiritual, moral, social and cultural issues, by enabling pupils to justify and defend personal opinions on these regards (15) and, more in general, by having them "sensitive to the feelings and ideas of others" and being "ready to value difference and diversity for the common good" (13).

Also in the case of the 2013 *Review of Religious Education in England*, we need to retrieve the implicit concept of religion. Here RE should contribute to education by

> provoking challenging questions about meaning and purpose in life, beliefs about God, ultimate reality, issues of right and wrong and what it means to be human. (RE Council 2013, 14)

and RE pupils are expected to learn

> about and from religions and worldviews in local, national and global contexts, to discover, explore and consider different answers to these questions. (RE Council 2013, 14)

Again, religions seem to be implicitly defined as answers to common 'challenging questions', and such answers are expressed "in coherent systems or ways of seeing the world" made up of "belief, teachings and sources of wisdom and authority including experience" (cf. 25).

This implicit conceptualization is consistent with the representations proposed. In KS1 pupils are expected to learn about beliefs and practices such as festivals and worship. A certain importance is given to the 'sources of wisdom', which include key texts such as the Bible, the Torah and the Bhagavad Gita, and the teachings of key persons from different traditions such as Buddha, Jesus Christ, Prophet Muhammad, Guru Nanak and humanist philosophers (14). KS1 pupils are to engage these 'sources' starting with the "moral value of stories" (25), while advanced pupils in KS3 or KS4-5, should focus on the investigation of "the influence and impact of religions and worldviews" (28) with a special emphasis on the key leaders, thinkers or founders of religions or worldviews. It is worth noting a better focus on the issue of inner diversity. Among the overall aims of RE, the importance of "recognising the diversity which exists within and between communities and amongst individuals" is explicitly affirmed (14). In summary, this framework is still based on a conception and representation of religions as phenomena being constituted primar-

a "sense of wonder at the world in which they live", and in the "capacity to respond to questions of meaning and purpose" (13).

ily by beliefs and teachings written in official texts or expounded by individuals, which only afterwards are expressed in practices and thus influence individuals and communities. There is a stronger emphasis on inner diversity.

Concerning the epistemological underpinnings, we find both continuity and discontinuity with the previous framework. A general 'theological approach' is still endorsed, as pupils are asked to "understand, interpret and *evaluate* texts, sources of wisdom and authority and *other evidence*", as well as to identify, investigate and *respond to questions posed*, and responses offered by some of the sources of wisdom" (14; italics added). More specifically KS1 pupils should "think about and respond to 'big questions'" (20), while KS4-5 pupils should consider "theological questions about truth that arise, giving reasons for the ideas they hold" (26). Personal-existential perspectives are applied through "key concepts and questions of belonging, meaning, purpose and truth", to which pupils should respond 'creatively' (25). For example,

> linking to Science, students examine arguments about questions of origins and purpose in life (where do we come from? why are we here?). (27)

There is more explicit reference to disciplines that produce second-order knowledge about religions. KS1 pupils should start by using certain key words (holy, sacred, scripture, festival, symbol, humanist), while advanced pupils are expected to "use ideas from the sociology of religion, the psychology of religion or the philosophy of religion", and to "use ethnographic approach to interview believers representing diversity within a tradition" (26). Furthermore, there is a noteworthy suggestion for a theoretical exercise on the concept of religion itself:

> build an *understanding of religion itself as a phenomenon*, rather than merely studying religions and worldviews one by one, (26; italics added)

> consider and evaluate the question: what is religion? Analyse the nature of religion using the main disciplines by which religion is studied. (67)

However, there are some critical elements in this regard, from the perspective of the contemporary study of religion\s, like the suggestion of using ideas from phenomenology in order to tackle arguments which engage "profoundly with moral, religious and spiritual issues" (28). Other questionable suggestions concern inquiring about "spiritual experiences (such as sensing the presence of God, or the experi-

ence of answered prayer)" (25), or to see weather "religion and spirituality are similar or different" (26).[8]

Nonetheless, these recommendations represent a step toward the problematization of the concept of religion as an educative aim of RE. From a didactic transposition point of view, this may reflect a changed composition in the noosphere out of which this document has been issued. In fact, the composition of RE Council, as of October 2013, also includes bodies like the British Association for the Study of religion\s (BASR) and the Independent Schools Religious Studies Association (2).

Even if they are not explicitly used, 'learning about religion' and 'learning from religion' still adequately describe the general educational aims of this framework. 'Learning about religion' is now delineated with more reference to methods and approaches to the study of religion\s, while the 'learning from religion' attainment target does not change substantially the existential/personal development objectives set by the precedent document. For example, KS1 pupils are expected to "find out about questions of right and wrong and begin to express their ideas and opinions" (68) or to "think and talk about their own ideas about God" (20), while more advanced pupils should "express insights into significant moral and ethical questions […] which invite personal response" (27).

From the point of view of intercultural and citizenship education, at KS1 it is suggested to foster a sense of cooperation by creating a 'recipe for living together happily' or a 'class charter for more kindness and less fighting' by drawing from different religious traditions (20). At KS3 it is suggested that engaging with controversial issues is at the heart of good RE as it helps to develop respectful disagreement. Accordingly, pupils should select a religious controversy to be investigated (26) and, in general, are expected to

> critically evaluate varied perspectives and approaches to issues of community cohesion, respect for all and mutual understanding, locally, nationally and globally. (28)

The recommendations of the Commission on Religious Education (CoRe) in the 2018 report *Religion and Worldviews: The Way Forward* propose some noteworthy innovations, starting from the name of the subject, which should change from 'Religious Education' to 'Religion and Worldviews'.[9] This change of name also reflects a different approach towards the subject matter itself. That is, a concern

8 We have addressed the (false) question of religion and spirituality above (§ 3.2.4).

9 For the sake of brevity and to avoid further acronyms, I will still refer to the educative practice proposed in this document as RE.

over the problematic nature of the concepts of 'religion' and 'worldviews' and of the necessity to address this theoretical step is sharply evident. In other words, differently from the previous documents, we are provided with a definition of religions, or, to be more precise, a definition of the 'worldview' of which religions are conceived as a subgenre. For this report, a worldview is:

> An overarching conceptual structure, a philosophy of life or an approach to life which structures how a person understands the nature of the world and their place in it. Worldviews encompass many, and sometimes all, aspects of human life – they influence how people understand what is real and what is not, how they decide what is good and what to do, how they relate to others, and how they express themselves, to name but a few examples. […] Worldviews should not be understood merely as sets of propositional beliefs. They also have emotional, affiliative (belonging) and behavioural dimensions. (CoRe 2018, 72)

Such worldviews are, strictly speaking, peculiar to any individual. They develop dynamically, influencing and being influenced by individuals' "beliefs, values, behaviors, experiences, identities and commitments" (4). Those worldviews that are shared and organized by certain groups and embedded in institutions are defined 'institutional worldviews', which generally include what are normally called 'religions' together with non-religious, organized worldviews such as institutionalized Humanism. The conceptual difference and relationships between personal and institutional worldviews are conceived in this way: personal worldviews may be more or less consciously constructed or coherent, and individuals holding them may explicitly mention an institutional worldview of reference, but not necessarily. Individuals, however, cannot help drawing their ideas from one or many worldviews, consciously or not. Interactions between individuals and groups, traditions and institutions are complex. People are freely and creatively influenced by a whole range of factors, not just by their religion or their adherence to a certain worldview (36).

Worldviews should be engaged in RE as "complex, diverse and plural" (12) and "dynamic" (72), in the sense that worldviews develop in interaction with each other, with overlapping and cross-fertilization. They are not fixed, bounded entities, but feature both shared characteristics as well as differences. This is because they are fluid, and adapt themselves to new times and cultures, and, as a consequence,

> patterns of belief, expression and belonging may change across and within worldviews, locally, nationally and globally, both historically and in contemporary times. (34)

Worldviews are said to be made up of not only belief and practice, but also of "rituals, narratives, experiences, interactions, social norms, doctrines, artistic expressions and other forms of cultural expression" (72). The distinctive trait (cf. also above, § 2.1.4) is a bundle of "fundamental questions of meaning and purpose" (12). These are shared by both religious and non-religious worldviews, address "the nature of reality, the meaning and purpose of human life, what constitutes a good life" (30), and inform the dimensions of "identity, belonging, commitment, and practice" (30).

The shift from the more specific and theological-oriented "fundamental questions" of the previous documents to these more generic and 'meaning-making'-oriented 'fundamental questions', is noteworthy. What I find missing is a more detailed discussion of what defines a certain worldview as religious or not. Distinction between religious and nonreligious worldviews is stated as "not as clear-cut as we might have thought" (30). The use of the term 'religion' by this document seems to rely on the self-definition of institution and individuals addressed (cf. 73).

Such emphasis on complexity influences the issue of representation, which this document laments as one of the main faults of the past practices of RE. The recommendation is to "move beyond an essentialised presentation of six major world faiths" (6). This means not only ensuring a deeper understanding of the complex and plural nature of those institutional worldviews which "are sometimes neglected" (30) – Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism –, but even suggesting a much broader range including Daoism, Confucianism, Shintō, religions from Australia, New Zeland and America, Zoroastrianism, paganism, modern/new religions such as Baha'i, Jehovah's Witnesses, Rastafari, etc. (cf. 75). There is also a concern towards the 'structural differences' among worldviews, for example, the fact that "different religious or non-religious worldviews may have different components or emphases" (36). That is, some traditions might put more weight on doctrine and orthodoxy while others might prioritize practices or orthopraxis. This is also a critique of past practices of RE which "have sometimes treated all worldviews as though they are predominantly a matter of assent to a series of propositions" (36), or neglected the fact that the same propositions are inevitably interpreted differently according to times, places, cultures and contexts (cf. 34, 37).

This emphasis on theoretical complexities is reflected in the explicit identification of the epistemological underpinning of this RE with a "wide range of academic disciplines" (13) such as

> anthropology, area studies, hermeneutics, history, other human and social sciences, philosophy, religious studies and theology. (37)

Affinities with the study of religion\s further increase as we read that the theoretical aims of

> understanding 'religion' as a category, and understanding the nature of worldviews, *are central to the aims of the subject*. Knowledge of particular worldviews alone is not sufficient. (36; italics added)

There is also the invitation for a genealogical study of the concept of religion:

> For older pupils, understanding the origins and uses of the concept 'religion' also helps to illuminate debates in the study of religion\s, for example on the nature of 'Hinduism,' as well as the possible shortcomings of the term. (36)

To be fair, a 'theological-philosophical' approach is not completely dismissed. It is still acknowledged that there are "fertile grounds for investigation" of "revealed truths" claimed by adherents of a particular worldview (73). We interpret this somehow dissonant recommendation as the result of ordinary negotiations among the commissioners and the stakeholders they represent.

This note leads us to the question of didactic transposition, in particular of the external DT and the noosphere. From an institutional and organizational point of view, the recommendations are probably the most innovative. There is a centralizing measure called "National Entitlement to the study of religion\s and worldviews", which is a set of compulsory, organizational principles that must serve as basis for developing programs of study for all state-funded schools (32-3). These principles reflect the above discussions on the concept, representations and epistemology plus the provision for RE teachers to be competent as educators and have a secure and updated subject knowledge. Building on these principles, the Department of Education should appoint, based on the recommendations from the Religious Education Council, a board in charge of the development of a national, non-statutory-program of study (38-9). This board is made up by professionals experts in academic research on Religion and Worldviews, in curriculum development, in teacher education and in actual classroom experience (39).

The non-statutory national programs of study are expected to have much more weight – similar to a national curriculum – than the previous non-statutory frameworks, because of another important recommended reform: the removal of the requirement for local education authorities to develop locally agreed syllabi (41). SACREs and ACs should thus change into "Local Advisory Network for Religion and Worldviews" (cf. 52-7), whose function is to facilitate the imple-

mentation of the National Entitlement, and to provide support and resources. Also, their composition changes, with an increased role of the professionals and practitioners in the school context along with an involvement of academic researchers. Notably, the proposal puts the Church of England at the same level as all the other religious traditions in the composition (cf. 39).

In other words, among the *savoirs* to be didactically transposed, a heavier weight is put on the academic disciplines, as the religious institutions and communities are no more directly involved in the creation of the program of study. This idea is reflected also in the observation concerning the change of the name of the subject:

> The name also removes the ambiguity in the phrase 'Religious Education', which is often wrongly assumed to be about making people more religious. (7)

The general educational perspective of this RE is not limited to providing the cognitive enrichment on the subject matter and introduction to knowledge and methods of various academic disciplines. These latter are also supposed to foster a range both specific and general, transferable skills, more or less intrinsic to these disciplines but with a broad educative application (29). More specific skills include, among others, analyzing primary and secondary sources, understanding symbolic language, using technical terminology, performing qualitative and quantitative research, applying hermeneutical approaches, etc. Wider transferable skills and dispositions include empathy, respectful critique of beliefs and positions, recognizing bias and stereotype, critical thinking, self-reflection, open mindedness and representing others' views with accuracy (29, 77). Even if addressed in a less detailed way, 'existential' educative aspects are not neglected. The transversal dimension of the "spiritual, moral, social and cultural development" policy (Ofsted 2004b, 6) is interpreted as being able to understand the human quest for meaning, being prepared for life in a diverse world, reflecting on one's own worldview as an answer to the "fundamental human questions" (77) and "articulating these responses clearly and cogently while respecting the right of others to differ" (73).

4.3 English RE: Rational-Theological Approach

4.3.1 Introduction

I put the works of two prominent authors in the fields of RE under this label. The first is Andrew Wright, active from the early 1990s till the present day. He is Professor of Religious and Theological Education at the Institute of Education, University College London and presently he coordinates the Critical Religious Education Network which includes Elina Wright from the University of Oxford, Angela Wright from King's College of London, Christina Easton from London School of Economics, and Angela Goodman from UCL Institute of Education. The last and most interesting work for our purposes produced by this network is *Critical Religious Education in Practice* (Easton et al. 2019), but other relevant works by Wright will be also examined.

The other author is L. Philip Barnes, presently Emeritus Reader in Religious and Theological Education at King's College of London. He has edited a collection of the major works for the publisher Routledge about RE (Barnes, Arthur 2016) issued by the *British Journal of Religious Education*.

The reasons why I put these authors together lies in their common focus on the philosophical and rational approach to RE, in the sense that a philosophical theorizing on the nature and aims of RE covers a good part of their research. Furthermore, they both see RE as an educative endeavor aimed at fostering competence for rationally assessing and judging the main doctrinal tenets of the religious traditions. Both of them prefer to call these tenets 'truth-claims' and conceive them accordingly. In their approach such truth-claims are to be critically analyzed and compared one against each other on the base of their rational consistency. This explains the choice of my wording 'rational-theological',[10] which also indicates how 'theology' (in their understanding thereof) is individuated by these authors as a disciplinary resource of reference for RE.

Note that they prefer to label themselves differently, as Wright calls his approach 'Critical Religious Education' and Barnes 'Post-Liberal Religious Education', which leads also to the last common point: they are both highly critical of what they call the 'liberal approach' in RE, which flourished in the 1980s and, according to them,

10 While the juxtaposition of 'rational' with 'theological' may sound paradoxical, it will be clearer in the next paragraphs how, through the focus on transcendental issues such as the 'ultimate-state-of-things' and the recourse to arguments of overt philosophical nature, these authors manage to maintain these two dimension in a fairly coherent manner, even if this may lead us to see some postulates typical of religionist insiders behind their works.

upholds a universalistic theological agenda in which all religions are said to share a common truth.

4.3.2 Concept, Representations and Epistemology of Religion

In order to individuate the concept of religion employed by Wright and Barnes, we need first to address their criticism of those RE approaches variously defined in their works as 'experiential-expressive', 'liberal Protestant' or (badly developed) 'phenomenological'.

Wright attributes the pejorative label of 'experiential-expressive' to those RE practices which, according to him, followed from the 1980s onwards a common trend of assuming that there is the same infinite divine reality behind different religious phenomena, whose truth is expressed through inner feelings and emotions, while the different doctrines are 'accidental' (Wright 2000, 32 ff.; cf. also Barnes 2007, 19-20). According to Wright, the strategy behind this approach is aimed at reconciling faith with modern culture and at avoiding conflicts between truth-claims, since it eschews issues such as 'revelation' and 'reason'. He thinks that such inclusive educational models are influenced by the emergence of liberal humanism as the dominant philosophy underlying the public education system, which is particularly concerned with social integration and avoiding controversy.

This approach is deemed highly flawed because it disregards the differences between the various religious traditions in favor of an overly simplistic attitude, nurtured in the 'cult of the individual'. He also laments an unsubstantiated suspicion on language and rationality that leads to the reliance on the authority of the inner experience, eliminating the possibility of criticism. Furthermore, this RE paradigm is considered to be forming in itself a spiritual tradition grounded in a mishmash of romantic and post-modern ideology (cf. also Wright 2004), which encourages pupils to develop their "own personal and idiosyncratic vision of ultimate reality" (Wright 2000, 76).

Barnes holds very similar critiques to this modern RE based on "romantic pluralistic theology" which has uncritically appropriated axioms and commitments of the phenomenology of religion (Barnes, Wright 2006, 69; Barnes 2014, 94-113):

> But why should schools be required to convey the liberal Protestant creed that all religious paths lead to God? Modern Britain is a pluralist society where the truth of religion is disputed and where no single form of religion commands allegiance. (Barnes, Wright 2006, 71)

According to them, religious pluralism cannot be addressed merely by promoting an alleged commonality of all religions, instead, it should

> respect the right of religious believers and religious traditions to define themselves and not impose on them the kind of fluid religious identity that follows from liberal theological commitments. (72)

On the base of these observations, we are safe to conclude that thexy are firmly against an interpretation of religions as sharing common metaphysical and/or psychological roots and against an epistemological approach to religions as a subjective-emotional engagement. What do they propose instead, then?

Wright, in his main monographs devoted to RE (2000; 2004; 2007), does not directly address the concept of religion, but discusses instead the idea of 'spirituality', in the sense of

> the relationship of the individual, within community and tradition, to that which is – or is perceived to be – of ultimate concern, ultimate value and ultimate truth. (Wright 2000, 175)

In this way he intends to put religious traditions on the same level as all those worldviews that affirm a certain order-of-things, such as secularist or post-modern worldviews.[11] At the same time, however, he stresses that

> any study of religion\s that does not have at its heart the exploration of the question of transcendence […] will, from the outset, be a reductive activity to do justice to the heart of religion. (Wright 2004, 212)

Such a focus on 'transcendence' is not seen as problematic when the comparison is also made with perspectives such as secularism, post-modernism or even atheism and agnosticism, because for Wright

> the question of religious commitment is universal and unavoidable […] atheism and agnosticism are just as much acts of faith as positive religious commitment. (Wright 2000, 27)

Concerning religion and religions, in one article he draws on Searle and addresses religious traditions as "robust and substantial social facts" created by a collective intentionality (Wright 2008, 10), which is consistent and homogeneous enough to justify not only the use of tags such as 'Christianity', but also of those ones coined by outsiders such as 'Buddhism' and 'Hinduism' (8). For him it is possible to talk of "fuzzy edges" surrounding a "prototypical nucleus of all religious

11 The secularist one is said to put truth in natural and social sciences, while the post-modern one negates any objective truth (cf. Easton et al. 2019, 20-1).

traditions" (7-8, 10-11), so that we may find also Christians who believe in reincarnation, but they will be "clearly at odds with the collective intentionality of that tradition as a whole" (10). Concerning the structure and function of religion, he employs the term 'worldviews' and attributes four key functions to them:

> They constitute answers to basic or ultimate questions; they tell stories about the ultimate order-of-things; they utilise a range of distinctive cultural symbols; they express themselves in social practices that offer a particular way-of-being-in-the-world. (11)

Turning our attention to Barnes, we find similar arguments. One difference consists in his slightly sharper differentiation between religions and worldviews, since he defines as 'religious' any belief or practice that "expresses or implies the existence of supernatural being or states: angel, ghosts, nirvana, God, Brahaman" (Barnes 2014, 120). More in detail he states that the term 'religion' applies "in the context of belief in a transcendent or supernatural reality that is regarded as unconditionally and non-dependently real", and this belief is

> integrated into a wider form of life that incorporates both other beliefs, say about human origins, personhood and human salvation, and practices that typically involve (religious) functionaries, institutions and rituals. (121)

Barnes, moreover, does acknowledge the possibility of inner variation and creativity within religions, even at the level of individuals (121-3). However, he still attributes strong ontological status to religious traditions. They are "coherent wholes" (212), and this coherence is ultimately derived from a distinctive core made up of beliefs:

> Religions are, at least, schemes of belief; and in certain context are appropriately describe as such. […] There are key beliefs in each religion. It is these key beliefs and the differences between them that justify distinguishing between the different religions. (210)

He argues for the importance, also in terminological way, of the coherence of key beliefs, by way of a comparison with Marxism and pointing to the incoherence of speaking of a Marxist who believed in a free competitive market (211-12). From this perspective, even if he concedes that boundaries between religions may shift and be contested,

> this does not mean that boundaries are infinitely extendible or contractible. The beliefs of Christianity, established by reference to the Christian scriptures, restrict and constrain Christian identity. (212)

Therefore, words such as 'Christianity', 'Hinduism', etc. can still retain their descriptive function (207 ff.).

Concerning the representations of religions in the Rational-Theological, it should be clear that there is a certain hierarchy, both ontological and epistemological, that puts the intellectual/textual/normative aspects preeminent over material/social/pragmatic aspects (cf. Easton et al. 2019, 40). Beliefs, doctrinal propositions and relative texts are the key aspects to be taken into account when dealing with religions, and it is through the individuation and discernment of these key aspects that it is possible to distinguish different and coherent religious traditions in accord with the paradigm of the world religions: Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism.

Since Wright and Barnes discuss mainly the theoretical foundations of their RE models, they do not give many details on how religion and religions should be represented. An exception is the already cited *Critical Religious Education in Practice* (Easton et al. 2019). Here it is worth noting a proposal for an introductory series of lessons focused on the issues of 'ultimate questions' which imply what I would label a 'Greek-Judeo-Christian' paradigm, especially in respect to question 1, 6 and 9. The questions are the following:

> 1. Does God exist and if so, what is he/she like? 2. Where did the world come from? 3. Where did human beings come from? 4. What is the purpose of our lives? 5. What happens to us when we die? 6. Do human beings have a soul? What about animals? 7. Why is there evil in the world? 8. Do miracles happen? Do you have any examples? 9. Who was Jesus? 10. Does it matter how we treat other people? Why/why not? (24)

The analysis of these kinds of ultimate questions should lay the groundwork for further developments. Therefore, a strong focus on doctrinal issues or, as the authors put it, 'truth-claims' should not surprise. This is reflected in the next proposal for a scheme of work, which takes Islam as an example of the way to address a world religion. The topics to be explored are: an overview of the life of Prophet Muhammad, with special focus on those contexts that make sense of key teachings of the Prophet. Next, there are the Qur'an and the Hadith, followed by an overview of six key beliefs of Islam: the unicity of Allah, the revelation through prophets, the Qur'an as the word of Allah, the Day of Judgment, the existence of angels and their activity in the world, and the predestination of everything by Allah. Concerning these practices, the Five Pillars are singularly addressed, one in each lesson, with the recommendation of highlighting the connection with beliefs. One lesson is devoted to the difference between Sunni and Shi'a Islam. Finally, the other three topics are proposed

for their particular sensitivity or contemporary relevance: the concept of jihad (greater and lesser), the role/dress, etc. of women, and the Shari'ah law (Easton et al. 2019, cf. 45 ff.).

I think it is safe to judge this representation as quite 'monolithic'. In the detailed overview of the scheme of work (47-67) and in the additional materials proposed,[12] I have not been able to find any hints envisioning the idea of the historical character or historical development of Muslim beliefs or practices.

The same applies for a proposal for a scheme of work on Buddhism and Christianity. Let us address the contents regarding Buddhism (148-50). They propose 24 lessons, of which lessons 1, 2 and 3 focus on the Buddha's life, its significance and the Four Noble Truths. Lesson 4 is meant to understand what the Sangha is and to explore the denominational differences.[13] In Lesson 5, students should address the Buddhist worldview through what is called an 'ontological triangle' of questions such as "what is the nature of ultimate reality?", "what is the view of humanity?", "how should we then live?". Lessons 6 and 7 remain within the doctrinal dimension with the concept of 'Dhamma' (Dharma) and the concept of co-dependent arising. Lessons 8 and 9 address the 'nature of humanity' through the topics of the three marks of existence and the topic of the 'human personality'. This latter is presented as the doctrine of the five aggregates for what concerns the Theravāda tradition, while in reference to Mahāyāna the doctrine of emptiness within the possibility of attaining Buddhahood and Buddhā nature are presented.

Lessons 10 and 11 focus on different ideals in Theravāda and Mahāyāna traditions: Arhat and Bodhisattva ideals, Buddhahood and the Pure Land. Lessons 12 and 13 shift to practice by exploring meditation which is differentiated in "Samatha (concentration and tranquility) including mindfulness of breathing", "Vipassana (insight) including zazen" and, "visualisation of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas" (Easton et al. 2019, 149). Lessons 14 and 15 aim at presenting the "puja/devotional ritual" at home and in the temple, including chanting "both as a devotional practice and as an aid to mental concentration" (149), *mantra* recitation and the use of *mālā*. Lessons 16 and 17 focus on Buddhist places of worship including temples, shrines, monasteries. Interestingly enough, different ceremonies and rituals associated with death and mourning are also addressed in lessons 18 and 19. Lessons 20, 21 and 22 engage with ethical teachings: the five moral precepts, the six perfections in the Mahāyāna tradition, *karma*

12 Available upon purchase from the website: `https://routledgetextbooks.com/textbooks/_author/easton/`.

13 No further specifications are added but I surmise, on the base of following indications, that with 'denominational differences' just Mahāyāna and Therāvāda distinctions are implied.

and rebirth, compassion and 'loving kindness' (*mettā*) (150). The last two lessons are meant for reflections and feedback.

As we can see, more than a half of the topics regard doctrinal matters. A slightly increased emphasis on variations in practices can be recognized, but a very homogeneous image is still maintained, especially on key doctrines, which are differentiated merely between Therāvāda and Mahāyāna. Again, no hints on the historical character or the historical development of beliefs or of practices are provided. Quite the contrary, to purposely seek a coherence between 'fundamental beliefs' and practices even in front of inconsistencies with the living practice is proposed (cf. Easton et al. 2019, 139).

The insistence on a religions' 'truth-claim' is further reaffirmed in the scheme of work "Critical Religious Education and Philosophy: An Exemplar Scheme of Work for Teaching Science and Religion" (69-101). It consists of a comparison between the scientific methods and theories relevant to ultimate questions, such as the Big Bang theory and evolution, and the biblical myth of genesis and various arguments for the existence of God. The philosophical framework aims at pushing students towards confronting the epistemological coherence of 'science' and 'religion'. Actually, with 'religion' the authors merely intend the philosophical arguments for the existence of a Creator God in Christianity.

We can shade further light on the logic of such an approach in RE if we look at the underlying epistemological approach adopted. Wright constantly reminds (2000, 23-5; 2004, 52-61; Easton et al. 2019, 2), that he adopts an ontological realism in which reality is deemed to exist independently of human perception. Knowledge of this reality is limited but not completely arbitrary, and therefore it is possible, and it can be based on informed and rational judgment. What is peculiar in Wright's take is that:

> The spiritual implications of critical realism are profound, since it suggests that we are not simply free to construct our own personal set of ultimate values, and instead must allow our spiritual identities to be shaped by our developing relationship with an objective reality which is inherently meaningful. (Wright 2000, 25)

This is because:

> The domain of value has as much ontological reality as the realm of fact. […] It is possible that the explorations of reality conducted by artists, scientists, philosophers and theologians will reveal that values are not mere human constructs, but are rather inherent in the very structure of reality. (24)

In other words, it makes no sense for Wright to talk about insiders or outsiders because religious people, agnostics and atheists are at

the same level in their holding of beliefs/positions about the ultimate-state-of-things. Even scientists

> engage with a variety of meta-narratives that seek to account for the ultimate order-of-things, whether these be religious or secular, realistic or idealistic, modern or post-modern. (Wright 2004, 52)

Consistently to Wright's idea of religions as "answers to basic or ultimate questions", religions are to be epistemologically engaged not as social phenomena about which second-order knowledge (analysis, description, theoretizations, etc.) can be produced and discussed. Instead, they are sources of knowledge about the nature of reality and the way to behave accordingly to such a nature (182-3; 2007, 148; Easton et al. 2019, 2-3). Religious practices are thus the practical embodiment of the fundamental beliefs on this metaphysical reality, which faithful individuals adopt in order to carry on what is called 'truthful living'.

Coherently with this framework, to study religions there is no need to address the questions of definitions or concepts of religion with pupils. Instead, it is proposed to adopt three philosophical-epistemological questions is proposed:

> 'What is real?' (ontological realism); 'Can we know what is real?' (epistemic relativity); and 'How do we know what is real?' (judgmental rationality). (Easton et al. 2019, 19)

Thus, the way of studying a topic, such as e.g. the three marks of existence in Buddhism, is to question their 'truthfulness': "Are the three marks of existence self-evidently true?" (149).

Turning our attention to Barnes, even if we do not find any explicit discussion on the epistemological grounding in his RE proposal, I think it is safe to say that he does not differ too much. To be fair, he does touch the issue of the definition of religion in class *en passant* by stating that, even it is not a strictly necessary topic for religious educators, it may be a useful intellectual activity for pupils, albeit at a level adapted to their age and aptitude (Barnes 2014, 120). There are also some differences from Wright, such as the idea of more starkly separating between religious and non-religious worldviews (120-1). However, this does not mean that pupils should not "need to be familiar both with secular challenges to religion and with religious challenges to secularism" (Barnes 2008, 29). Ultimately, the question of 'truth' and the way to approach the 'truths' expressed by religion is pivotal also in Barnes and expressed in terms similar to Wright. Religions are "contrasting sets of beliefs (which *purport to 'reveal' the same divine being and mediate salvation*)" (italics added), so that

> in an important sense religions are in competition with one another over the nature of reality (they enshrine and express different truth-claims). (Barnes 2014, 213)

These set of beliefs, furthermore, are what must be "assessed for their coherence" (126). In fact,

> What is required in education is for the truth-claims of religion (and of particular religions) to be presented to pupils and for *attention to be given to the forms of evidence to which religions appeal and to the kinds of assessment that are relevant to the consideration of this evidence*. (241; italics added)

4.3.3 Didactic Transposition and Educational Perspective

According to what was explored above, it would seem that in Wright's and Barnes's proposals the main *savoirs* taken as reference are not scholarly knowledge, but instead, the various doctrines of a religion taken at face value. In other words, since for Barnes and Wright religions are fundamentally ways of knowing ultimate reality and prescribing practices (rituals and ethics) that fit coherently with that said reality, this knowledge is what should be didactically transposed. Indeed, this approach seems coherent with the situation of the noosphere in which representatives of the locally present religious are supposed to draft the RE syllabi.

However, we have one striking difference from the didactic transpositions of other school subjects, especially those which are actually a bundle of different academic disciplines, such as socio-economic sciences or natural sciences. In these cases, different disciplines are supposed to shed light in a complementary way on a common subject matter, such as human society or natural environments. Instead, in Wright's and Barnes's proposal, the various religions are engaged as contrasting truth-claims in competition over the faithful description of ultimate reality. So, on a closer inspection, the *savoirs* of reference to be didactically transposed is not the 'religious knowledge', i.e. knowledge about ultimate reality represented by various religious traditions. What seems to be the knowledge of reference is somehow a much more general, non-explicitly-confessional 'religious knowledge' of which the various religious traditions (secular worldviews included, at least for Wright) may be or not be truthful or coherent instances.[14]

14 Cf. Barnes (2014, 213): "A focus on contrasting sets of beliefs [...] highlights differences and draws attention to the fact that these may be intractable, *and consequently one or other may be true and others false, or perhaps one more true and others less true*

Wright does not explicitly define such a general *savoir* of reference, but we can have an idea of the relative 'mindset' typical of this *savoir* (cf. above, § 2.2.3)

> Here religious teaching takes on a spiritual dimension, moving 'beyond an objective study of religion\s to an exploration of inwardness, a grappling with existential questions, a search for spiritual identity, an encounter with mystery and transcendence'. (Wright 2000, 11)

> It follows that our pursuit of knowledge entails a struggle for more authentic forms of life, more appropriate ways of being in the in the world, and more truthful ways of relating to ourselves, to other-in-community, to the natural order-of-things, and to the presence or absence of that which is sacred, transcendent or divine. (Wright 2004, 167)

Barnes, instead, straightforwardly argues in favor of theology as the discipline of reference of RE (Barnes 2018)[15] and his argument goes as follows: under the influence of modernity (urbanization, secularization, individualization), religious identity is a matter of choice among competing options. Therefore, the educational challenge is to equip pupils with the intellectual tools to make informed and rational decisions about their ultimate commitments and values. This situation "clearly draws theology naturally into our discussion" (127) because it is theology that is primarily "concerned with a normative set of beliefs" (118) and that "articulates the rules that govern how doctrines are related to one another and, by extension, how the rules relate to practice" (127-8). Wright too, less explicitly, acknowledges such a role in theology:

> It is vital for students to engage in theological exploration of text, in order to meaningfully explore the different answers each religion offers to the nature of ontological reality. (127)

in certain respects" (italics added). Cf. also Easton et al. (2019) who, concerning the position of agnosticism, state that "it must be made clear to your students that such a potentially ambivalent position does not change the nature of reality – either God exists or God does not exist. Many theists and secular thinkers would argue that it is worth working out which side you feel has better evidence" (22).

15 To be fair, Barnes concedes that also religious studies should be taken as reference for RE, however he also argues that it was under the influence of religious studies (that is, phenomenology) that British RE ended up endorsing the liberal protestant theological view that wrongly treats all religions as equivalent truths. Moreover, he contends that also religious studies, though they have more inner variety, involve normative commitments, and therefore, should not be absolutely distinguished from theology.

Wrigth and the other authors recommend "producing high calibre philosophical and theological study, rather than reducing our subject to social science" (Easton et al. 2019, VII).

In summary, the fundamental knowledge of reference seems to be a kind of rational and existential inquiry over matters of transcendence, through which the truth-claims of individual religions can be assessed and, consequently, endorsed or not. I venture to label such knowledge 'natural theology', in the sense of a "program of inquiry into the existence and attributes of God without referring or appealing to any divine revelation" (Brent, N/D). Coherently, the methods, the language and the key concepts are those of philosophical investigation: inductive *versus* deductive arguments, verification principle, inference, the relationships between ontology, epistemology and ethics, and so on (cf. Easton et al. 2019, chs 3 and 4). Similarly, from the point of view of the learner (cf. above, § 2.2.5), what are expected to be primarily activated are not cognitive competencies concerned with data on various religions, but the very personal religious or not-religious perspectives of pupils (cf. 141-2). Data and information from various religious traditions are the 'samples' with which exercising such theological competence.

All of this has quite relevant educational implications. It is safe to conclude that, with reference to the two main educational aims of British RE, 'learning about religion' and 'learning from religion', in this RE approach the former is clearly in function of the latter. That is, learning about religion is conductive to directly addressing one's own religious worldview. We can see this in the assessment criteria laid out in Easton et al. (2019, 167-9). The criterion of *attentiveness* refers to the accuracy in which beliefs, practices, concepts and issues are not only explored by the pupils, but also confronted by them with their own worldviews. *Discernment* refers to the ability of pupils to offer balanced and substantiated arguments in their evaluation of both their own as well as that of others' views on ultimate truth. Finally, the criterion of *responsibility* refers to the issue of 'truthful living', i.e. the coherence with which beliefs are held and behavior is adopted (168).

This last criterion shows also how the ethical dimension is pivotal in the overall educational perspective of this RE. In Easton et al. (2019) there is a proposal for a series of lessons with a distinctive focus on ethics, with particular attention to the issue of moral decision making, aimed at equipping pupils with the philosophical tools with which to identify the sources of moral decision-making and to evaluate the consistency, strengths and weaknesses of both religious (called by them 'theistic') and non-religious ethical systems. The same applies to Barnes, who in various occasions laments how RE has been divorced from moral education and strongly suggests reinstating this aspect in the discipline, arguing that religious tra-

ditions are to be engaged as the main sources of ethical guidance (Barnes 2007, 27-8; 2014, 218-32; 2018, 124-30), with special attention to the role of Christian theology in its non-distinction between facts and values (Barnes 2018, 128).

In asking ourselves what may be the social practices of reference for a rational-theological RE approach, on the basis of the previous discussions I would propose two practices. The first practice I individuate is no other than *being a self-conscious religious practitioner*. As Easton et al. say, "nor is it sufficient for students to merely express an unjustified personal preference for one belief system or another" (Easton et al. 2019, 3). However, here a well-precise conception of what it means to be religious is implied, i.e. with a strong intellectual component, focused on propositional beliefs as expressed in authoritative texts, and with the assumption that holding a religious (or non-religious) position fundamentally excludes all the others, otherwise one would result 'incoherent'.

Invites to 'compare', 'argue for' and 'defend' one's own worldview are expressions which are quite reiterated. Together with our conclusion concerning the reference to an implicit 'natural theology', this leads me to hypothesize that Wright and Barnes, consciously or not, have in mind a second social practice of reference,[16] that I would label 'theological debating'. We find a perfect instance of this in the accompanying learning materials for the introductory series of lessons in Easton et al. (2019). Here teachers are invited to organize a 'RE boxing' (*sic*) activity. It starts with an example of a theological debate about the existence of a transcendent God between two hypothetical children, holding respectively a theist and a secularist view. Pupils are asked to enter the debate and discuss which one of three worldviews – theist, secularist or post-modern one – is more convincing.

4.3.4 Evaluation and Criticism

The rational-theological approach is clearly at odds with the SoR-based RE on many levels. From the point of view of a general approach of the study of religion\s, what is quite puzzling is the conception of religions as a cultural-social phenomena coherently bounded and dependent on a well-defined, rationally systematized set of truth-claims. Wright and Barnes rightly criticize certain RE approaches, which interpret religions as being ultimately grounded on a universal dimension of emotional/experiential nature, for actually being a subtle and hegemonic form of Liberal Protestantism. However, their strict characterization of religion under philosophical and theologi-

16 Even if it would sound, admittedly, somehow 'outdated'.

cal lens does not differ very much. It entails, in fact, a paradigm that I called 'Greek-Judeo-Christian' which is equally hegemonic. This paradigm implies the analysis of the rational coherence and persuasive power of the – written – doctrines of religious traditions on topics such as God, cosmogony, anthropogony, eschatology and morals. In other words, their privileged focus is on theological disputations on certain transcendent matters, which is hardly a neutral position, in that it emphasizes dimensions such as creedal emphasis, scripturalism, universality and distinctiveness. And we have seen how the emphasis on these dimensions emerged out of the historical evolution of Christianity (cf. above, §§ 2.1.5 and 2.1.8).

The logical consequence of this epistemological and educational choice is that religions are automatically transformed into monolithic systems of thought and practice. Internal variations or diversions from this paradigm are uninfluential and even pernicious, because they hinder the simplified representations which a tradition needs to undergo in order to be analyzed as a coherent whole. As can be surmised by the examples of representations of Islam and Buddhism, this approach highly reinforces what we already criticized as the world religions-paradigm (§ 2.1.5). What is automatically eschewed are the social impacts, the historical developments and interaction of religions with the whole spectrum of human thought and behavior. To give one example for all, the issue of the influence of Christianity on our modern concept of religion and on its consequences for other civilizations (cf. §§ 2.1.5, 2.1.8 and 3.3.1) is completely ignored.

The theme of Japanese and other Asian religions further corroborates our SoR-based critique to this approach. We have indeed seen (§ 3.2.2) how it is useless to look for a well-defined and rationally systematized set of orthodox beliefs in these traditions. It is much more common, instead, to find variations, often with contrasting tendencies, on general common themes such as the belief in 'spirits' or the status of *kami vis-à-vis* other traditions of thought and practice. On a larger scale, such as the case of religions of the Indian sub-continent, it is true that scholars have identified some general common themes and assumptions (e.g. rebirth, mechanism of *karma*, authority of the *Veda*, a shared pantheon), but at the end these elements, just like the very word 'Hinduism', are artificially collected and systematized by scholars to make sense of what they have discovered in the field. The examples in § 3.2.2 showed how various assumptions over the status of supra-human realities where all but fixed.

Often, the hermeneutical creativity of certain traditions, such as Japanese *mikkyō* Buddhism, permits a virtually infinite kaleidoscope of images of deities or metaphysical principles, not rarely coming from other traditions. As a matter of fact, while Wright and Barnes may rightly lament that a certain Liberal Protestant rhetoric imposes a fluidity over different religions, in their will to safeguard theo-

logical differences they risk overlooking those phenomena where this fluidity is actually implemented, such as in the case of Japanese *kenmitsu* system. The hermeneutical possibilities in the religious landscapes of Japan and other Asian regions clearly shows how insistence on the principle of abstract rational coherence is at odds with the empirical reality. This applies to religious phenomenon, but also well beyond. As a parenthetic comment, let us recall Barnes' remarks of the incoherence of speaking of a Marxists that believed in a free competitive market (Barnes 2014, 211-12). In response, we may suggest that nothing shows how empirical facts often contradicts the coherence of 'orthodox' doctrine and texts, such as in the case of the Chinese interpretation of Marxism and capitalism. Similarly, referring to the grassroot levels of practice in both Japan and China, we should recall that a single practitioner may resort to different religious resources simultaneously, accordingly to his/her preferred modalities, such as liturgical, immediate-practical, scriptural, and so on, without any problems of 'coherence' (§ 3.2.1.3).

Finally, due to its almost exclusive focus on discussing matters concerning transcendence or the 'truth-of-the-order-of-things', the rational-theological approach runs a serious risk. That is, to ignore religious practices such as those related to this-worldly concerns in contemporary Japan, or such as those connected with spirit beliefs in early Buddhism (§ 3.2.3). Even worse, it also runs the risk of dismissing these diffused aspects of religious tradition, especially those with strong ritual and bodily components, as superstitious degeneration from (supposedly) pure doctrines, replicating the first orientalist interpretations (§ 3.3.2).

Upon these observations, it should also be clear that the general educational frame of this approach diverges seriously from the intercultural framework set above (§§ 2.2.7 and 2.2.8). Furthermore, claims such as those of Wright that worldviews, including non-religious ones, are to be compared in the same exact terms as those which all refer to the issue of ultimate reality, are clearly at odds with a secular (but not secularist) framework, in the sense that they do not consider the existence of a-religious positions, i.e. positions of persons with no interest in discussing transcendent matters.

The fundamental intercultural attitudes of valuing diversity, especially in the sense of approaching different cultures as a resource for creating new meanings and new narratives, contrasts with the idea of nurturing a self-conscious religious (or anti-religious) person who is capable of assessing whether certain beliefs are – using the very words of Barnes (2014, 213) – "more true and others less true in certain respects". While it is claimed that the rational-theological approach aims at preserving differences among religious traditions, it does however apply an hegemonic paradigm which homogeneously interprets religious traditions and practitioners through an

essentialist perspective. What is consciously overlooked is the pivotal topics of socio-cultural complexities and the fuzziness within religious traditions, between religious traditions, and between religious traditions and other dimension of human thought and behavior. This goes against the idea of multi-perspectivity in the sense of getting a nuanced understanding of reality from different points of view and types of sources.

While for intercultural education a person is conceived as constantly creating her/his identity from the available pools of cultural resources, the rational-theological approach requires that this process must be assessed in terms of 'rationality' and 'coherence', which hinders the idea of maintaining an open definition of one's own identity. It is true that this is meant to foster critical and analytical skills by discussing and debating the rational coherence of normative claims in an open dialogue, which would enhance "responsible, self-critical choices about their participation in and attitude towards religious practices" (Barnes 2018, 126). However, this endeavor comes, in my view, at a high cost. That is, the domestication of religious traditions as a univocal, abstract set of doctrinal key points, artificially detached from the historical and social reality, especially when asymmetrical power relations are involved.

In fact, by unquestioningly assuming that such a paradigm is the most relevant, this approach does not permit a critical self-analysis of ethnocentric narratives, ignoring what are the historical and cultural reasons why we, modern Europeans, have come to hold the hegemonic view that this kind of paradigm is, naturally, the only relevant one, and why also many contemporary people outside Euro-American regions have come to think in a similar way. In this regard, it is worth noting that, for Barnes, to acknowledge that names such as Hinduism or Buddhism have been coined by outsiders and colonial powers is irrelevant: "Nothing interesting philosophically follows from this" (Barnes 2014, 209). The rationale for this claim, which is rather unconvincing when confronted with the observations above in § 3.3, is that the usefulness or appropriateness of a term is not affected by who invented or employed them:

> The theory of evolution would still be true if it had originated as Nazi propaganda, and its distinctive terminology would still retain its explanatory role! (209)

Moreover, this paradigm of religion surely does not foster openness to cultural otherness, because cultural relativism, in the sense that the standards of a given culture cannot be the base through which to judge other cultures, applies here with difficulty. If in this RE approach the 'other' is expected to be different in its doctrinal beliefs, how about those practitioners to whom the doctrinal beliefs on trans-

cendent matters are scarcely meaningful and/or vary consistently in space and time, as we have variously seen in § 3.2?

4.4 English RE: Existential-Instrumental Approach

4.4.1 Introduction

Under this label I regroup two authors, Clive Erricker and Patricia Hannam. The former is a consultant and researcher in the fields of education and religion. Prior to this, he was County Inspector for RE, History and Community Cohesion in Hampshire, and was previously Head of the School of Religion and Theology and Reader in Religion and Education at the University of Chichester. He has been active in the field of RE since the mid-1990's and together with Jackson and Wright is considered one of the most prominent authors in English RE. Here we will analyze the latest version of his RE proposal (Erricker 2010), but reference will also be made to his previous works (Erricker 2000; 2001; 2007) characterized by a certain radical and post-modern approach. Patricia Hannam is presently County Inspector/Adviser for RE, History and Philosophy for the Hampshire County Council. She authored a recent monograph (2019) in the field of RE and she is presently active in the debate, often writing alongside with Biesta, a renowned scholar in the field of education (Biesta, Hannam 2019a; 2019b; 2020).

The reasons for the choice of the term 'existential' will be self-evident while exploring Hannam's proposal. In Erricker's case, he labels his approach 'conceptual', but it should be understood as an evolution from previous, more radical works, in which Erricker argued that RE should give space to the 'little narratives' of children (their personal religious/'spiritual' experiences) to be explored and developed without being subsumed by the 'great narratives', i.e. the orthodoxies of the religious traditions, and sometimes also in contrast to them. While he acknowledges the excessive radicalism of his previous works (Erricker 2010, 79-80), he still considers his previous research on the experience-based, personal – often called 'existential' or 'spiritual' – development of children as relevant, underpinning his 2010 work also (71-7).

The second reason why I put these two authors together also explains my choice of the term 'instrumental'. Given the strong interest, in both authors, for what RE may and can matter for the personal, existential, 'spiritual' development of the pupils, we will see that – especially in Hannam – the way of treating religion\s (representation, ways in which pupils should study, etc.) is subordinated, i.e. instrumental, to the broader educational goal of the personal, 'inner' de-

velopment of the pupils. In other words, in their RE proposals, religion seems less an *object* and more a *project*.

The last reason for discussing these two authors together lies in the fact that, as a proof of the convergence of their perspectives, they have cooperated in the redaction of the 2011 RE Syllabus for the Counties of Hampshire, Portsmouth and Southampton, called *Living Difference*. The 2016 version, *Living Difference III*, draws heavily from Hannam's perspective – she is one of the authors –, but still retains the methodology of Erricker.

4.4.2 Concept, Representations and Epistemology of Religion

Erricker's monograph does not offer an explicit theory of religion underpinning his approach. However, we may discern some information from the very methodology of his approach. He calls it a 'conceptual approach' because it is fundamentally based on three classes of concepts that the pupils are expected to study in a progressive manner, starting from the type A concepts to type B, and finally to type C. Type A concepts pertain to a generic realm of human experience (common to both religious and non-religious experience) and are devised in order to permit the children to easily and personally relate to. Some examples are 'suffering', 'loyalty', 'belief', 'hope', 'devotion', 'community', 'sacrifice', 'environmentalism', 'love', 'justice', 'power' or 'authority' (Erricker 2010, 91, 112). Type B concepts are said to be "common to many religions" and are "used in the study of religion" (113). Examples are: 'God', 'worship', 'ritual', 'myth', 'martyrdom', 'symbolism', 'sacred', 'holy', 'initiation', 'rites of passage', 'stewardship', 'covenant'[17] (112). Type C concepts are instead those that are peculiar to discrete religious traditions. I will discuss some examples of them shortly, but for now we need to note that these type C concepts are presented as the basis through which "a particular tradition makes sense of the world" (91), as those concepts that different branches within the tradition interpret in various ways, and as being "the why behind the what of practice and behaviour. Thus, resurrection is a key concept in Christianity but prayer is not. Torah is a key concept in Judaism but Passover is not" (92).

For Erricker, the best way to conceive religions (as well as non-religious worldviews such as humanism) is to treat them as 'conceptual worldviews', in the sense of being made up of a web of peculiar concepts (type C ones), which can be nonetheless connected with generic concepts of human existence (type A) and concepts common to many

17 For now, I limit myself to note that the choice of some of these type B concepts, especially 'God', 'covenant', 'stewardship' and 'covenant' seems too tailored on Abrahamic religions.

religions, used in the study of religion\s (type B). The function of this kind of conceptual worldviews is twofold: it is an interpretative tool to make sense of the world, and at the same time it exerts an impact on the world. Moreover, these worldviews are subject to interpretation by branches within traditions, as well as contextualization in various historical and social circumstances (cf. 122, 139, 141 and 171).

Before addressing Erricker's epistemological underpinnings, i.e. his take on "how religion should be studied", we need first to consider the fact Erricker's position is highly influenced by the post-modern critique. We may thus ask whether 1) he is implicitly putting forth a definition, a theory, a way of representing and studying religion; or 2) he is presenting instead a *progressive didactical narrative* that serves for the educational aims of his idea of RE, without bothering too much in terms of coherence with a (supposed) external reference.

In the first case, his theoretical approach to the question of 'what is religion' seems to conceive, and represent religions, as possessing a seemingly a-historical, conceptual nucleus of fixed key ideas, from which practices and other beliefs would stem, as well as different interpretation of said ideas. Such an interpretation also entails, for example, that not only for the external observer, but also for the insider/practitioner, what is actually valuable and pivotal are abstract concepts, while rituals or behaviors have a derivative nature.

In the second case, instead, it would be consistent with his general philosophical approach, which is strongly connotated by a constructivist view, coupled with a post-modern critique to the 'grand narratives' and a Foucauldian critique of authority (cf. also Alberts 2007, 179-86 for an overview of his earlier works). We may substantiate this second hypothesis by referring to previous works in which he is critical and suspicious of any great narrative, from both religious traditions and academic disciplines:

> What is judged as idiosyncrasy […] is the same process of willed and selective remembering that results in orthodoxy in religious traditions. In both cases, the story is told backwards. Tradition and identity are selective constructions of the past that are made in the present. Disciplines such as history and the study of religion\s follow the same procedures and change their conceptual understandings of themselves according to the cultural changes within which they exist. (Erricker 2001, 29)

With this background, his earlier work featured a highly child-centered RE approach in which pupils should be helped to develop their own 'small narratives', instead of perpetuating the grand narratives of both religious orthodoxies and academic disciplines. As a matter of fact, also in the work here under examination, Erricker criticizes other RE approaches for being too narrowly focused on how religions

should be best represented, while overlooking the educational value of RE (Erricker 2010, 63-8). Therefore, we may well assume that, from his perspective, proposing a theory of religion (or a grand narrative on it) and a way of studying it would not make much sense for him – this does not mean, however, that his approach does not implicitly put forth a certain idea of what religion is or even *should be* (cf. next section).

In fact, what it is pivotal for Erricker is the question of how religions should be engaged by pupils in schools in order to fulfills those educational aims that should inform RE (cf. next section). This is evident from its methodology for actually teaching religions in class. He proposes cyclic structures of learning made up by five steps, each one corresponding to a certain skill. The skills, from the most basic to the most advanced, are *communicating*, *applying*, *enquiring*, *contextualizing*, *evaluating*. Since the skill of evaluating is the highest, each cycle should have some overarching key evaluative questions which should be progressively reached by each step. The three class of concepts (type A, B and C) discussed above are the 'material' to be engaged in these cycles, which may have two different starting points.

The starting point is usually the *communicate* and *apply* steps, especially in the case that some preliminary work is needed. Pupils start working on a certain concept from their own experience (hence the relevance of type A concepts) and then build on them. They are asked to express their personal experiences and apply them to certain contexts. For example, if the focus of a series of lessons is the type B concept of the 'sacred', *communicate* and *apply* phase starts with the discussion of what is 'sacred' for the pupils. In the next *enquiry* phase, there is the direct encounter with a religious concept or tradition. Erricker takes the example of the C concept of Tōrāh as the 'sacred' book in the Jewish tradition. Possible differences between a pupils' understanding of sacredness and those of the Jewish tradition need also to be outlined. The next, the *contextualize* step consists of basically adding nuances and further details by providing a certain context. For example, the different approaches to the Tōrāh by Orthodox, Ultra-orthodox or Reformers. This *contextualize* phase should also raise issues relevant to both the upcoming *evaluate* step and the overarching evaluate questions. The latter consists in gauging the value of a certain concept and in providing explanation for it. It is divided into two sub-steps. The first is *evaluate within*, i.e. within the context of a certain religious tradition, and the example of an evaluative question is "to what extent and why is the Tōrāh sacred for Jews?" (Erricker 2010, 85). The second is *evaluate without*, outside any particular context and addressing the type B concept of sacred in a more general dimension. For example, asking "to what extent is sacredness important today?" (85).

A RE based on this methodology is meant to be a path towards "religious literacy", "worldview interpretation" and "worldview analysis". With "religious literacy" Erricker means to go beyond the literal-

ist meaning of a certain word/sign and explore multiple/symbolic (he says "figurative") significations. For example, it entails understanding the web of meanings and possible articulations of the type B concept of the *sacred* just described above (122-9). "Worldview interpretation" means to understand the above process in the context of a specific worldview. This involves the identification and understanding of the connections between the various type C concepts, their different interpretations within the tradition, and the specificity of the said worldview as a peculiar interpretation of the general human experience expressed by the various type A concepts (143-4). "Worldview analysis" is a further step and implies the study of

> how worldviews impact on us due to the differing interpretations of concepts and how they are contextualised in world events and changes over time, and the complexity that involves. (171)

How does Erricker's approach influences the representation of religions, and in particular East-Asian ones? Let us begin by addressing Erricker's choice of type C concepts. First, we note that by individuating *emic conceptual elements as the key aspect*, this automatically translates in representations that highly foreground the intellectual dimension, at the expenses of other dimensions. Type C concepts of Hinduism (in his romanization) are: *brahman*, *avatar*, *atman*, *brahmin*, *Brahma*, *Vishnu*, *Shiva*, *murti*, *darshan*, *samsara*, *maya*, *guna*, *moksha*, *yoga*,[18] *bhakti yoga*, *jnana yoga*, *karma yoga*, *karma*, *Vedas*, *dharma*, *varna*, *jati*, *ahimsa* (115-16). A nearly total preference toward textual, doctrinal and soteriological aspects, including also quite technical philosophical elements such as the concept of *guṇa* is clear.[19] Similar observations apply to Buddhism's key concepts, which are (in Erricker's romanization): *dukkha*, *tanha*, *anicca*, *anatta*, *nirvana* (*nibbana*), *karma* (*kamma*), *buddha*, *sangha*, *dharma*, *bhavana*, *karuna*, *prajna*, *sila*, *upaya* (115).

Further details can be obtained from some of his proposals for the cycles of learning. Let us start with a cycle related to "worldview interpretation" with Buddhism as its object. The focus chosen is *bhavana* which Erricker understands as

> mental culture or mental development/discipline; also, meditation/formal training; the seventh and eighth steps on the eightfold path. (115)

18 *Yoga* here does not refer to one of the six orthodox *darśana*, nor to the heterogeneous bundle of psycho-physical techniques of Indian origin, but in the sense of path of liberation as expounded in the *Bhagavadgītā* (a specification not provided here by Erricker) and therefore linked to the three following concepts.

19 Which, it should be noted, pertains to a well distinct philosophical system, the *sāṃkhya* (a specification not provided by Erricker).

In the proposed cycle he sticks with "mental culture of development" (156). The overarching evaluative questions are: "What is the value of bhavana to Buddhists (Evaluate Within)?"; "Is bhavana useful to us, outside a Buddhist context, in our own lives (Evaluate Without)?" (159). The *communicate* and *apply* phase starts with the general idea of greetings, its common understanding by the pupils and its various meanings in different contexts, for example the case of military greetings. The *enquire* phase starts from the phrase "when bowing dies, Zen (or Buddhism) dies"[20] and the pupils are asked to experience the practice of bowing three times in silence and without shoes. The point is to show how this has created a "calm atmosphere and made them feel peaceful, relaxed and focused" (156), connecting with the next exercise which is an actual session of meditation. Here attention is given to the way posture affects the mind and

> to the importance of observation or awareness and the idea of being mindful. The fact that everything changes all the time, nothing abides, not even in the mind, can be introduced and the idea that we are not our thoughts. (157)

In the *contextualize* phase the topic of *bhāvacakra* is introduced to link Erricker's *bhavana* with further doctrinal points such as *saṃsāra*, *nirvāṇa*, the three poisons, ignorance, greed and adversion and the six realms. Interesting enough, pupils are asked to relate their own psychological experience with those represented by the six realms (e.g. toothache or heartache with the hell realm). In the *evaluation* phase the two overarching questions should be addressed, and further articulated in other questions such as: "What self is there to develop if we are not our thoughts and the self is an illusion (the Buddhist concept of anatta – no self)?" (158). It is evident that Erricker not only focuses on abstract doctrinal and intellectual matters, but also focus on those elements which can be easily connected – or even applied, such as in the case of meditation – with the personal and inner-world of the pupils. We will see in the next section how Erricker's methodology and relative representations of religions draw their logic from his larger educational perspective.

Before doing that, we need to address our second author, Hannam. She discusses three different ways to conceptualize religion: the first is religion as *propositional beliefs*, in the sense that being religious means to have certain beliefs, to consider them 'Truth' or 'real knowledge' and consider them as the primary reference points for the self-understanding of one's own religion (Hannam 2019, 88-92).

20 It is allegedly attributed to the famous Sōtō Zen popularizer in US, Suzuki Shunryū (1904-1971).

A religious education based on such conceptualization may, on one side, risk ending as an indoctrination. On the other, may become a too "scientific, objective, distanced" study (Biesta, Hannam 2019a, 181), which is equally unwanted.

The second way to conceptualize religion is as *practice*, in the sense that a religion is fundamentally a set of practices embedded in one person's life, in accord to a rule deemed authoritative. The main example of this conceptualization would be the Orthodox Judaism, in which carrying out a religious life means adherence/familiarity to a large set of precepts without a strict need to hold on to propositional beliefs (Hannam 2019, 92-5). This approach too may imply unwanted consequences. If religion as belief runs the risk of indoctrination, religion as practice runs the risk of 'recruitment'.

The third way to conceptualize religion is through an *existential* perspective. Since she contends that this is the best way to approach RE, we need to delve into some details. In this conceptualization, the center is 'faith', which needs to be understood as 'trust' (95-9). Hannam articulate her ideas by drawing extensively from authors such as Simone Weil, Thomas Merton[21] and Søren Kierkegaard. For Weil, Hannam tells us, being religious is to be focused on 'faith', but in the sense of a "subject growing in attentiveness to their existence in the world" and not to a truth "external to the believer" (98). Since Weil conceives God as immanent in this world, such existential 'faith' is to be understood as an awareness that 'goodness' is not beyond human reach, but is knowable as one explores it (97). Furthermore, following Merton, "once this way of 'seeing' has taken place, appearances will never be the same and further all action following will be different" (99). Therefore, existential faith is "rooted in the lived life of the individual subject" (96). Kierkegaard is cited to further strengthen the link between such 'faith' and the construction of the subjectivity of the individual, since his famous 'leap of faith' is a matter of an exclusively subjective personal choice, without the support of any objective proof (99-101). Hannam goes on with various examples and quotes. In summary, my understanding of Hannam's existential way of being a religion is a kind of attitude towards a divine plane which is not totally transcendent and capturable in a statement of beliefs or set of practices, but which is possible to know and engage through experientially (i.e. not necessarily in verbal-rational ways) living through the manifestations of such divine plane, which often correspond to the immanent world itself. Such processes involve the development of the identity and subjectivity of the 'existential practitioners'. In less lofty terms, this existential way of being religious is also described as:

21 Thomas Merton (1915-1968) was an American Trappist monk, renowned for his interest and numerous books in which he explores interfaith dialogue, especially between Catholicism and East-Asian traditions from the perspective of mysticism.

> A way of living one's life or, more accurately, of trying to live one's life. What characterises the religious way of trying to lead one's life, to put it briefly, is that one tries to lead one's life with the possibility of the 'event' of transcendence. This means acknowledging that you are not alone, that you are not in the centre of the universe; it means realising that ultimately everything is given, and that nothing can be kept. (Biesta, Hannam 2019a, 181)

In her main monograph she does not dwell in detailed representations. She affirms that "the way a religious life is lived is most likely to be in some way informed by two or more ways of conceptualising religion" (101). However, referring to Buddhism, Hinduism or Jainism, although she notes that "in some places and for some particular manifestations of these traditions faith as propositional belief could have priority" (102), she nonetheless argues that the "best entry point into Buddhism for example may well be through an existential conceptualization of religion" (102), which is "particularly close to what it means to live a religious life in the Dharmic traditions" (87).[22]

The results of this take on Asian religions can be seen in their representations found in the Syllabus of Hampshire, Portsmouth Southampton and Isle of Wight Councils entitled *Living Difference III* (Hampshire, Portsmouth Southampton & Isle of Wight Councils 2016). We should also keep in mind that this syllabus retains the conceptual approach of Erricker. In the syllabus' indications on how to study Buddhism it is suggested to start from the overarching evaluative question: "*Can meditation help people overcome suffering?*" (49; italics in the original). There are three key concepts to focus on. The first is *dhukka*, which should lead to the discussion of the famous 'four sights' cited in the biography of the historical Buddha, then of the historical Buddha's enlightenment, and finally of the Four Noble Truths. The second is *sangha*, which should lead to the discussion of the first sermon of the eightfold path of the five precepts and of "the different groups within Buddhism". The third one is "enlightenment",[23] which should lead to a discussion of the practice of meditation, how it brings enlightenment and of the importance of different types of meditation to different groups of Buddhists. Further indications suggest contextualizing these aspects in specific examples such as the story of Kisā Gotamī or the practices in some contemporary monasteries to help former soldiers "recovering from post-traumatic stress disorder" (49). Similar to Erricker's approach, also this kind of rep-

22 Similarly, we note that she focus on Christianity when discussing religion as belief, and on Judaism and Islam when discussing religion as practices.

23 I note here that the syllabus' list of key concepts for Buddhism, differently from Erricker (2010, 115), adds also 'enlightenment' (Hampshire, Portsmouth Southampton & Isle of Wight Councils 2016, 69).

resentations highlights those doctrinal elements which may have a sort of 'direct' relevance to the existential dimension of pupils. Concerning Hinduism, the focus slightly shifts to a more philosophical/metaphysical tone. The overarching question is: "*Does an awareness of* ***ultimate reality*** *matter when deciding how to live and act in one's life?*" (51; italics and bold characters in original). The three key concepts are *brahman*, *karma* and *dharma*. While there are not detailed indications concerning the last two concepts, the topic of *brahman* is expected to lead to an exploration of the three deities Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva, and their associated ideas of creation, preservation and destruction of the cosmos. It is suggested furthermore to engage these concepts within a context of environmental issues as well as contemporary astronomy (51).

For what concerns the question of "how pupils should study religions", we have already anticipated that for Hannam pupils should engage religion from an existential point of view. To understand Hannam's position better, however, we need to clarify her broader educational perspective.

4.4.3 Educational Perspective and Didactic Transposition

Starting with Erricker, his general view about RE is that it is about how "we make sense of the world and our place in it" (Erricker 2010, 76) and about "interpret[ing] religion in relation to one's own and others' experiences" (82). RE should focus on the personal narratives of the individuals, the construction of meaning that arise from experience, and how these narratives relate to those of others. This is, in his view, the ideal 'merging' of the two RE attainment targets of 'learning about' and 'learning from'. He laments the predominance of the former and the lack of didactic methodology. Instead, RE should seek balance between a cognitive engagement ('about religion') and an affective engagement ('from religion'). We may interpret the five skills above discussed as addressing these two dimensions: *enquire* and *contextualize* pertaining to the cognitive side of 'learning about', while *communicate*, *apply* and *evaluate* involve more personal and subjective reflections.

This emphasis on affective engagement is not justified by the fact that "effective learning involves young people speaking their mind" (72), but has to be read in light of Erricker's strong constructivism and post-modern critiques that underpin his previous works. According to his criticism, since all content-focused school subjects are power-driven meta-narratives, the only 'authentic' knowledge is knowledge that children construct for themselves from their experience. And this 'knowledge' (uniting both cognitive and affective dimensions) is expected to feed into what Erricker defines as either 'spirit-

uality' or 'narratives', something akin to the construction of an integrated and meaningful view of one's own life. RE thus should "help students develop personally and spiritually" (76) through responses, stimuli, inspirations, criticisms, etc. between children's spiritualities/narratives and other narratives, which include both the great traditions' worldviews incapsulated in the type C concepts and other children's narratives. It is worth noting that Erricker worked on a previous project called "Children and Worldviews", explicitly aimed at individuating what is needed in order to "address children's spirituality and their 'spiritual development' or personal development meaningfully" (76; cf. 72 ff.).

In other words, it is safe to say that Erricker has a strong 'instrumental' understanding of RE, in the sense that:

> The focus on religion is contextual rather than essential. Put another way, educational development is not essentially dependent upon the subject content, rather the subject is a vehicle used for the larger educational development of the learner. (Erricker 2010, 82)

Erricker offers various examples of cycles of learning, addressing various topics. In many of them, this focus of the "larger educational development of the learner" is discernible, in the form of providing 'tools' or 'languages' for the 'spiritual' or existential needs of the pupils. For example, a cycle of learning on Hinduism has this key evaluative question: "How effective is the concept of samsara as an explanation of change?" (102). It starts with the *communicate* and *apply* phase focused on the general idea of change, then the *enquire* and *contextualize* steps address the concept of *saṃsāra* through some verses taken from an Upaniṣad[24] and the image of Śiva *naṭarāja*, this latter offered as an exemplification of such concept. In the final *evaluation* step, the 'spiritual'/existential perspective takes over. A response from a pupil is quoted:

> For me, Shiva Nataraj is a symbol to show that my life is always changing. If I try to stop it changing, I will fail. You cannot stop change. This is difficult sometimes because you don't want things to change. Maybe we were worried about going to a new school. We don't want to grow older. We don't want to leave our family. We don't want to die. But we will, and we have to accept it. We will die, but Shiva Nataraj reminds me that I will be born again. I believe in reincarnation – that I will return and be born again. Everything changes, nothing remains the same. That is what life is like. (104)

24 He does not indicate which Upaniṣad and from which translation, but I have been able to identify it as Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad 5, 11-13; cf. the unreferenced translation in Erricker 2010, 103 with that of Olivelle 1998, 429.

Apart from these more 'spiritual'/existential aspects of the "larger educational development of the learner", in Erricker we also find an interesting discussion of RE's educational aims within a secular, liberal context. His argument (cf. 177-81) highlights the dilemma inherent in liberalism in which private, different, exclusivist truths exist along with public and pragmatic values, such as pluralism, i.e. the renunciation of an exclusivist truth. These latter must have precedence, thus configuring a liberal yet not universal position. In fact, not every way of life, religious or not, conforms to those values. In other words, liberal pluralism, while trying to accommodate ways of life different from itself, cannot renounce certain principles (which are not empirically universal), such as human rights and democratic process. That RE is perceived as a sensible and contested subject, argues Erricker, is also because such dilemma is much more evident. This brings another dilemma: should RE be the arena for attestation or contestation of religious truths, values and practices? Or should it contribute to cohesion by promoting toleration and respect of diversity? Erricker proposes a 'third way', in the sense that RE should foster a *modus vivendi*, an ongoing project that tries to reconcile intimations of rival traditions, without claiming to any universal authority. Going beyond mere and pleasant celebration of diversity and operating also at the level of discomfort, it should help pupils to determine their value position and foster more durable social cohesion

Notwithstanding this agreeable self-reflective position, I also observe that Erricker cannot escape from an instrumental use of the religious materials that actually hints to certain value frames. In his proposal for a 'worldviews analysis' to be performed by pupils, he set an analytic grid with two axes. The first axis is *religious-secular*,[25] the second is *faith-ideology*. This is meant to highlight the complexity within a single religion in which sub-movements could be found in different positions, e.g. evangelical Christian right and liberation theology (cf. 192-3). However, there is critical issue at this point: for Erricker RE should address both positive and negative aspect of religion or any other non-religious worldview, but he seems to identify the former with 'faith' and the latter with 'ideology':

> It is about faith, in its larger than religious sense, and specific values that liberate us from ideologies, whether religious or not, including scientism, which are repressive and exclusivist. […] It is religion focused on faith and social justice. It is not religion as ideology. If we are to analyse worldviews we must take account of both the way they oppose power and the way they use it. (173)

25 Readers are given no parameters on which to gauge the level of religiousness of a worldview.

We find additional details in his earlier writings where he defines 'faith' as "willed commitment to a non-institutionalized entity or being" (Erricker 2001, 31). 'Faith', for him, is something that:

> Can only be understood within the matter of relationships, wholly immanent, not as the pursuit of some salvific goal. Given the above reconstruction of the idea of faith we might describe it as an antidote to despair, which brings it closer to our sense of hope. (Erricker 2007, 58)

One of the aims of RE, in fact, is this:

> The facilitation of the metaphorical construction of children for providing meaning, or being the basis of a notion of faith, without resorting to a modernist construct of truth; and the possibility of collapsing the division of religious and secular, constructed on the basis of doctrines that are antithetical to one another, in favour of metaphorical narratives that are always provisional. (Erricker 2000, 66)

In other words, it seems that this 'faith' is both a descriptive and normative concept. It refers to an intuitive, experiential sense of how one can integrate meaningfully different elements of personal life into a thoroughly personal, 'spiritual' manner. RE is in charge of the development in pupils of such a 'faith', which is processual and always provisional, and has to be constructed through interaction with other personal narratives, religious or non-religious sources, all having that same authority.

In Erricker (2010) we find something similar: a value-laded differentiation between a 'liberating' and 'faith-oriented' doctrinal position, and a 'repressing' or 'ideology-oriented doctrinal position'. For example, the case of Pelagianism is brought forth when discussing the exercise of critical worldview analysis:

> When Romanised Christianity entered Britain with the Roman invasion, having already affirmed the doctrines of the Trinity and Grace, it met with a Celtic Christianity informed by the theology of Pelagius, which it ultimately defeated. […]
>
> It could be argued that the vision of *Pelagianism was much stronger on the liberatory possibilities* of Christian teachings, in this life, than the Romanised form, which stressed sin and salvation in the afterlife, by way of judgement. We now have an orthodoxy of Trinitarianism in Christianity that is largely undisputed. Do we ignore the means by which it came to this undisputed representation or *uncover its doctrinal fault lines* and ask new questions about its veracity? (Erricker 2010, 176; italics added)

Here RE does not limit itself to record different theological positions and possibly interpret them from an ethical or political point of view. Erricker's RE seems upholding certain doctrine at the expense of others because of their 'liberatory possibilities', and this resonates with the post-modern critique that informs much of Erricker's position and his active intent of offering a RE that fosters a freer 'spirituality' or 'faith' in pupils.

Shifting our attention to Hannam, in her case the idea of religions as the *project* of RE, instead of the *object*, is even more conspicuous. However, we need first to address her larger educational perspective. RE "should be *educational*", and "the educational interest is first and foremost *existential*" (Biesta, Hannam 2019, 176; italics in the original), in the sense of allowing pupils to *act* as subjects of their own life, and to be acted upon by external pushes.

She develops these ideas drawing from Hannah Arendt's philosophy (Hannam 2019, 76-86; Biesta, Hannam 2019a, 177-80). According to the philosopher, human *action* means appearing to other human beings as unique individuals, and this appearing marks their own 'beginning' – in Arent's term, 'natality'. Human beings continuously bring new beginnings into the world through their words and deeds. The human being is a subject in a twofold sense, as both who begins an action, and who is subjected to the unpredictable consequence of said action derived from the response of other human beings. This situation may be frustrating, but at the same time such uncontrollability of human action is the very condition for the unique 'natality' of each person to take place. In this sense, for Arendt action is radically situated in plurality, as it requires the exposure to other individuals. In other words, human freedom to action needs a public sphere of difference. In more pedagogical terms, this means that the task of education is:

> To bring the child to this place, the world, where, whilst gathering itself, it meets others who are gathering themselves as well, and where slowly the child comes to the realisation that a 'full gathering' towards pure identity, if such an expression makes sense, is impossible – or is only possible at the cost of obstructing the 'gathering' of everyone else. (Biesta, Hannam 2019a, 179-80)

Now, the pivotal point in Hannam's arguments is that such a way of conceptualizing the existence in the world is comparable to the existential understanding of being religious. In fact, she understands this modality of being religious in terms of a focus on the unique, lived individual experience of the subject projected towards this world. This kind of being religious is a matter of

> 'standing out' towards the world, exposing oneself to the world, letting the world speak and, more importantly, letting oneself be addressed by the world. (182)

Therefore, such religious life is the expression *par excellence* of political life, in the sense of living with other equals, but at the same time unique, human beings. In fact, such exposition to the world and to others' 'natalities/beginnings' is said to resemble a kind of 'revelation', which calls for a response engagement to a "common world in which there is an opportunity for everyone to begin" (183).

In other words, "existential religious education will be best understood as the cultivation in the child of a mode of being in the world" (Hannam 2019, 131). For this reason, RE should address religious traditions in such a way that it introduces "children and young people '*to what a religious way of looking at and existing in the world may offer in leading one's life, individually and collectively*'" (141; italics added highlight a quote from Hampshire, Portsmouth Southampton & Isle of Wight Councils 2016, 4).

In more practical/didactical terms, this approach to RE indicates three steps which are to be reached by pupils: 'attention', 'intellectual humility' and 'discernment' (cf. Hannam 2019, 124-34), which not only are explicitly drawn from Weil, but are also defined as possible exemplifications of the existential religious path.[26] The first step means bringing the pupil to "attend not only to something but […] also […] to someone new" (125), outside the immediate family/familiarity and ordinary flow of his/her life, thus making the engagement with the public sphere possible. The second step means to explore further what s/he is 'attending to', but "without prejudgment" (132). The final step means ensuring that the child's enquiry reaches some kind of resolution about the importance of something and/or the discovery of some values in what has been explored (133).

In conclusion, we can see how in Erricker and Hannam the broader educational framework highly influences the way in which religions should be engaged and studied. That is, representation and conceptualization of religion are clearly subordinated to the set educational goals. Here, in my view, we can see the influence of the – ambiguous and freely interpretable – attainment goal of 'learning from religion'. For both authors, religions are not meant only to be studied in a detached way, but are first of all expected to be personally and existentially engaged by pupils, so that they may tap them as potential sources of meaning for their religious/'spiritual'/existential needs. Therefore, religions must be represented in a suitable way for pupils

26 "We might even say that this threefold path *is* the path of religious existence itself, constantly attending to other and self, and, with intellectual humility, coming to discernment" (Biesta, Hannam 2019a, 184).

to do that. Erricker offers a systematization of religious contents in three classes of concepts that links everyday experiences together, ideas deemed common to all religions, and different religious traditions. Also his didactical device of the five-fold cycle strongly emphasizes the personal involvement so to ideally foster a 'faith' which is anti-ideological and liberatory. In Hannam's case we find the more explicit statement that religious education should engage religion in existential terms because this is the way of addressing religions best conductive to the desirable educational result, that is leading an active life in the public sphere as theorized by Arendt.

What we are left to do is to observe Erricker's and Hannam's proposals from the point of view of didactic transposition and see which kind of *savoirs savants* are taken into consideration. Starting with Erricker, he considers RE to be deriving from religious studies, but in his understanding these latter include a very broad multidisciplinary approach: "sociological, phenomenological, philosophical, psychological, ethical and theological" (Erricker 2010, 95). Secondly, we must again keep in mind his 'post-modern/instrumental' baseline approach. In other words, what is important is the *performance* (i.e. the educational process and results) of a theory, rather than its adherence to a reality. Indeed, in the various examples of cycles of learning, the suggested epistemological approaches (existential-philosophical, theological, socio-anthropological) are *not* evenly applied to the various religious tradition. The theological approach is the most suggested for examples on Christianity (cf. 105-6, 145-9, 160-2); the socio-anthropological one for Islam and Judaism (cf. 125-7; 149-55, 162-4); the experiential-philosophical one for Hinduism and Buddhism (cf. 102-5, 155-9).[27] I interpret this move as a further instrumental use of religious materials, in order to have the pupils better engage these three aspects. Here we have two interpretative options: in the first case Erricker thinks that pupils expect certain aspects to appear more conspicuously in certain religion and not in others. A sort of instrumental use of stereotypes, so to speak. In the second case, Erricker actually thinks that certain religions do in fact feature more of certain aspects than others, which is more problematic.

At any rate, we are safe to conclude that in Erricker's work the *savoirs savants* of reference are a very heterogeneous array of perspectives whose common point is merely the declared object of study. Indeed, the adoption of so-called theological or experiential-philosophical perspectives seems particularly apt to offer an introduction

27 Incidentally, we may note how this pairing of Christianity with theology, Judaism and Islam with socio-anthropology and Hinduism and Buddhism with existential philosophy resembles the examples used by Hannam in her discussion on the three ways of being religious: as holding propositional belief (Christianity), as practices (Judaism and Islam), and as existential (dharmic traditions).

to an insider-like appreciation of doctrines, instead of fostering second-order reflections. All these various perspectives, moreover, are generally subordinated to the overall educational objective of providing pupils with resources for developing their own religious or spiritual 'narratives' – that is their own worldviews at various levels, from metaphysical to political, from social to psychological –, thus being able to respond to the religious or spiritual 'narratives' of others and of the established traditions.

Turning our attention to Hannam, we note the following points. First, her preference for the existential approach in RE runs parallel with a skepticism towards a content/knowledge-based education (cf. also Biesta, Hannam 2019b, 6-7). Since human action, in Arendt's view, is guided by volition and desire as much as it is from knowledge and reasoning (cf. Hannam 2019, 76 ff.), "education focussed on knowledge and reasoning is unlikely to be able to address sufficiently well matters in relation to the question 'what does it mean to be religious?'" (76). Accordingly, in her view the very act of conceptualizing religion as an object is a problem:

> The problem […] however, is that it makes religion into an object of study and thus disconnects religious education from the 'lived experience' of being religious. (Biesta, Hannam 2019a, 175)

In other words, it seems that the *savoirs* of reference for RE cannot but be the very religions themselves, with the caveat of being interpreted from an existential point of view to avoid the risk of both confessionalism and indoctrination (cf. above). In order to do this, no other *savoirs savants* dealing with religion can be of support, due to their objectifying tendency, except from philosophy (or better to say, a certain strands of philosophy) and theology, as the only disciplines that may bring the inquiring subject to the required existential involvement. We have seen how Hannam largely draws from Weil, Kierkegaard and Merton, and this privileged position of philosophy and theology is variously reiterated in *Living Difference III* syllabus (cf. Hampshire, Portsmouth Southampton & Isle of Wight Councils 2016, 8, 11, 27, 43, 51, 54-5, 59-60). Concerning the social practices of reference in Hannam's RE proposal, it should be evident at this point that they are identified with the social/political life, which is peculiarly understood as an equivalent of leading also an existential-religious life, in a kind of 'mysticization' of said social/political life.

4.4.4 Evaluation and Criticism

The Existential-instrumental approach also presents many elements at odds with a SoR-based RE approach and critical issues in regard

to the topic of East-Asian religions. The first point is epistemological. While the former aims at studying religions and religion primarily for the sake of increasing knowledge and understanding, the 'existential-instrumental approach', as the chosen label indicates, is mostly aimed at having an educative effect on the pupils, especially on the 'existential/spiritual' dimension. With this observation I do not intend to say that a study of religion\s-inspired epistemology is absolutely neutral and objective, especially in a context of didactic transposition when the axiological dimension is also at stake. However, as it has been already discussed, the study of religion has been chosen as the epistemological reference due to its constant self-criticism and historical consciousness, so that religions may be engaged in the most impartial way and represented in all their possible complexities. Therefore, the fact that Erricker and Hannam subordinate to certain educational goals the way in which religion should be studied begs the question of how much the impartiality of the conceptualizations and representation of religion will be affected. From the point of view of the study of religion\s, especially for what concerns East-Asian religions, the answer is that these traditions are clearly engaged in unacceptable ways.

Erricker offers various examples in which his general aim of providing pupils with 'existential/spiritual tools' to be taken from other religions is discernible. First, we have seen its specific preference for doctrinal element in its choice the type C concepts which make up Hinduism and Buddhism. Next, let us recall the cycle on Hinduism, its overarching evaluative question: "How effective is the concept of *saṃsāra* as an explanation of change?", and the pupil's feedback:

> For me, Shiva Nataraj is a symbol to show that my life is always changing. If I try to stop it changing, I will fail. You cannot stop change. […] We don't want to grow older. We don't want to leave our family. We don't want to die. But we will, and we have to accept it.

This seems to me more of a theological enquiry, which is not very different from Wright and Barnes's approach. What I mean is that this pupil gauges how much a certain concept of a certain religion is apt to describe a certain aspect of his/her reality. But does this approach help to explore the multifariousness of this important aspect of Hinduism? It seems to me it does not. Indeed, instead of being presented as a pivotal concept in the cosmological and eschatological discourses of various traditions of Indian origin, *saṃsāra* here is taken as a sort of worldview concerning the general issue of change in this present world.

In other words, there is a clear tendency towards a modernization/de-mythologization of this concept. Other similar examples are the inclusion of *bhavana*, understood as "mental culture or development"

(Erricker 2010, 156) inside the type C key concepts of Buddhism, and its use in the cycle of learning on meditation and on the wheel of existence, which also includes a practical attempt to meditate (155-9). By doing so, important dimensions of the religious life of the majority of Buddhist practitioners (worship, rituals, other cultivational practices) are neglected (cf. above, § 3.2.3). In other words, what we see here are clear examples of the modern domestication of foreign traditions, cherry-picking certain elements (*saṃsāra*, meditation) and arranging them in a way that runs the serious risk of perpetuating all those stratifications of exotic and orientalist representations that picture East-Asian religions as mainly philosophical or 'mystical' (cf. §§ 3.3.2, 3.3.3 and 3.3.4.). Even the seemingly innocent choice of having pupils meditating may perpetuate the modern and orientalist rhetoric that religions, especially East-Asian religions, cannot be fully understood in logical-discursive language. Even more seriously, it reinforces the modernist idea that, while meditation is the key practice[28] defining Buddhism as such, paradoxically, it is also a culture- and history-free technique easily detachable from its Buddhist context (cf. § 3.3.4) and that it can be thus proposed as an activity for pupils without fear of being accused of indoctrination.

A similar discourse can be made concerning Hannam. First, her approach is highly problematic from a general perspective of the study of religion\s. She claims that to conceptualize religion as an object ultimately disconnects religious education from the 'lived experience', and that knowledge and reasoning is unlikely to be able to sufficiently address 'what it means to be religious'. This entails a *sui generis* discourse about religion which is reminiscent of those romantic attempts to preserve religion in general, and Christianity in particular, from rationalist attacks through the creation of the rhetoric of religious experience. These are all ideas which feed into the problematic paradigm of phenomenology of religion (cf. §§ 2.1.1, 2.1.5 and the first part of 3.2.3). Furthermore, her approach leads her not only to privilege the existential way of conceptualizing religions, but to reinforce the orientalist paradigm that East-Asian religion are best understood through the existential conceptualization of religion, basically perpetuating that stereotype of intuitive, irrational Asia (§ 3.3.4), whose roots, we have seen, trace back to the romantic and transcendentalist movements (§ 3.3.2). Indeed, in her example of a learning cycle on Buddhism, the overarching question "can meditation help people overcome suffering?" is explored by focusing mainly on the historical Buddha and its first teachings, to shift then directly to the contemporary use of meditation as a tool for "recov-

28 Indeed, Erricker characterizes *karuṇā* as being developed by Buddhist by means of meditation (2010, 137), which is a quite a reductive, romantic and simplified definition.

ering from post-traumatic stress disorder" (Hampshire, Portsmouth Southampton & Isle of Wight Councils 2016, 49). The historical diversity of meditation – not to mention other practices – within Buddhism is addressed only in very general terms with sweeping indications. In this representation we can see both the influence of the nineteenth century idea that the real Buddhism was limited to the first development from the historical Buddha, and the contemporary idea that meditation is the central-yet-detachable technique.

Furthermore, the point of view of the study of religion\s, always in connection to the theme of East-Asian religions, is called upon also in questioning how much the educational goal of the 'spiritual development' is based on impartial grounds and is it compatible with intercultural goals. Indeed, if RE is to help pupils to develop 'spiritually', this entails a series of problematic issues. Let us consider the constructivist and post-modern framework, proposed by Erricker, in which the teacher is conceived as a facilitator. Even in such an anti-foundational approach, if the goal is to reach 'spiritual development', then some sort of 'standards of spirituality' must be implicitly or explicitly set. An example of spiritual development is exemplified by Erricker by narrating the experience of his own seven year old daughter coping with the issue of communicating with his deceased grandfather, who was cremated. She wrote and then burned a letter in order to communicate with him (Erricker 2010, 71-3). From the point of view of the study of religion\s, this story represents a phenomenon that may be explained by a cognitive science approach, conceiving the behavior of the daughter as an example of human imagination breaching and transferring in a counter-intuitive way the ontological properties of objects. In this case using the symbolism of ashes (cf. § 2.1.7; cf. also Jensen 2014, chs 4 and 5). However, while our interpretation of the symbolic thinking and acting of this child is just one way of describing the phenomenon, for Erricker this very symbolic thinking and acting aimed at giving meaning to a certain life-event is taken as the 'ought' of the spiritual experience. In other words, there is a normative definition of what a spiritual experience should be. However, we have seen how the idea of spirituality, and especially its understanding as a neutral common ground of all religions, stripped of the ritual or doctrinal 'trappings', has instead a well-defined genealogy and development within modern Euro-American cultures (§ 3.2.4) and has been often instrumentally applied to the representation of East-Asian religions (§§ 3.3.3 and 3.3.4).

This is even more conspicuous in Hannam, who sets three general methodological steps or thresholds to be reached by pupils: 'attention', 'intellectual humility' and 'discernment', which are explicitly inspired by Weil's philosophy. This means that the ideas and experience of a single modern, European and Christianity-inspired thinker are defined as possible exemplification of an allegedly universal

existential religious path. Paradoxically, the very idea of exploiting this 'existential' way of being religious in order to 'be open' towards something new, or to be intellectually humble in front of the otherness of the world, actually ends up in subsuming such otherness, i.e. the complexity of various religious traditions under a very limited set of modern and Christian perspectives. This means that, if RE is to develop this 'spirituality' in pupils through the encounter with various religions, the representation of these latter will inevitably be adapted, domesticated in function of a well-defined, normative, and modern idea of spirituality, which tends to emphasize the 'inner' dimension at the expenses of 'outer' material and social-institutional aspects (§ 3.2.4). Given the long and influent history of the orientalist stereotypes of Asian religions, the ways in which of Erricker and Hannam have handled the theme East-Asian traditions further increase the risk of portraying them as bearers of an 'eternal wisdom' or 'spirituality', to be individually experienced, especially in non-rational ways.

We have seen (§ 2.2.7) that in the axiological frame of reference for our RE, that of intercultural education, certain competences are needed in order to engage the complexities of cultures and religions in all their aspects. Among these latter also are included all those critical and analytical skills that enable us to expose the possible biases, presuppositions and assumptions that, as in such cases as that of Erricker and Hannam, make us project on different traditions those images and values that actually belong to our historical and intellectual heritage (§ 2.2.8, cf. also *infra*, § 5.2.2). From the observations above, it should be clear that the 'existential-instrumental' approach is clearly at odds with these educational goals, especially if we are to deal with East-Asian traditions. The overall educational goal of this approach is the development of an existential/spiritual dimension, which is ultimately an emic, modern, Euro-American idea passed off as a universal constant. This obviously does not help exploring Japanese and other East-Asian traditions, especially their pre-modern history. Actually, it risks hindering the exploration of those entangled histories, often with power-related aspects, through which, for example, Hinduist or Daoist traditions, shifted from being despised as magical superstitions to being praised as spiritual remedies for the contemporary world. As a matter of fact, one of the aims of the RE I am proposing is exactly the unveiling of the very pretension of neutrality and universality of this concept of 'spirituality' and highlighting the role that this ambiguous concept had in historically regulating the discourses and judgments about East-Asian traditions (cf. also ch. 5).

4.5 English RE: Interpretive-Dialogical Approach

4.5.1 Introduction

Under this label I want to address in the first place the work of Robert Jackson, Emeritus Professor of Religions and Education at the University of Warwick. He is probably the most renowned scholar (coming from the field of education) for what concerns RE in both UK and in Europe, and possibly beyond. His theoretical approach to RE, called the 'interpretive approach' (Jackson 1997) has proven quite influential also beyond the British borders, and he and his team have become increasingly involved in supranational research projects and other RE-related activities, such as the EU funded project REDCo: *Religion in Education. A Contribution to Dialogue or a Factor of Conflict in Transforming Societies of European Countries* (2006-2009). Jackson has cooperated with the OSCE/ODIHR's drafting of the *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs* (OSCE/ODIHR 2007) and has contributed to a number of the Council of Europe's (CoE) initiatives and publications on religious diversity and education since 2002 (cf. e.g. CoE 2007). He contributed to the drafting of the recommendation by the Committee of Ministers on teaching about religions and non-religious convictions (CoE 2008a). Recently, he authored the CoE's *Signposts: Policy and Practice for Teaching About Religions and Non-Religious Worldviews* (CoE 2014), which summarizes various perspectives on this issue. Here, however, we will address his contributions as an individual scholar.

I am grouping under the label 'interpretive-dialogical' the works of Jackson and of other authors because Jackson's work laid the foundation for other strands of RE research focused especially on the theme of dialogue, in its various dimensions both in UK and beyond. Among these scholars we can cite Julia Ipgrave. Her proposal envisions a teacher/researcher who provides little but systematical input and acts more as a facilitator of the dialogue, providing further information only if required. Pupils encounter diverse religious traditions through dialogue with peers or invited religious practitioners. Pupils are asked to set out the ethos and rules for engaging with difference and learning from it by themselves. Finally, she recommends easing the personal engagement of the pupils to have them express, negotiate and justify their own views (Ipgrave 2001; 2003). Other notable authors beyond UK borders are Heid Leganger-Krogstad and Weisse (cf. Jackson 2004, 107-25).

The author to whom I will focus here is Kevin O'Grady, Associate Fellow at the Centre for Education Studies at University of Warwick. He studied under Jackson and cooperated in projects such as the above-mentioned REDCo project. O'Grady's approach relies heavi-

ly on the methodology of action-research not only "as a methodology but also [as] curricular and pedagogical principles" (O'Grady 2019, 4), and while in his monograph examined here the interpretive approach is not explicitly discussed, elsewhere he attested how this latter provided the theoretical foundation for his own research (O'Grady 2013). The reason for choosing his work (O'Grady 2019) among those of other authors, apart from being the most recent contribution, lies in his emphasis on RE as subject that fosters "democratic citizenship through the study of religions" (subtitle of O'Grady 2019), which resonates with my proposal of 'social practice of intercultural citizenship' as the social practice of reference for RE.

4.5.2 Concept, Epistemology and Representations of Religion

Jackson approaches is influenced by the hermeneutical anthropology of Clifford Geertz but also in dialogue with other relevant authors such as Edward Said, Vincent Crapanzano, James Clifford and others (Jackson 1997, 30-49, 72-95). Drawing on these insights, Jackson proposes to look at cultures as having fuzzy edges and being internally diverse, negotiated and contested. This is because individuals can draw on a large pool of cultural resources, and there are overlapping points between public and private spheres, with communities and groups that act as kinds of intermediate bodies. Thus, both ethnicity and nationality are not fixed but equally construed and negotiated dimensions. This emphasis on the complexities and 'fuzziness' of social and cultural realities, and the relative implications for the researcher who must also consider personal and power-related factors, can be seen as the general *leitmotiv* of Jackson's approach to both religion and education fields.

Concerning the issue of the concept of religion, Jackson positions himself in that trend of scholarship which sees 'religion' and 'religions' as categories originating in the West and having a particular history and different meanings in different times. Nonetheless, they can still be used as

> useful analytical categories in relation to sets of *beliefs, practices, experiences and values dealing with fundamental existential questions, such as those of birth, identity and death*. (Jackson 2008b, 21; italics added)

The various phenomena thus identified can be regrouped by means of family resemblance, avoiding posing and identifying any essence of religion. However, "some degree of transcendental reference", although endowed with different meanings, can be posited as a common point (21). From an ontological point of view, he does not endorse a

non-realist position, but simply recognizes that religions, along with other "broad patterns of social and cultural life, such as 'work', 'family', 'politics', 'childhood', 'law', 'marriage" are

> social and cultural constructs, the meaning of which has changed over time, varies in different cultural situations and has never been universally agreed. (20)

This applies in particular to contemporary times where factors of globalization and localization move religions on one hand towards individualization and, on the other, towards the strengthening of religious authority (22). Additionally, religions are to be recognized especially as "communicative processes" (22).

Jackson proposes a sophisticated matrix of levels that make up a religion and account for its internal diversity, complexity and the fuzziness of both internal and external borders. He suggests looking at religions as being formed by the dialectical interplay on three levels. Firstly, the individual, including his/her experiences, feelings, attitude, and language, other than mere beliefs and practices. Secondly, the tradition at large, which must be conceived as being interpreted and considered differently depending on the individuals who participated in it. Thirdly, the last level is membership group which is to be employed as a loose concept, as it could mean both a large subdivision within the broad tradition (e.g. Protestant) or a range of subdivisions (e.g. liberal, charismatic) down to the narrower denomination (e.g. Baptists) or local groups within the denomination. This is the level at which most of the social, political and power-related dynamics are more evident and where the mediation between 'individuals' and larger 'tradition' takes place (Jackson 1997, 60-9; 2008a, 172-3; 2008b, 15-16). From a didactic point of view, this matrix allows pupils to encounter a religious tradition starting from any point: a narrative describing the broader tradition in general terms, a more circumscribed account of a religious membership group or the single biography of one person. From here the exploration can shift to other levels and see how the interpretation of the whole religious tradition proceeds through the interplay among the levels. In other words, the hermeneutical circle between parts and the whole.

Turning our attention to O'Grady, although he aligns himself in general to Jackson's approach, for what concerns the concept of religion he relies on Smart's theory (esp. Smart 1996) and his "dialectical phenomenology" (O'Grady 2019, 122). Religions can be analyzed in seven dimensions which are mutually interrelated. These are the doctrinal, mythological-narrative, ethical, experiential, ritual, institutional and material-artistic dimension. Modalities and degrees of interaction between dimensions vary among religions. O'Grady explains his choice by asserting that such a conception of religion

serves multiple aims, such as reducing "the danger of essentialism" (122), countering the critiques against overemphasis on personal experience (e.g. Wright and Barnes), but also criticizing the idea that religions are primary built around system of beliefs (158).

This multidimensional approach notwithstanding, O'Grady seems still to hold some kind of *sui generis* attitude towards religion\s: he says, for example, that it would be a misrepresentation if we "fail to acknowledge that religious adherents may understand their texts, beliefs or practices to originate in and point towards transcendental realities", and that religions can be engaged as cultural phenomena, but this does do not means a 'reduction' from being also conceived as "revealed truth" and "responses to ethical and existential dilemma" (184-5). That such views are at odds with the more critical stances in the field of the study of religion\s is clear in O'Grady's explicit dismissal of Fitzgerald's critique (2000; cf. above, §§ 2.1.5 and 2.1.8) to the concept of religion (O'Grady 2019, 133-4), and in his suggestion that what is "distinctively religious or sacred" should not be neglected (196). However, no further details are provided.

Concerning the issue of the representation of religion, Jackson's concept of matrix has given us already some hints. Additionally we should note that his theoretical move is explicitly aimed at highlighting how the individual is always participating in multiple identity groups (ethnic, religious, language-related, etc.), an example of which are the young British Hindus who tend to distinguish themselves from British non-Hindus by emphasis on vegetarianism, but also from older generations by distancing themselves from *jāti*-groupism and adopting protestant-influenced ideas on religion (Jackson 1997, 65-9). Another important element is that his approach developed primarily out of the insights gained from ethnographic research on the religious nurture of children (age 8-13) in various British religious communities, especially from minorities, both old (Jewish, Catholics) and new (Islam, Hindu, Sikh).

Jackson and his team developed a series of textbooks in which they translated the ethnographic materials gathered. Insiders such as families, local and national religious leader were also involved in checking, commenting, and criticizing the materials during the development process (more details in Jackson 1997, 94-112).

The results are didactic materials which focus on real British children as representative of each of the religions traditions presented, who accompany the reader through the books. As an example of which aspects are represented in such materials, we can pick the textbook on Hinduism designed for KS3 pupils (Wayne et al. 1996), whose selection of topics focuses on a quite broad range of practices (I quote *verbatim* the title of chapters): "Worship and Prayer: Ways of Worshipping"; "Worship and Prayer: Picturing God"; "Food and Fasting"; "Marriage and the Family"; "Family Celebrations – Life Names";

"Visiting Gurus", sided by several sections on festivals: "Holi and Janmashtami"; "Keeping in Touch – Raksha Bandhan"; "Navaratri"; and "Divali". Fewer sections focus on doctrines and texts: "The Atman and the Cycle of Life, Death and Rebirth"; "Karma and the Law of Karma"; "The Bhagavad Gita" and the "Ramayana". There are also sections devoted to important places or notable persons: "The Mandir – The Temple"; "Mother Ganga – A Sacred River of India";"Jalaram Bapa – A Saint from Gujarat" and "Mahatma Gandhi". Other sections deal with general ethical and social aspects: "Respect for the Natural World"; "Respect for Life" and "Belonging to a Community of Communities; Who Am I?". One section is devoted to the topic of inner diversity: "Learning about Hindu Traditions".

In each of these sections, statements from the featured children are provided. For example, in the chapter "Karma and the Law of Karma" one child says: "If I do something good, I hope for a good life next time. If you do good it will be better next time, I hope!" (Wayne et al. 1996, 24). These statements, comments and other information about these children are sided with general explanations of the key concept provided by authors, along with other examples from individual or collective group of insiders and citations from authoritative texts. This is the practical application of the threefold matrix, in which different insiders' voices are presented within a framework of a general understanding of the broader traditions. As for the selection on topics, the above list of chapters shows an equilibrated representation of various aspects, without excessive focus on the 'usual suspects' such as doctrines and texts. We can see a pupil-centered focus of the interpretive approach in the number of topics of potential interest and motivation for children, such as festivals and food, or topics which they can easily relate to, such as family- and community-linked themes. On top of that, of course, there is the expedient itself portraying the personal voices and experiences of children. This is expected to foster involvement and responsiveness, for the reason that these figures act as insiders, but, at the same time, they are also peers to which other UK pupils are expected to interact with. Such emphasis on 'peer-insiders' is even more evident in the decision of "mak[ing] use of categories or division within the tradition" (Jackson 1997, 110), and arranging topics around insiders' categories. For example, in a KS2 textbook on Christianity topics are organized under "'joining', 'learning', 'believing and worshipping', 'prayer and praise', the 'Bible', 'living as a Christian', 'sharing' and 'caring for others'" (115). What seems missing in this modality of representation is a diachronic view of religious diversity, even if we have seen how the historical aspect of religion\s is not completely ignored by Jackson on a theoretical level. It seems that diversity within a tradition is not explored trough historical development but simply as a given fact. Meijer (2004) too notes this missing dimension.

Concerning O'Grady's work, on one side he recommends that religions should be engaged in a

> broad, balanced, multi-aspectual way, with attention to expressions including beliefs, texts, rituals, myths, art, architecture, ethics, social and political views and practices and how these interact. (O'Grady 2019, 195)

On the other side, however, he also emphasizes that RE's focus should be on plural beliefs and values in function of the development of identity, which is the key question for adolescents (47). Therefore, religious material should be chosen so that pupils may be helped in clarifying their own beliefs and values through them. Pupils are invited to address materials through their own questions and concerns about "existential and ethical interest and matters of personal significance" (191-2). This is also the reason why O'Grady does not discuss in detail which aspects of religion should be privileged. In fact, in his suggested action-research approach, the contents and methods of RE lesson should be 'co-planned' with the pupils in order to individuate themes and activities that motivate them the most (19-21). We have however some examples from his own action-research. In a cycle of lessons on Islam, one of the topics chosen was the life of Muhammad, where pupils (age 11-14) were "tasked to imagine that they could interview Muhammad about his life and to list the questions they would ask" (76). Among these questions O'Grady highlights those involving the personal views of the pupils. For example, how did it feel for Mohammed to be rejected and forced from Mecca, compared to the personal experience of one pupil who had to leave the US. Next, they explored the concept of *tawḥīd* or oneness of Allah. Pupils were asked to create artistic artifacts through which they would also "relate the words to their own personal circumstances" and "showing what the idea of oneness means to you personally" (77). Other topics were *zakat* or mandatory charitable contribution, the ritual prayer and a comparative examination of general 'Islam values' in order to discuss "how do Islamic values compare to those of the members of our class, or help us to understand our own values?" (78).

As a retrospective comment on his own work, O'Grady does ask himself whether putting more focus on motivating pupils to investigate their own concerns, rather than presenting religious traditions exhaustively, was a balanced choice (26-8). Nevertheless, he claims the success of this strategy in raising motivation. He also acknowledges that, in order to provide a broader representation of religions, Smart's approach can be improved by incorporating media portrayals of religions and making pupils reflect on how these could affect their views (143).

Lastly, coherently with the pupil-centered approach, it is O'Grady's conviction (cf. also Jackson 2004, 179) to also include non-religious worldviews as contents to be addressed in RE. Since the main educational aims of his RE is to foster democratic participation and citizenship competences through RE dialogues, and since many pupils do not necessarily identify themselves as religious, in order to motivate them into dialogue their perspectives must also be taken into account (160).

Shifting to the topic of the epistemological perspective, we have already seen that Jackson's interpretive approach draws from social sciences such as anthropology. The very word 'interpretive' that he uses is explicitly taken from Geertz's *Interpretation of Cultures* (1973). In particular, he employs idea of the 'textualization' of the ethnographic data, that is the treatment of the single part or 'sign' (concept, institutions, etc.) as a part of a web of semantic relations with all the other 'signs', which the ethnographer must interpret in its various meanings through a dialectic between parts and the whole. It is the well-known device of 'thick description'. For Geertz, says Jackson, the ethnographer's work is more akin to that of the literary critic, whose interpretive nature – i.e. the subjectivity the interpreter – must be explicit. Jackson refers especially to the moment in which the ethnographer creates a bridge through a back-and-forth movement between *experience-near* concepts and *experience-far* concepts (Jackson 1997, 32-8). He also cites Waardernburg's (1978) 'new style' of phenomenology, according to which *epoché* should be extended to the concept of religion itself and there must be a due acknowledgment of other social, cultural and economic contexts. Moreover, there is the acknowledgment of the active role of researcher's imagination in recreating the 'structures of intentionality' of others. All this, according to Jackson, resonates with Geertz' contextual and creative hermeneutical exercise (Jackson 1997, 25-8, 38).

Such appreciation of the active role of the observer's subjectivity is balanced by Jackson by the acknowledgement of the risks of projection of one's own biases and stereotypes inherent in every analysis of any cultural object. In this sense, Jackson also considers the insights of the deconstructive ethnography of authors such as Clifford and Crapanzano, who emphasize the fictionalities of any ethnographic descriptions and the need to be aware of the subjectivity and authorial power of the researcher, as well as the inner contradictions and contestation within any cultural group observed (38-43). Such attention to critical and reflective issues is also present with direct reference to religion. In fact, Jackson discusses, drawing from Wilfred C. Smith (1963), how the history of the European concept of 'religion' came to be essentialized as a 'system of beliefs' approachable only through a *sui generis*, experiential approach. Just as we have seen in previous sections (§ 2.1.5), Jackson too recognizes how these

historical developments influenced the use of term 'world religion', which came to refer to traditions allegedly having a strong degree of homogeneity as discrete belief systems and a universal message/mission. Furthermore, the superimposition of European ideas on non-European realities reflects the hegemonic orientalist practice that highly influenced the representations of religions, essentializing a dichotomy between 'us' as liberal and rational *versus* 'them' as exotic, strange and mystical (Jackson 1997, 49-59).

Turning our attention to O'Grady, he does not further develop the overall epistemological framework of Jackson, but he instead focuses on the issue of interpretation in a very broad way and with a direct relevance for what it is expected from pupils. In other words, O'Grady, differently from Jackson, does not discuss how religion\s should be epistemologically engaged in general, but, more specifically, how pupils are expected to do this. In his words, "religious traditions should be opened to *interpretation*, *criticism* and *response*" (O'Grady 2019, 47; italics added).

Concerning *interpretation* and *response*, according to O'Grady, hermeneutics (especially from a Gadamerian point of view) should be applied in RE to foster expansion of pupils' horizons through encounters between pupils and religious traditions, as well as between pupils and pupils. These encounters, he states, "always have potential to generate new and significant meaning" (192). Indeed, as the subtitle of his monograph affirms, RE should be set up as a "dialogue with difference" and in such "hermeneutical pedagogy", the pupils' responses from their dialogues with religious traditions have "equal status to material from religious traditions" (48). The engagement and dialogue with religions should be as motivating and involving as possible, also at personal level, provided that it is the pupil who decides the level of involvement. Even if they "should not necessarily view the beliefs and practices of others as options for themselves", they should "at least, try to appreciate the meaning of those beliefs and practices to those others" (179). Through such dialogues, pupils need to become aware of their own background assumptions or influences determined by variables such as gender (193). They are also expected to make comparisons and contrasts with their own perspectives, drawing conclusion about question of various nature, value-related questions included (195).

Concerning *criticism*, O'Grady affirms that "RE should not overemphasise religious experience nor deny pupils opportunities for critical debate" (193) since the 'assessment' (i.e. value judgment) of religions by the pupils is an inevitable outcome (132). He sympathetically recalls that Smart too lamented about the "sloganistic use of 'the phenomenology of religion' to divorce religious studies from questions of truth and meaning" (132), and adds that, even if a broader and balanced study of religion\s is preferable, the question of truth-claims of

religion should not be excluded, but instead addressed through critical and philosophical tools (193).

Continuing with the issue of the 'truth-claims' of religion, and specifically of their existential relevance for the pupils, we note that also in Jackson's work – notwithstanding the robust grounding on academic studies on religions – we find ambiguous statements about this topic. In trying to anticipate criticism to his approach for being 'relativistic', he affirms that his suggested RE "does not imply a methodological assumption that religions are equally true" (Jackson 1997, 123), a statement that is at odds with the methodological agnosticism of the study of religion\s. Indeed, on one side his approach and materials "do not explore truth-claims" because it "is not their job" (125); on the other, "it does, however, leave question of truth and value open, to be pursued as a part of religious education" (122), with the only caveat of exercising caution in respect to the youngest pupils and minorities. Nonetheless, in the case that pupils raise such issues, teachers "should not stifle or prevent such discussions" (125).

In summary, we can see how, for both Jackson and O'Grady, the active involvement of the pupil is the factor that ultimately guides their approach. To Jackson, RE is fundamentally about "existential and social debates in which pupils are encouraged to participate, with a personal stake" (Jackson 2004, 18), and what distinguishes RE from other fields are these "fundamental concerns in relation to existential and social questions and the data of religious traditions" (18). Therefore, the "personal agency" of the pupil is "an important ingredient of religious education" (163). Such emphasis on subjective involvement of pupils is not without reason and it depends, as we will see, on the broad educational framework – in terms of both aims and methods – in which these RE proposals are built.

4.5.3 Educational Dimension and Didactic Transposition

The influence of anthropology and ethnography can also be seen in what Jackson proposes as the main learning processes the pupils are expected to go through. The first one is called *Interpretation*, in which the pupils should not leave aside their presuppositions (as in phenomenology), but make comparisons between their owns concepts and the phenomena studied. The point is to individuate possible overlapping of meanings or contrasts and to apply a back-and-forward movement from one's own perspective and that of the insider, aided by "analogous experiences" (cf. Jackson 1997, 110-11; 2009, 402). A practical example would be as follows:

> For example, in introducing young children (aged 5-7) to a boy from a Buddhist family sitting quietly in a meditation hall at a

> rural English Thai Forest Hermitage monastery the teacher explores "noisy times" and "quiet times" with children in the class. […] They then listen to the story of the Buddhist boy's visit to the monastery and start to think about why he might be having a "quiet time" in the meditation hall. The teacher feeds the information from the book and the children compare their ideas about "quiet times" with those of the Buddhist family. (Jackson 2008a, 174)

Such drawing on personal experiences or on familiar ideas in order to interpret material is called 'building bridges' in the textbook developed by Jackson and colleagues, and it has to be coupled with another hermeneutical exercise, called 'working it out'. This latter refers to the interpretive process of moving between the parts and the whole of the phenomena/'text' studied, which is, the above-mentioned hermeneutical process throughout the three levels: individual, membership groups and tradition (Jackson 1997, 115-16).

The learning process of interpretation, as it directly touches the personal experience of the pupils, is expected to foster another important process called 'reflexivity', understood as "the relationship between the experience of students and the experience of those whose way of life they are attempting to interpret" (Jackson 2009, 402), and it is further divided in 'constructive criticism' and 'edification'. The former refers to the ability to critically examine the material studied and the methods applied, and it is linked with the issue of representation above discussed. In other words, pupils should be taught to consciously adopt a critical stance towards their own learning methods and try to identify possible bias in their representation, as well as to be sensitive to representational biases or clichés in the material studied, such as newspapers (Jackson 1997, 129; 2009, 404). The 'edification' process is slightly more complex, and Jackson takes direct inspiration from the thoughts of famous anthropologists who stressed how the engagement with different cultures brought them to reflect on their own background and assumptions. He cites from Edmund Leach:

> The scholarly justification for studying 'others' rather than 'ourselves' is that, although we first perceive the others as exotic, we end up recognizing in their 'peculiarities' a mirror of our own. (Leach 1982, 127, cit. in Jackson 1997, 130)

And from Victor Turner:

> When we have become comfortable within the other culture […] and turn to gaze back to our native land, we find that the familiar has become exoticed; we see it with new eyes. The commoplace has become marvelous. What we took for granted now has

> the power to stir our scientific imaginations. (Turner 1978, XIII-XIV, cit. in Jackson 1997, 133)

Pupils are thus encouraged to re-assess the understanding of their own worldviews through the challenge of 'unpacking' others' worldviews and by trying to relate to them through their own concepts and experience. Whatever differences there might appear to be between the pupil's way of life and the way of life being studied, Jackson says,

> there may also be common features or points of contact or overlap. What might appear to be entirely 'other' might link with one's own experience in such a way that new perspectives are created or unquestioned presuppositions are challenged. (Jackson 2009, 403)

Jackson links his idea of edification with the above cited RE key attainment target of 'learning from religion' (1997, 131-2). He does so especially in reference to the original formulation of this concept by Michael Grimmit, which focuses on personal introspection, on one's own "ultimate questions", on "signals of transcendence", on "influence of their own beliefs and values on their development as persons", and "responsibility for their own decision-making, especially in matters of personal belief and conduct" (Grimmit 1987, 255). Jackson, in his interpretation of Grimmit's ideas, affirms that, since interpretation stems from a dialectic movement between self and other, such 'self' should be put in the foreground. In the textbooks, for example, there are indications about encouraging students to re-examine aspects of their own understanding in the light of topics encountered in specific religious traditions, but "which also have universal significance" (Wayne et al. 1996, 4). Thus, RE should make

> pupils and their concerns a key element in religious education, reducing the amount of 'content' that the subject has, making time and space for reflective activity and dealing with the emotional as well as the rational. (Jackson 2004, 74)

Just like the experience of their editorial counterparts in the textbooks

> pupils' own religio-cultural experiences, reflections and interactions can and should be part of the subject matter of religious education. (108)

This methodology is further encouraged since

> a religious education disconnected from pupils' own questions and concerns is very likely to fail to engage and to motivate them. (Jackson 2009, 403)

Therefore, Jackson presents various case studies in which this "potentially transformative character of religious education" (108) is highlighted as successful examples of the implementation of his interpretive approach. These are cases in which a teacher manages to connect religious material to the "spiritual needs" of his/her pupils with special needs, or cases in which the "affective concerns" (106) of the pupils represent the starting point, and the teacher encourages them to reflect on existential questions and connect them with material from wider religious and nonreligious sources (107).

Turning our attention to O'Grady, his broad education framework has three main interrelated strands. The first is an underpinning Deweyan philosophy of education, the second is the focus on the issue of motivation, and the third is the establishment of 'democratic citizenship' as one of RE's main aims.

Concerning the first strand, according to John Dewey the process of education necessarily implies co-partnership and shared commitments to agreed values and modalities of interactions between competing rationalities towards the "promotion of respectful and fair consideration of all" (133). Moreover, Dewey's approach is highly child-centered, in the sense that teachers are supposed to acts as a 'facilitator' rather than someone instilling knowledge in empty heads. It also means that the

> aims of education cannot properly be imposed from outside the pupil and […] that pupils should experience a sense of themselves as unique individuals, whose opinions matter and who have something positive to contribute to society. (37)

This leads to the second strand, which is motivation. To motivate pupils in RE, O'Grady suggest that this subject must touch "the development of identity" which "is the key question for adolescents" (47), by "link[ing] their own questions and concerns to religious material" (193). This is the reason why pupils should be involved as co-planners of their own learning, keeping logs of their impressions and providing feedbacks, through interviews with the teacher, about the contents and methods of their RE lessons. These are then taken into account by the teacher who adjusts the curriculum and practices accordingly (55-66). Furthermore, by making pupils responsible for communal decision about their own education, such an approach is presented as fostering democratic education, since it increases

> the choice, responsibility and participation of pupils both as ends in themselves and as preparation for adult life in a diverse society. (28)

This leads to the third strand, with which also wrap up the previous two. For O'Grady, contribution to democratic citizenship should be

RE's overarching aim (8), which is in accord with Dewey's lesson that the support of democratic social order is the "fundamental purpose of education" (193). How can child-centeredness, motivation, identity and democratic citizenship be combined together? O'Grady's key argument is that, in the case of the adolescent, elements of education for identity overlap with those of citizenship education. Such overlapping occurs because both educational processes focused on the development of autonomy and commitment to a coherent set of values. Thus, in one case they may represent the responsibility of oneself as adult citizen, in the other case such commitment to a coherent set of values represents no other than "a part of a person's sense of himself or herself" (38, cf. 33-41).

RE enters in this context as it represents an occasion for a "dialogue with difference" (subtitle of the book). For O'Grady dialogue must feature "attentive listening", promote "the expression and consideration of different perspectives" in a "safe but not necessarily comfortable environment". Disagreements should come to the surface and pupils should be challenged by diversity (3). This diversity is brought about by a "broad, multi-aspectual knowledge and understanding of religion" (193) that RE should foster. By dialoguing and personally engaging the plurality of beliefs and values explored through RE, for example, by discovering that religions are internally diverse, pupils may become "more flexible about their own identities" (149). Through being challenged by plurality and diversity embodied by both learning materials and their peers' personal response to these materials, pupils may gain awareness of what shapes their identity and their own background assumptions (193). They should also start investigating constraints such as media influences or gender biases on their ability to engage sympathetically and critically with the traditions of others (149). If conflicts emerge in such processes, these should be investigated rather than smoothed over, since conflicts can intensify or even generate a good dialogue, provided that pupils also need to learn to disagree constructively (a competence in itself linked to citizenship education) (146-7).

In summary, for O'Grady RE is particularly effective when put in a framework of citizenship education, because it brings the challenge of diversity and plurality, especially in "issues of existential and ethical interest and in matters of personal significance" (195). These latter are what RE should focus on, because of their effectiveness in stirring up questions related to identity development in pupils. This engagement on the personal level of the pupils,[29] the responsible participation in their own learning and the practice of dialogue with their accom-

29 It must be noted that O'Grady maintains that it is up to the pupil to decide the degree of personal investment in RE (O'Grady 2019, 196).

panying processes of *interpretation* and *reflexivity*, are thus argued to be key factors in developing competences of citizenship education.

All these observations leave us with very little doubt on which social practices of reference O'Grady has in mind.

Also Jackson investigates the connections between religious education, intercultural education and citizenship education. He draws a parallel between the problem of the old paradigm of multicultural education, charged with essentialism and stereotypes as it portrayed cultures as self-enclosed wholes, and the similar problem in the representation of religions. Ongoing debates in the social sciences as well as in intercultural education emphasize the dynamic interaction, contestation and negotiation inherent in socio-cultural phenomena, so that borders between socio-cultural groups are rather fuzzy and individuals continuously reshape their culture by drawing from a variety of both autochthonous and foreign sources (Jackson 2004, 126-31). To overcome reification and stereotypization which may fuel intolerance and racism, the representation of this complexity should be implemented in education. The same argument applies to the representation of religions which, due to its strong connection to identity and ethnicity discourses, is especially critical when it comes to political issues such as coexistence with minority groups (Jackson 2005, 5-8). In such a situation, Jackson argues that the interpretive approach can adequately provide the needed education to this complexity. First, the threefold matrix of the representation of religions follows the same exact logic of avoiding reification and emphasizing complexity. Secondly, the process of *reflexivity* gives pupils opportunities to consider the "impact of new learning on their own belief and values and to apply critical judgment in a constructive, rational and informed way" (10), while clarifying at the same time "their own sense of identity in relation to place and personal and family history" (Jackson 2004, 141). Thirdly, the interpretive approach fosters interactionist/dialogical attitudes since it focuses on engaging the real lives of insiders (such as the pupils portrayed in the textbook) and on developing dialogue and mutual learning among classmates, thus preparing for future intercultural encounters.

Concerning citizenship education, Jackson considers the school as a "microcosmos of democratic society and therefore the ideal place to practice ideas of citizenship" (138). Since the argument that religions are nowadays reduced to the mere private dimension of individuals is not feasible anymore (Jackson 2003, 62-9; 2004, 4-21, 139), this citizenship practice could and should be informed by an understanding of the different religious traditions at their various levels of individual, membership groups and tradition at large (70). Moreover, the dialogue-focused developments of the interpretive approach (i.e. O'Grady's), are seen by Jackson as maximizing the participation of the pupils in various ways through their very methodology, nota-

bly by training the pupils to become aware of the preconceptions lurking in their interactions and to consider how these preconceptions are formed). Furthermore, since "the very nature of religious thought" is an "engagement with ultimate questions" (139), dialogical religious education is an ideal forum for the development of dialogue and negotiation skills.

While the interpretative-dialogical approach explored so far resonates with the discussion on intercultural education discussed in ch. 2, it nonetheless maintains a peculiar focus on the subjective dimension of the pupils which necessarily imply epistemological consequences in the didactic transposition of the *savoirs savants* of reference. We have seen how Jackson explicitly draws from various scholarly sources, authors from the study of religion\s (Smith, Waardernburg) from social sciences (notably Geertz's critics), and from cultural criticism (notably Said). Indeed, discussing teachers' training, Jackson argues that they should have a training in the study of religion\s especially in order to have a grasp of the "debates about the representation of religions in Western literature since the European Enlightenment", as well as a training that allows them to exercise "flexibility in approaching debates about 'cultures', 'ethnic groups' and 'communities'" (Jackson 2009, 410).

However, according to Jackson, RE as a subject does not reduce itself to a 'fixed body of knowledge'. This is because it features a peculiar "integration of the personal and the social" and therefore involves a series of

> existential and social debates in which pupils are encouraged to participate, with a personal stake related to their own developing sense of identity. (Jackson 2004, 17-18)

We see such a stance in the way Jackson engages with anthropology as the main *savoir* of reference. We might understand the above discussed concepts of *interpretation* and *reflexivity* as an attempt to didactically transpose the *forma mentis* (cf. above, § 2.2.3) of the (hermeneutical) anthropology, especially for what concerns the methodological side (*interpretation*) and the self-reflection side (*reflexivity*). However, there are some differences in how this *forma mentis* works between anthropology as *savoir savant* and the *savoir scolaire* created by Jackson.

From the point of view of anthropology as *savoir savant*, we may affirm, to put it bluntly, that this discipline is primarily concerned with the production of knowledge, descriptive as well as explicative, empirical as well as theoretical, concerning a quite broad object of enquiry: "human society and behaviour" (Scupin 2016, 112). Let us try to draw here a parallel between anthropology as a *savoir savant* and Jackson's concepts of *representation* (that is, the threefold ma-

trix), *interpretation* and *reflexivity*. Anthropology has been producing descriptive, propositional knowledge about religions (*representation*), through appropriate method (*interpretation*). Anthropological thinking has also been focused on issues of self-reflection, such as the already mentioned insight from Leach and Turner (*reflexivity*). It underwent even further process of self-review, engendered by the theoretical developments of deconstructionism, post-modernism and post-colonialism (Erickson, Murphy 2016, 222-50).

However, these self-reflections and self-criticisms in anthropology were mainly focused on epistemology, on research ethics, and on broad political and ethical questions relating to issues of power, representation and inequality (which Jackson nonetheless acknowledges). Much less space has been devoted to subjective reflections on personal matters.[30]

We have seen, instead, that for Jackson *reflexivity* is also meant to "help each pupil to identify with and argue for a particular religious or non-religious position" and "find their own positions within the key debates about religious plurality" (Jackson 2005, 6). We have also seen how this re-elaboration of the self-reflective insights from anthropology relates to the attainment target of 'learning from religion'. Indeed, as other scholars have commented (Grelle 2009, 466-7; Jensen 2010, 74), in Jackson's RE, as well as in English RE in general, although there is a distinction between 'learning about religion', 'learning from religion' and religious nurture (in the sense of trans-

30 To be fair, the post-modern skepticism on the value-free objectivity of sciences, and of social sciences in particular, engendered a process for the rethinking of ethnographic method, with particular concern for the subjectivity of the researcher and the influence of her/his personal and socio-cultural background (cf. Aull Davies 1999, 3-26; Olivier de Sardan 2014, 103-33). Certain theoretical developments saw the (inevitable) subjective dimension of any ethnographic inquiry as a resource, instead of an obstacle, and proposed the method of autoethnography, which seeks to "describe and systematically analyze (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experience (*ethno*)" (Ellis, Adams, Bochner 2011, 1). Now, subjective reflexivity in general has typically been invoked in the function of buttressing the scientific project of the social sciences (Bourdieu 2004, 85-115). However, some advocates of autoethnography, especially of the one called 'evocative autoethnography', explicitly argue for a blurring of the borders between scientific, artistic and even therapeutic dimensions (Ellis, Adams, Bochner 2011, 39). These trends, as well as their excessive focus on subjectivity in general, have been the object of several critiques. For example, Remotti (2014) laments how such 'post-modernist intoxication' led to an excessively solipsistic and self-referential anthropology. Olivier de Sardan bluntly states that, since the object of inquiry of social sciences is already complex, there is "no need to go overboard by transforming the field into an opportunity for redemption, conversion, revolution, fusion, salvation, or psychotherapy" (Olivier de Sardan 2014, 131). In the field of the study of religion\s, one of the most famous examples of ethnographic work in which the enquiry toward the object of research crosses and overlaps with an analysis on the subjectivity of the researcher herself is *Mama Lola* (McCarthy Brown 1991), where the author ends by becoming a practitioner herself. Cf. Strenski (2015, 203-4) for a critique of her epistemological choices.

mission of religious knowledge, but not necessarily inculcation or indoctrination), these borders are often "intentionally blurred" (Grelle 2009, 467). This is because of a lingering general idea that learning about religions and learning into one's own religion actually *are* and *can be* complementary (cf. Jackson 1997, 4) in a positive sense. In other words, since pupils, through *interpretation* must 'build bridges' towards foreign practices or concept by resorting to their own personal experience, such personal experience may well be of a religious nature, and since pupils are expected to rethink such experience in front of diversity, all of this process actually becomes a (welcomed) self-religious exploration.

To sum up, the *forma mentis* of the scholarly disciplines of reference has a more 'outward-looking' dimension (i.e. description and explanation of human behavior connected with religion), since the 'inward looking' dimension is primarily subordinated to check epistemological, ethical and political issues of the former. In the case of Jackson, the 'inward looking dimension' also touching the personal sphere has as equal a weight as the 'outward looking' dimension, and the two are seen as complementary (cf. Jackson 1997, 138).

This appears to have some consequences in terms of didactic transposition, especially concerning methods and theories peculiar to the study of religion\s. For example, even if Jackson builds his proposal on a robust base of scholarly works, he recommends avoiding an "axiomatic secular humanist interpretation of religion" (139) which is an ambiguous statement that may have at least two meanings. In one case it may mean that religions, *in truth*, ('axiomatic'), are man-made phenomena ('humanist'), and must be relegated to the private sphere ('secular'). In the other case it may mean that religions are to be studied and explained *exclusively as if* ('axiom') they are man-made phenomena ('humanist'), avoiding judgement of truth or falsity relative to their theological claims ('secular'). The first case is an ideological position, the second one is no other than the methodological postulate of the study of religion\s. On a similar vein, Jackson also recommends a "sensitive application of academic methods and standards" that should be furthermore open to "critical scrutiny of commentators within religious and secular traditions" (Jackson 1997, 140). Analogously, to find a balance between "sources reflecting the understanding of different academic disciplines" and "those representing the perception of different kinds of insiders" is recommended (140). In this sense is revealing the lack of details about the place and weight, within the learning paths of the pupils, of the theoretical inquiry on the concept of religion in itself. In other words, even if Jackson holds a quite precise idea on what counts to be a re-

ligion[31] (cf. previous section), and recommends training in the study of religion\s for RE teachers, we are left wondering how pupils should be made able to reach similar ideas through engagement with the theoretical study of religion\s, and if such a body of knowledge should be considered as a guidance only for teachers or as theoretical and methodological knowledge to be transmitted to pupils too.

From a pragmatical point of view, such ambiguities in Jackson's stance towards the academic study of religion\s may be explained as a practical move to ensure a safe space in which non-religious and (especially) religious pupils may explore their personal religious/existential issues in a climate of respect and mutual learning (cf. CoE 2014, 47-59). Most probably, the pivotal issue remains the safeguarding of the motivation and of the involvement of pupils in RE, who need to be personally and existentially engaged. All of this, of course, assuming but not conceding that purely academic methods may be detrimental for the aims of ensuring safe space for dialogue and maintaining motivation towards the subject.

Turning our attention to O'Grady, even if the status of *savoir savant* concerning religions *vis-à-vis* his RE proposal is not explicitly addressed, we are safe to affirm that his perspective does not differ from Jackson's. His approach is strongly dialogical in its methodology also, i.e. that contents, methods and techniques are co-planned with the pupils and arranged on the basis of their feedback on motivation and engagement. Thus, the reference to a *savoir savant* such as the study of religion\s, exemplified by the work of Ninian Smart, seems conceived more as a resource for the teacher. That is, knowledge aimed only at providing the teacher with the essential vocabulary and conceptual guidance in order to be an informed facilitator, while most of the knowledge about religion to be acquired by the pupil is, in last analysis, to be gained through interaction and engagement with the personal views of their peers. Indeed, O'Grady puts both the level of acquisition of propositional contents and the "personal and social development" (O'Grady 2019, 196) gained through such interaction on the same level, while adding that "performance assessment", i.e. the measurement of the level of attainment of a well-define corpus of knowledge, is detrimental for RE (198). Especially in regard to the issue of the methodological postulates of the study of religion\s, such as methodological agnosticism, we should take note of the following: O'Grady, in responding to criticism of his approach, concerning the "possible risk", of "failure to deal with the sacred" by the pupils (180), does not respond, as a scholar of religion\s would, that dealing in these terms with an essentialized, *sui generis* con-

31 It has to be noted that Jackson makes explicit his concept of religion in the form of a response to the criticism of upholding a non-realist view of religion (cf. Jackson 2008b), while in his other main works he does not deal with this topic in great detail.

cept is outside the scope of the discipline. Instead, he assures that his approach does not entail such a risk, and accepts the recommendation of giving due attention to the *peculiarities* of theological language (cf. 161-5, 180-2).

4.5.4 Evaluation and Criticism

The first observation is about the potential of Jackson's matrix on three 'levels': individual, membership group(s) and tradition at large. The dialectical interplay, including power-related dynamics, between these three levels is a convincing strategy to elucidate the internal diversity, complexity and fuzziness of borders within a given tradition, especially if compared with the modality of representations proposed by the other approaches. Indeed, we have seen, regarding the textbook on Hinduism, that the selection of topics offers a fairly equilibrated representation of a religious tradition, without excessive focus on the 'usual suspects' such as doctrines and texts. What is missing here is the notions that at the level of individuals there may be overlaps of different religious traditions, that at the level of membership groups and traditions at large may be interactions and borrowings (cf. above, § 3.2.1), and in general the notion of historical change and contextualization (cf. §§ 3.2.2 and 3.3). Nonetheless, the kernel of the idea is still valid, and I do not see any difficulty in incorporating these missing parts.

On a more educational level, also Jackson's idea of *reflexivity* may be seen as highly consistent with the disciplinary and educational components of the kind of RE we are envisioning. *Reflexivity* involves *constructive criticism*, i.e. to develop a critical stance towards one's own learning methods in order to identify possible biases in their representation, as well as those present in the material studied. Another component is *edification*, i.e. the re-assessment of one's own worldview through the challenge of 'unpacking' the worldviews of others. These processes are clearly pivotal in the development of a critical self-reflection on the dominant ideas concerning religion in general and Japanese and other Asian religions in particular, especially for what concerns the exploration of 1) those aspects of East-Asian religions that go against the grain of euro-centric ideas of religions and 2) the historical-cultural reasons for current (mis)representations of East-Asian religions.

However, we have also seen the peculiarly strong concern of the interpretative-dialogical approach in fostering pupil's motivation and personal involvement. These latter are stimulated by presenting the religions to be studied through the voices and experiences of other children, by considering pupils' religious experience themselves as study material and, furthermore, by making pupils the co-planners

of the RE curricula. In other words, what I find puzzling is Jackson and O'Grady's stance when treating the *reflexivity*-related processes as eminently "personal to the student" (Jackson 2008, 175), and their attempt to combine critical reflection on epistemological, ethical and political issues, with personal issues of religious/existential/identity-related nature. This problem is further highlighted by an ambiguous stance towards a *sui generis* concept of religion. We have seen that O'Grady holds theological and 'sacred' dimensions as important, that Jackson suggests avoiding 'insensitive' humanistic approaches, and that in general the idea of discussing religions in RE as 'truth-claims' is seen as not problematic.

All these ambiguities can be linked to the already cited problem of combining the aim of 'learning about religion' with the ambivalent aim of 'learning from religion'. More generally, we must acknowledge that in RE there is a tricky relationship between what Alberts (2007, 307-9) calls the *descriptive* and *existential* dimensions.

This strong interest of Jackson and O'Grady in issues of motivation and personal involvement can be discussed through a comparison with a similar key feature in Swedish RE, which explicitly foregrounds the issue with a pedagogical device called 'life questions pedagogy' (Alberts 2007, 222 ff.; Berglund 2013), inscribed in the institutional provisions for RE. In a few words, life questions (Sw. *livsfrågor*) are supposed to address the basic conditions for human life and of life in general. Examples of questions are:

> What is the meaning of life? What happens after death? Who are you and how would you like to be as a person? What is morally right?
>
> [...] Life questions are supposed to be posed by the students to different religious traditions and outlooks of life, as well as to themselves. Through studying different religions and outlooks on life, the students should then try to find the answers to these questions in the religion they are studying, the underlying idea being that this would bring about understanding for different religions, but that it could also contribute to the students' own ideas about her or his life. The life questions are understood to be universally human. (Berglund 2013, 178)

Berglund, while acknowledging the possible advantages in terms of pupil involvement through this kind of pedagogy, nonetheless finds several critical issues. First, these questions clearly focus on existential/inner dimension, which betrays a Christian-Protestant root, especially Lutheran-Christian creation theology. Secondly, the universality of these life questions cannot so simplistically be regarded as given. And even in the cases in which it would be possible to find answers to these questions among different religious traditions, the

weight and *relevance* of these questions and answers would clearly differ, even within the same tradition. Thirdly, to look at religions through the lens of *livsfrågor* runs the serious risk of creating stereotyped representations (178-81). These criticisms are perfectly consistent with our discussions and observations about the risk of rhetoric on the universality of the dimension of spirituality and of related 'existential' issues, which is, in reality, a contemporary development of the – modern and Christian idea – of the universality of religion (cf. above, §§ 2.1.5, 2.1.8 and 3.2.4). We have already seen how this idea strongly influences the conceptualization of the aims and contents of RE, as our critiques of the instrumental-existential approach have shown.

On the bases of these observations, we may observe that, if we want to provide a fair, complex account of religious traditions, especially of the Japanese and the other Asian traditions, the idea of linking the personal questions and concerns of pupils may be a seriously conflictual operation. Let us recall our discussion of the creation of 'models' (§ 2.2.5), those stratification of mental images in the minds of the pupils which may became so elaborated and strong as to resist further updates and subsume any new inputs. This is linked to the notion of epistemological obstacles, the knowledge which, in the evolution of key concepts within a discipline, have been useful or effective in that particular moment, but that is of no use when conceptualizing more advanced information. This is the case, for example, with the intuitive notion of the 'sacred' common to any religion that we found in the phenomenological phase of the study of religion\s. Brusseau (2002) warns us about the likelihood that pupils will probably face hindrances similar to those encountered in the historical evolution of the discipline. In addition to strictly *epistemological* obstacles, our exploration of the dynamics and stratification of self- and hetero-representations between 'East' and 'West' (§ 3.3) warns us also about the legacy of these historical processes, which are still in motion (§ 3.3.4), and thus exert their influence on pupils' models.

In fact, it is reasonable to think that many pupils will expect, in the context of RE, the implementation of an inner dimension-centered paradigm of religions. Therefore, if they are actively invited to relate to the religious material through their existential questions, this will reinforce the 'model' of knowledge about religion that works with this inner dimension-paradigm, whose supposedly universal and existential relevance conceals instead its Protestant origins. If the implicit expectations of pupils are not discussed in a propaedeutical manner, it may well be that cognitive conflict will rise when they are presented e.g. with those aspect of East-Asian religions discussed in § 3.2. I wonder if any teacher would invite an adolescent European pupil to personally relate to the practice of paying Buddhist monks to perform rituals aimed at obtaining success in business. In the worst-case

scenario, this could be interpreted, just like we have seen in § 3.3, as a degeneration of authentic Buddhism and not worthy of interest. If we were to follow O'Grady's recommendations to plan the contents of RE lesson taking the interests of the pupils as guidelines, it may be that we will find ourselves in a dilemma: should we avoid certain topics because they are 'boring' or non-relevant to the pupils' personal concerns? Or should we tackle exactly this kind of content because of the intercultural value of discovering that certain things can be relevant to others but not to us, and asking ourselves why? I would suggest, of course, the second option.

4.6 Conclusion

In this chapter we have briefly explored the historical and institutional context of English RE and then focused in detail on the different ways of theorizing and practicing RE as proposed by six authors which I have regrouped in three strands: 'interpretative-dialogical', 'rational-theological', 'existential-instrumental' in order to highlight some common and predominant traits.

Concerning the historical context, we have seen how the religious organizations had traditionally maintained a certain bond with RE, even after the 1988 Act, which changed the 'instructional', 'catechetical' aims of the former RE towards a more educational one. As a matter of fact, England RE is to be seen more as having a multi-faith education instead than of a strictly secular, non-confessional subject (cf. Alberts 2007, 294). As a matter of fact, contents of the syllabus are, at least in theory, to be drafted by local religious representatives and educational stakeholders in the context of the SACREs, with a privileged position of the Church of England as stakeholder and Christianity as a topic.

Indeed, this ambiguity between non-confessional and multi-confessional can be seen in the two often cited attainment targets of 'learning about religion' and 'learning from religion'. In the first case it is clear that the expected educational outcome is an increase and a refinement of the knowledge base. In the second case, however, we have seen how the expected outcomes may vary among the authors discussed, depending often on other factors, such as the conception of religion or the social practices of reference. The 'learning from' aim is further linked with the general educational aim of the promotion of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Here the word 'spiritual' plays, in my view, a pivotal role in allowing a very broad interpretation of what pupils should learn *from* religion. We have seen, in fact, that interpretations of this learning outcome vary and may involve questions of a more 'theological-philosophical' character, such as "about the meaning and purpose of life, beliefs about

God, ultimate reality, issues of right and wrong and what it means to be human" (RE Council 2013, 14; cf. above, § 4.2.2), as well as more personal or existential issues such as "questions of identity and belonging, meaning, purpose and truth, and values and commitments" (QCA 2004, 11; cf. § 4.2.2). This intersection of the theological plane with the 'experiential' one can be seen in those developments of RE during the 1980s, which Wright and Barnes accuse of having a covert "liberal protestant theological agenda", i.e. of promoting the idea that there is common experiential 'truth' in all religions beyond the various conflicting doctrines (cf. § 4.3.2).

We have also seen that the Commission on Religious Education (CoRe; cf. above, § 4.2.2) put forth some quite innovative suggestions, such as excluding the religious communities from the direct creation of a so-called 'National Entitlement for RE', and reinforcing the academic weight, both in the sense of the type of experts involved, and in the sense of the theoretical and epistemological recommendations. One of the striking differences this report has in respect to previous documents is a robust theoretical framework on how religions and worldviews in general should be conceived. At present, it seems that the government is not interested in following the report recommendations.[32]

The absence, in the 2004 and 2013 documents, of a theoretical framing or definition of religion may explain in part the varieties of approaches to RE. In fact, they do not vary only at the level of 'learning from', but also for what concerns the 'learning about' dimension, which we have analyzed through the three dimensions of conceptualization, representation and epistemology of religion.

For Wright and Barnes religion is to be better conceived as a set of truth-claims, systematically connected among them, concerning the ultimate nature of things. Therefore, the type of enquiry proposed as the best suited is the philosophical-theological one, especially directed to doctrinal texts (§ 4.3.2). Erricker and Hannam propose other different ways of conceiving religion: a set of interrelated conceptual key terms, or a division between holding propositional beliefs, performing practices and applying an existential modality (§ 4.4.2). Furthermore, their proposal is less concerned with *what religion is* from an *objective-scientific point of view*, and more with *how religion should be studied* by pupils from an *educational point of view* (§ 4.4.3). Jackson proposes his three-layered matrix of individual/membership

32 However, it should be noted that this document sparked, in these very last years, new interesting research perspectives in English RE, which are becoming more and more receptive of SoR insights (cf. O'Grady 2022). Nonetheless, voices against these new positions have also been raised (cf. Barnes 2022). I have not been able to duly engage with these developments here as I was finalizing this book for publication, but I am to analyse them in a forthcoming article.

group(s)/larger tradition and stresses that studying 'religion', just like 'culture', means addressing complex phenomena, with internal differentiations, whose borders furthermore, are fuzzy, shifting and negotiated (§ 4.5.2). Socio-anthropological approaches are then suggested as the best suited epistemological paradigms, and representations of real-life expression of religions are preferred (§ 4.5.3).

We have also seen how different conceptions of religions work in tandem with different educational perspectives. For Wright and Barnes RE should be conductive to a rational and critical evaluation of the various truth-claims of the various religions, so that pupils may become more conscious religious (or non-religious) practitioners, and, especially for Barnes, may draw guidance accordingly from the relevant sources for their ethical behavior (§ 4.3.3). With Erricker and Hannam, we have seen how the educational perspective is of paramount importance. For the former, RE should not only be concerned with the cognitive aspect of grasping, interpreting and evaluating the key concepts of the various religious traditions, but should also foster an engagement with such concepts at the personal level, in order for the pupils to develop their own spiritual narratives. For Hannam, instead, since she considers the existential way of being religious as the functional equivalent of leading an active political life in the public sphere, RE should expose pupils to such a way of being religious that it may be meaningful and inspiring to them in both religious, educational and political sense (§ 4.4.3). For Jackson and O'Grady, RE is meant to foster the capacity to interpret different forms of (religious) life in the pupils, moving back and forth between their perspectives and those of the 'others' (be they insiders portrayed in textbook or other classmates), so that their own background may come to be seen in a different light. All of this process should be conductive to a dialogical attitude which, especially for O'Grady, motivates and empowers pupils and helps the development of intercultural and citizenship competences (§ 4.5.3).

These main differences notwithstanding, we can say that certain themes run through all the approaches discussed. The most evident one is the concern for the 'learning from' attainment target which, albeit in different fashions, is addressed by each author when they consider the effects at various levels of encountering different religions to the personal development of the pupil. Not only, therefore, is this peculiar to Erricker and Hannam, but also Jackson and O'Grady are keen to actively help pupils in the construction of their cultural and religious identity, by linking religious material to their existential questions and fostering in this way their motivation, involvement and – in the case of O'Grady – also responsibility in being the co-planners of their own education. The same may apply to Wright and Barnes as well, who are more interested in having each pupil make critical and reasoned choice about her/his own set of beliefs, so as to lead an 'authentic' religious life.

Another common trait may be also found in the conception of religion. Notwithstanding the strong differences in the theoretical treatment (or non-treatment) of religion, some key words like transcendence, metaphysical truths or fundamental existential and ethical issues appear as a common, distinctive features of religion in all the authors. To be fair, in Erricker and Hannam, these key words are more nuanced towards an idea of immanently-oriented religiosity, with strong personal and existential tones, and often conceived as 'spirituality'.

We have critically commented on these aspects on the grounds of the arguments explored in the previous chapters. Wright and Barnes' approach to religions has been showed as being profoundly influenced by a Protestant-Christian paradigm of religion, with strong emphasis on the creedal dimension, doctrinal texts and discreteness between religious traditions which are understood as coherent and rational systems of thought and practice. Therefore, it is clearly incompatible with the complexity of the theme of Japanese and other Asian religions which, – we have seen in the previous chapter – have many traits that explicitly challenge the Protestant-Christian paradigm of religion. Their baseline educational perspective of enabling a self-conscious religious (or anti-religious) individual to decide which beliefs are truer than others is also at odds with our chosen intercultural frame, according to which cultural/religious differences are not to be engaged as monolithic, and the awareness of the contingency of our point of view – in this case, of its modern and Christian origins – is pivotal.

Erricker and Hannam's approach to religions have been criticized also because they excessively subordinate the epistemological approach to religions in their educational goals. Errickers's focus on conceptual elements, in order to provide pupils with 'building blocks' to both understand a religious worldview and to construe their own ones, actually results in representations of religions, especially East-Asian ones, as a sort of 'wisdom' or 'rarefied spirituality'. This clearly shows the influence of the long history of orientalist and self-orientalist representations of these traditions, as well as the contemporary discourse on the superiority of 'spirituality' *versus* established religions. This is even more conspicuous in Hannam, who explicitly affirms that the existential mode of religiosity, represented by modern (and often Christian) philosophers such as Simone Weil, is the best way to address religions, especially Buddhism and Hinduism. From an intercultural perspective, this is a clear hegemonic projection of modern Euro-American ideals and conceptualizations towards East-Asian religions. Furthermore, this hinders a self-critical understanding of those historical influences at the root of this attitude towards molding religious and cultural difference into one's own desires and neglecting the elements as not fitting such desires.

We have detected a similar problem also in the interpretative-dialogical approach. While we have acknowledged the potential of the three-layered matrix of representations and noted how the idea of *constructive criticism* and *edification* resonates with our intercultural frame of reference, we also cast some doubts on how these processes may be totally compatible with a centrality of the pupils' needs and interests. In particular when this centrality is so pronounced, that making the pupils co-planner of RE lessons is suggested. These doubts are based on the observations that pupils' needs, interests, reasons for motivation and, above all, models of understanding 'religion' and, especially, East-Asian religions, will be likely informed by a modern and orientalist understanding of them. Therefore, this somehow runs against our ideas of exploring those aspects of Japanese and other Asian religions in order to deconstruct this very contemporary understanding and opening space for intercultural and self-critical reflections.

We have concluded our close-reading examination of the main RE approaches in England and have seen how the theme of Japanese and East-Asian religions has been a useful lens in showing how an alleged non-confessional RE has still many unresolved issues, concerning both their approach to the concept of religion in general and their approach to East-Asian religions in particular. This does not mean that there are not any positive insights to be gained. Starting from the ideas of the 2018 CoRe's report to Jackson's ideas on *representations* and *reflexivity*, there are elements on which we may capitalize. Similarly, the issue of the importance of the motivation and the personal expectations of the pupils, particularly strong in O'Grady but present in different form in all the authors explored, should not be easily dismissed. Instead, it is a factual element that we should address in relation with our aims to provide a balanced representation of East-Asian religions, an understanding of the issues at stake when talking about 'religion', and a sensibilization towards themes of intercultural and democratic coexistence.

In order to do this, we need to recapitulate what we have discussed so far in a systematized manner and add further insights by other SoR scholars who addressed the topic of SoR-based RE. By doing so, I will try to propose a sort of model for teaching Japanese and East-Asian Religions that may offer an orientational map of interconnected key points, both theoretical and practical, articulated at various levels: axiological/educative, epistemological, teaching-oriented and learning-oriented.

5 Towards a Model for Teaching Japanese and Other East-Asian Religions

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5.1 Use and Limits of the Concept of 'Model'

In didactics, the concept of 'model' features a considerable level of polysemy. Baldacci, for example, understands this term as

> a simplified and stylized representation of reality, based on the selection and on the abstraction of a few aspects from it, and on the idealization of their relations. (Baldacci 2010, 27)

He attributes a descriptive function to it. Damiano also highlights its prescriptive function as he understands it as a

> simplified representation of operative frames aimed at realizing educative actions institutionalized in school. (Damiano 1993, 91)

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Bonaiuti, Calvani and Ranieri further stress the prescriptive dimension by particularly referring to the cognitive paradigm-based sub-field called 'instructional design', in which 'model' is usually defined as a

> theory whose aims are to identify a set of adequate methods and procedures so that, given certain contextual conditions, learning will become more effective, efficient and appealing. Instruction models have situated, non-universal character and maintain at any rate a probabilistic nature. (Bonaiuti, Calvani, Ranieri 2017, 59)

Perla, trying to provide a synthesis of the various interpretations of this pervasive term in didactics, suggests first of all not to assume the model as a straightforward form of theory. It should be understood instead as a

> structure of mediation between theory and practice, which provides a simplified and partial representation of the didactic activity. (Perla 2013, 37)

Moreover, consistent with the general theoretical shift in the overarching paradigms from Cognitivism to Constructivism (cf. above, § 2.2.1), there is a rethinking of the pivotal role of model. Previously, it was considered a rigid structure created through the operation of logical inference, abstract problem-solving and technical rationality, and teachers were expected to follow it thoroughly in their planning and implementation of activities. According to recent developments, instead, this logic of technical rationality is sided, on one hand, with the logic of complexity, which implies non-linearity, circularity of procedures and interrelationships between elements of the didactic process (cf. Sarracino 2013). On the other hand, there is the acknowledgment of the influence of the implicit, practical knowledge of the teachers, which can hardly be codified in a model or theory. Accordingly, Damiano provides another definition of a model as a sort of orientation map, in the sense that it is a

> simplified representation of teaching actions aimed at signaling, through emphasis, those different aspects which, from time to time, are deemed relevant to the intention of who is producing the said model. (Damiano 2006, 164; translation slightly altered)

Furthermore, to our treatment of the concept of model it is useful to recall from above (§ 2.2.1) that it is not very useful to conceptualize the object of study of didactics, i.e. teaching learning, with a rigid substantial definition pointing to the 'ontological core' of the phenomenon. Indeed, it refers to different empirical realities: the *act* of teaching, the *content* to be taught, the teaching *relationship* between

persons, between persons and artifacts, teaching as *formal process*, teaching as *informal event*, and so on. Accordingly, Baldacci proposes to engage the notion of teaching as a 'function-concept', in the sense that an initially empty, purely abstract idea of teaching is put *in function* of various variables: "*teaching* (teacher, pupils, content, medium, action, context… x, y, z)" (Baldacci 2013, 29). In this sense, teaching became conceivable and analyzable once some of these variables are saturated. This means that teaching *in itself* does not exist, but it is always teaching *of something*, or/and teaching *to someone from someone*, in certain *contexts*, through certain *actions*, and so on. By saturing of a certain numbers of variables, the object of research became more or less specified. For example, the focus on the variables of persons, contexts and activities builds up the research object of general didactics, while the focus on the variables of contents and epistemologies builds up the research object of disciplinary didactics.

I draw from these reflections and I take in consideration a certain number of variables for my 'model' for teaching Japanese and East-Asian religions. It somehow recalls the scheme of didactic transposition discussed in the §§ 2.2.2 and 2.2.6. These variables – or better, classes of variables – are axiology/education, epistemology, teaching dimension and learning dimension, and are mutually interrelated. Not all variables, however, have the exact same weight.

We have seen (§ 2.2.6) how the axiological dimension, i.e. the choice of certain social practices of reference, implicitly or explicitly influences the choice and the modality of the didactic transposition of the *savoirs savants*. In this discussion of the axiological/educative variable, we should recall also the interrelationship between the acquisition and evaluation of types of competence typical of certain discipline or fields, which is primarily engaged by didactics, and the overall formation of the individual as a part of a society within the horizon of values, mindsets and behaviors deemed desirable by that society, which is primarily engaged by pedagogy (cf. above, § 2.2.1). Concerning this latter point, also the utopian character of the pedagogical discourse must be noted. That is, apart from being an analysis, a history and a critical reflection about the "essentially contested concept" of education (Biesta 2015, 256), the pedagogical discourse features an ideal, utopian dimension in that it also strives towards the creation of "feasible transformative paths for the existent, ideally projecting them in new places and worlds" (Frabboni, Pinto Minerva 2018, 18). This observation highlights the somehow arbitrary aspect of the axiological/educative variable, as it ultimately points towards an ideal vision of society which depend, indeed, on one or more *axioms*. Both words have in fact the same etymological Greek root of *axios*, 'valid, worth'.

This connection between axiology and axioms makes us aware that the epistemological variable too is not axiologically neuter and has

its degree of influence concerning the social practices of relevance, as well as a certain degree of implicit ethics. The disciplines themselves, including the case the study of religion\s, may have their own relevance to society. Moreover, within a same discipline, axioms, paradigms and, above all, findings and conclusions are not necessarily coherent nor homogenized (cf. ch. 1 *passim*). Therefore, certain social practices of relevance may be favored while other may be or undermine and excluded, on the base of the chosen premises. To provide a quick example, the deconstructionist trend of the study of religion\s automatically excludes a RE whose social practice concern the interreligious dialogue aimed at discovering that we are fundamentally referring to a single, common 'Truth'.

In the context of the present research, we must include within the epistemological variable a fixed, arbitrary element, i.e. the topic of Japanese and East-Asian religious traditions. This choice is in turn linked to the axiological choice too since, as I have anticipated in the introduction, it is my hypothesis that this topic is a pivotal (albeit not exclusive) element in providing RE with an inclusive and self-reflective pedagogical framework, characterizable as intercultural and global citizenship education.

The other two variables, teaching and learning dimensions, are somehow more dependent – but not completely – from the previous two. They indeed represent the more practical and operative aspects which we are interested in developing more in detail. However, these dimensions involve certain pivotal processes, such as the transformation from a *savoir savant* to a *savoir scolaire*, the identification of its foundational nuclei, its learning objectives, the possible misconceptions of the learner, and so on. It is true that, on one side, these elements depend on the epistemological variable for their content, but, on the other, they also 'act' on the epistemological variable. In fact, they *change* the *savoir savant* from being 'simply' knowledge into: 1) knowledge to be taught; 2) knowledge taught; and 3) knowledge learned (cf. above, § 2.2.2). They do this on two bases: the intrinsic logic in these processes, developed by the reflections of general didactics, and in relation to the overarching axiological variable.

Based on the reflections above, in what follows I will develop a 'model' for teaching Japanese and East-Asian religions in the form of a discussion and highlight of those particular aspects, their interrelationship and the theoretical and practical outcomes of said interrelationship. Such outcomes, I will argue, are relevant and consistent to the chosen axiological variable and epistemological variable. In other words, I will saturate the variables in the dimension of axiology, epistemology, teaching and learning.

Consistent with the 'soft' notion of model above discussed, I do not intend to present it as a ready-to-use method, nor as a sort of a comprehensive 'theory of teaching Japanese and East-Asian religions'. I rather think of it as is a sort of orientation map that highlights some pivotal aspects and knots, but also as a conceptual toolkit with various insights, some more theoretical, others more practical, accompanied, when possible, with some operative examples.

In developing each of these dimensions I will briefly recapitulate what has been discussed in the previous chapters and add additional insights and remarks from the work of those scholars, coming from the field of the study of religion\s, who have devoted their research to the establishment of normative, operative criteria for implementing a SoR-based RE. Given the logical preeminence of the axiological dimension, I will start from it, and it will be also the occasion to present and discuss what I deem as a useful reference model for what concerns the notion, and the implementation of, intercultural and citizenship education. Thereafter, I will discuss the dimensions of epistemology, of teaching, and of learning, in a progression which is consistent with the didactic transposition theory. That is, from the noosphere, where the *savoir savants* are chosen and reworked on the base of the social practice of reference and of the overarching values frame, to the actual application in school practice and, finally, to contexts and situations concerning the learning processes of the pupils. However, as we have just seen, due to the mutual interrelationship between these dimensions, a seemingly linear argumentation will be punctuated by several cross-references.

5.2 The Axiological/Educative Dimension

5.2.1 Recapitulation and Further Insights

We may well begin by reviewing which kind of, we may say, *axia paiedia* or worthwhile education is implicitly or explicitly upheld by the various practices and knowledge discussed so far. For the reasons explained above in § 4.1, we choose the English RE as case study to be analyzed and discussed. In general, we can say that English RE has been transformed, in front of the developing processes of immigration, multiculturality and secularization, from a transmission to religious belief to a (allegedly) non-confessional education aimed towards the understanding of and coping with different religions, and their impact on society. Two overall objectives have been established: 'learning about religion' and 'learning from religion' – which in turn refer to the general educational norm concerning the promotion of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. These two

objectives have been variously articulated and interpreted both in institutional documents as well as in individual RE theoretical and methodological proposals (cf. §§ 4.2.1 and 4.2.2).

The 2004 *Non-statutory National Framework* and the 2013 *National Review* address various social, intercultural and citizenship-related competences, such as resolving conflicts concerning religious and ethical issues, being sensitive to others' ideas and feelings, critically evaluating varied points of view in the perspective of community cohesion, and valuing difference as an asset for common good. We saw how in English RE there is the general conviction that, to reach such objectives, apart from mere learning about religions, what is needed is also learning from religion, conceived in the sense of a certain kind of reflection of theological and existential nature, which address the learners at the personal level. For example, engaging 'ultimate questions' (e.g. "is God real?", "why are we alive?") (QCA 2004, 14), responding creatively to issues of belonging, meaning, purpose and truth (cf. RE Council 2013, 25) and ultimately being more 'confident' and 'positive' about one's own religious (or non-religious) identity and ideas (cf. § 4.2.2). We have seen how this idea of personally involving the pupils in reflections of theological and existential nature is an important element all of the RE approaches analyzed in detail.

For Wright and Barnes, the educative value of RE consists, first of all, in addressing in a critical manner certain contemporary perspectives concerning religious pluralism. These perspectives, which posit an inner, experiential common ground of all religions, are deemed shallow and ultimately belonging to certain currents of Liberal Protestantism. Against this imposition of a false fluid identity over the differences between the various religious traditions – which favors, moreover, an individualistic attitude nurtured in the 'cult of the individual' – RE should instead be conductive to a rational and critical evaluation of the various truth-claims of different religions, so that a pupil may be a more conscious religious (or non-religious) practitioner. Barnes adds also the ability of drawing, in accord to these reflections, relevant guidance for his/her ethical behavior (§ 4.3.3)

Concerning Erricker and Hannam, the educative value of RE consists, first of all, to take advantage of religious pluralism in order to address the personal, spiritual and existential development of the individual. For Erricker, RE should not only concern itself with the cognitive aspects of grasping the key concepts of the various religions and applying them in the interpretation and evaluation of various religious phenomena. It should also foster an engagement with such concepts even at the personal level, to enable pupils to develop their own spiritual narrative, free from constrains of other hegemonic meta-narratives that come both from institutional traditions and from liberalism and its (allegedly) universal principles. For Hannam, instead, since she considers the existential way of being reli-

gious equivalent to or at least conductive towards an active political life in the public sphere, RE should expose pupils to such modalities of being religious. Existential dimensions of religions are supposed to be meaningful to pupils, and inspire them in both religious, educational and political sense (§ 4.4.3).

We have criticized these educational perspectives since they go against the fundamental premises of the educational perspective assumed by the present work, which draws from theories and concepts of intercultural education and basically aims to enable pupils to navigate through intercultural diversity. This latter must not be conceived as a set of separate, monolithic blocks called 'cultures', 'nations', 'social groups', and so on, but as a field of complex intercultural interactions between fuzzy borders that take place at many levels, and in which political, economic and other power-related factors are integral elements.

Wright and Barnes, with their aim of enabling pupils to discern which religious doctrines are more rational, coherent or appropriate for them, inevitably rule out the possibility of exploring the pivotal topics of socio-cultural complexities and the fuzziness within religious traditions, between religious traditions, and between religious traditions and other dimensions of human thought and behavior. This goes against the idea of multi-perspectivity in the sense of getting a nuanced understanding of reality from different points of view and types of sources (§ 4.3.4).

In other words, we highlighted the naivety of uncritically focusing on the (alleged) religious 'spiritual' existential needs of contemporary pupils living in a Western country, because it necessary entails a projection of modern, Christian-centric ideas about 'religion' and 'spirituality', and raises further the risk of orientalist understanding of other religious traditions, especially the East-Asian ones. This is particularly conspicuous in Hannam and Erricker. Their overall educational goal is the development of an existential/spiritual dimension, which is ultimately an emic, modern, Euro-American idea passed off as a universal constant. This obviously does not help pupils to acknowledge their possible biases, presuppositions and assumptions at works when exploring Japanese and other East-Asian traditions, especially their pre-modern history. Actually, it risks hindering those entangled histories, often with power-related aspects, through which, for example, Hinduist or Daoist traditions shifted from being despised as magical superstitions to being praised as spiritual remedies for the contemporary world (§ 4.4.4).

However, there are also insightful elements to be considered. We have seen how the CoRe 2018 report *Religion and Worldviews: The Way Forward* introduces quite innovative ideas in the field of RE, and the educative value of RE come to be more focused on a set of general transferable skills, which are more or less intrinsic to the disciplines

involved in the academic study of religion\s. Broadly speaking, the RE upheld in this document should foster, through a thoughtful engagement with the complexities of the phenomenon of 'religion', the following competences: individuating biases and stereotypes; careful listening; critical thinking; self-reflection; open mindedness; representing views other than one's own with accuracy; respectful critique of beliefs and positions, especially in controversial issues. Outcomes related to the aim of 'learning from religion' are not completely dismissed, but are framed in sober, less 'theological' terms. Briefly, these are: to be able to understand the human quest for meaning; to articulate one's own position in this regard; to be prepared for life in a world featuring different answers to fundamental human questions (§ 4.2.2).

For Jackson and O'Grady, the educative value of RE consists in its capacity to positively address the present multicultural and multi-religious situation, by fostering in pupils the capacity to interpret different forms of (religious) life and to move back and forth between their perspective and those of the 'others' (be them insiders portrayed in textbooks or classmates). In this way, their own background may come to be seen in a different light. This is in particular the case of Jackson's process of *edification*, that is, the understanding of one's own worldviews through the process of 'unpacking' others' worldviews, of trying to relate them with one's own experience, and of discovering one's hidden preconceptions. All of this should be conductive to a dialogical attitude which, especially for O'Grady, motivates and empowers pupils and helps their development of intercultural and citizenship competences. The same process is also meant to help each pupil to identify with, and argue for, a particular religious or non-religious position. Pupils are invited to find their own positions concerning religious plurality through the exploration of both own and peers' personal religious/existential issues in a climate of respect and mutual learning (§§ 4.5.2 and 4.5.3). This centrality of the pupils' needs and interests – which for O'Grady is so pivotal that he suggests making the pupils co-planner of RE lessons – has been critically discussed on the basis that it may actually hinder a thorough self-critical reflections on deep-seated ideas concerning religion\s, especially when it comes to Japanese and East-Asian religions (§ 4.5.4). The issue of the motivation and personal involvement of the pupils remains still relevant, and will be tackled in connection with the learning dimension (cf. *infra* § 5.5).

Since the declared approach in this research is the academic study of religion\s, it is worth dwelling here on the reflections concerning the educational value of a RE explicitly based on this particular discipline. Moreover, this will also offer the occasion to explicitly address the following question: on which axiological/educational grounds should the study of religion\s be employed as the primary, if not the only one, epistemological base for RE?

Jensen (2008; 2017b; 2019) is one of the foremost scholars advocating a SoR-based RE. He has been particularly critical towards what he defines "small-c confessional RE", i.e. those approaches which, albeit presenting themselves as non-confessional, nonetheless implicitly or explicitly put forth the uncritical presumption of theism, thus promoting some postulated religious or spiritual dimension which is supposed to constitute a universal human and ontological fact. Upon critical analysis, however, this perspective reveals itself to be a crypto-Christian-Protestant one (Jensen 2017b). The core value of RE, instead, in front of the acknowledgment of religion as relevant social phenomena, exemplified but not limited to current issues of islamophobia or of coexistence in increasing complex religious pluralism, consists in its 'emancipatory knowledge'. This latter is formed by scientifically sound information and, more importantly, by analytical-critical tools, to be employed to critically analyse social reality in a rational and independent way. Objectives such as fostering tolerance are of secondary importance (Jensen 2008). The rationale is that in an open, democratic and plural society, space must be given to religions, anti-religious, and a-religious voices. Therefore, for the functioning of such a secular, but not 'secularist', society, what is needed is a second-order, analytical-critical discourse on religions (Jensen 2019). This is also the reason for the exclusive choice of the academic study of religion\s, notwithstanding the various internal critiques, especially concerning the very concept of religion (39 ff.; cf. above, § 2.1.3). Instead, processes typical of this discipline, such as being constantly self-aware, retooling one's own critical approach, engaging with human issues such as dynamics of social formation and identity construction, and so on, may well contribute to 'general education' (*Allgemeinbildung*) and other competences related to citizenship education (34 ff.).

Alberts (2007, 353 ff.) has similar arguments for the exclusive choice of the study of religion\s. The development of this discipline (cf. above, § 2.1) is characterized by a constant striving to reach a non-religious and impartial approach, which is not the 'truest', but the most objective in regard to both believers and non-believers. If the confessional approach endorses a negative pluralism, i.e. looking to other religions from a competitive perspective, and the 'theological' or 'small-c' approach endorses a hegemonic pluralism, i.e. subtly subsuming plurality under a specific perspective, the study of religion\s endorses instead a positive pluralism in that it engages the incommensurability of different worldviews with epistemological humility, methodological relativism and methodological agnosticism. This fundamental concern towards impartiality makes the study of religion\s the most appropriate approach, and avoids the risk that RE may be instrumentalized by any religious or anti-religious group. All of this is reflected in the overall educative value of this RE, which consists in its 'transformative' potential, i.e. the development of critical con-

sciousness, emancipation, and autonomy of judgment. For example, it promotes critical self-awareness of hidden assumption of religious nature, or challenges an allegedly monolithic notion of 'European religious/cultural heritage'. Moreover, for Alberts the emancipative role of RE may also consist of foregrounding the underlying general value framework, such as those of international agreements on human rights and democracy, under which all religious phenomena are to be scrutinized, exploring also historical nature and contested application of these very frameworks (cf. Alberts 2007, 360, 363). Additionally, the social responsibility as individuals is also addressed: Alberts sees fruitful connections between RE and intercultural education, as the two may be of mutual improvement in promotion of competence such as knowledge of the others and awareness of various cognitive, affective and behavioral issues involved in intercultural dynamics, such as the subtle mechanisms of otherization (362).

Giorda and Saggioro (2011; Giorda 2012), since their proposal takes the form of a subject identified as history of religions, discuss its educative value in a broad range of transversal competences. These are textual/semantic, philosophical-phenomenological, psychological and anthropological (this latter meaning the engagement with universal constants of humankind, e.g. the meaning-bestowing activity). On a more general level, this subject is part of the larger frames of interculturality (Giorda, Saggioro 2011, 170-9) and social and civic competences. This entails addressing the understanding of the legal aspects concerning religions in society and within religions themselves, or reflecting on topics of identity, conflicts and boundaries, especially in relation to ethical and religious debates in contemporary plural society (151-2). In a nutshell, its main goal should be

> developing a deep understanding and respect for beliefs and traditions of others, which can all make a contribution towards establishing a sense of solidarity and citizenship. (Giorda 2012, 111)

Notably, apart from the overall idea of helping pupils in making autonomous decision in cultural, social and political matters, the theme of personal development of the pupils, including their own quest for meaning, is not dismissed (Giorda, Saggioro 2011, 143). While reiterating the neutral position of the history of religions in this regard, among the desired outcomes is included also being able to reflect about one's own religious identity and religious experience, about the role of religions in one's own cultural development, and about the manifold existence of values and answers. This is also in consideration of the fact that involving personal experience may actively motivate the students (Giorda 2012, 116).

Frank (2013; 2016; Franck, Bleisch 2017) excludes instead any personal commitment of the learners, i.e. their quest for meaning, for

ethical models or for identity resources. The reasons are consistent with her views on the educational role of a RE based on the study of religion\s. Basically, the relevance of RE as school subject, and therefore to the society at large, is the promotion of the peaceful coexistence of people of different religious and ideological origins (Frank 2016, 23). This requires that all those involved in intercultural and interreligious situations should maintain a certain scientific distance from religious attitudes and rituals. Instead of making a 'personal use' of certain religious perspectives, one should be able, through observation and investigation, to put oneself "mentally in the place of people of different religious convictions as well as of atheists or people who are indifferent to religion" (Frank, Bleisch 2017, 75). This is what should ease the cohabitation between individuals and groups with different horizons. Given the strong emphasis (not absent in both Jensen and Alberts) of the principle of freedom both of and from religion, RE as school subject is meant to be part of a larger project of socialization into a common plural world, which must be accessible to all, not only to the 'life-worlds' (on Frank's 'life-worlds' cf. above, § 1.1) of a limited number of learners with religious sensibilities. Therefore, this common world is to be explored in terms of dynamics of religious socialization, representations, and communication, not for the sake of answering spiritual needs but for the sake of social education and in order to create conscious citizens (Frank 2013, 91).

It is useful at this point to also address the social/educational value that scholars have attributed to the study of religion\s in itself. It is argued (Tweed 2016; Antes 2017) that it is desirable to have a substantive knowledge regarding religious phenomena because, in increasingly multi-religious societies, critical cross-cultural situations can be expected in various instances. Examples can be found in economic areas, e.g. tourism, or in public utility, e.g. health care towards religionists who follow certain relevant behavior motivated by their traditions. From the point of view of social cohesion and security, it is argued that reliable, non-partisan information may provide pivotal knowledge in religious dynamics, both in itself and in relation to the various representations in public discourse. Such knowledge may prove useful in decision making. On a more individual-oriented level, the inherent striving of the study of religion\s towards understanding, and implicitly cherishing plurality, has transformative potentials. In fact, it may correct that 'blindness' we have in regard of the ways of being of people different from ourselves, through "making the familiar strange and making the strange familiar" (Tweed 2016, 809). Also, some scholars do not exclude the self-reflexive potential of the study of religion\s, as it may affect one's own religious belief or philosophy of life. Other scholars, instead, reject these considerations not only on an epistemological basis but also on a moral one. That is, to reduce religion to the individual inner sphere entails

neglecting all those critical interactions with society, politics, power and violence. This would end as an endorsement of the hegemonic notion of religion as a fundamentally 'spiritual' matter, coupled with the dangerous corollary that the material, practical or bodily aspects are instead a 'degeneration' from the 'real' religion. In this sense, we may well speak of an educative agenda within the deconstructionist trend in the study of religion\s, which we may be labeled "decolonization of knowledge" (Nye 2019, 8). We will further dwell on this.

5.2.2 Discussion and Proposal

Fundamentally, I side with the various scholars from the study of religion\s and their upholding of the principles of equality, of public secular institutions and freedom both of and from religion. This has the epistemological consequence of choosing a discipline that constantly endeavored to rethink itself, and continues to do so, in order to reach the most impartial point of view possible, with all its possible pitfalls and internal contestations.

At the same time, I am conscious that these principles, which, together with other pivotal contemporary principles such as human rights, democracy and rule of law, are historically and geographically determined concepts. Similarly, their universalization too is a matter of historical dynamics and it is still contested. We have seen, for example, how the concept of secularity has its peculiar history, intimately linked with the religious history of Europe and America (§§ 2.1.3 and 2.1.5), and how the dyad 'religion-secularity' has then been imposed to, but also tactically employed by, other civilizations (§§ 2.1.8 and 3.3.1). Similarly, Erricker highlights the dilemma of liberal pluralism which, while trying to accommodate ways of life different from itself, cannot renounce to certain principles. These latter are, for example, those of human rights and democratic process, which are not empirically universal principles, thus configuring liberal pluralism, strictly speaking, as a non-universal position (§ 4.4.3). This is a reminder that, even with a self-critical and neutral perspective, we cannot achieve an absolutely value-free teaching, especially in relation to RE.

This makes me reflect that, in an increasingly globalized, interconnected and even contested intercultural world (cf. above, §§ 2.2.7 and 2.2.8), it is pivotal to address the notion of negotiation among different horizons, and the importance of carefully reflecting about the degree of negotiability of one's own values, positions and assumptions (cf. above, § 2.2.8; Hardy, Hussain 2017; Mansuri, Arber 2017).

Therefore, I agree with Frank and her idea of RE as being fundamentally aimed at fostering cohabitation between individuals and groups with different horizons. In order to do so, RE must be framed,

as Jensen puts it, in a second-order discourse that, as Giorda and Saggioro suggest, should support learners in making conscious and autonomous decisions in relation to ethical, legal, political and cultural debates concerning religions. And for these decisions to be made, apart from reliable information, what is also needed is an analytical-critical approach towards religious phenomena, including their entanglements with other dimensions of society and their dynamics of self- and hetero-representation, of power and identity. Furthermore, the same approach should be translated into critical self-awareness, especially of those hidden assumptions concerning religions; in a nutshell, Alberts' idea of an emancipative role of RE.

At the same time, it is important to avoid the construction of imaginary 'walls' between religious, but also between anti-religious or non-religious groups and persons. This means, consequently, to avoid stereotypical, fixed characterization of these groups, which may well engender prejudices, discrimination, or even fear and conflicts. In order to do this, we have seen above (§ 2.2.7) a dynamic concept of culture (including in itself also the notion of religion) as a 'process' of creation, transmission and recreation of values, beliefs, practices and traditions, some of which may well be of recent invention. Individual choices and negotiations according to contextual needs and constraints are factors in these dynamics. Within seemingly coherent groups, they may well be internal and of contested variety. Individuals may draw, consciously or not, from different cultural resources or partake in different identity symbolisms.

On the basis of these considerations, I find the idea of *edification* from the interpretative approach, that is the idea of taking advantage of the 'unpacking' of others' worldviews in order to put in the foreground one's own background and seen it in a different light, quite relevant and worth developing.

This is an operation which, as both Jackson and O'Grady argue, may be a key factor in developing competences of citizenship and intercultural education. In a similar perspective, O'Grady's idea to sensitize pupils to be more flexible about their own identities through the engagement with plurality and diversity is likewise worth taking into consideration (cf. above, § 4.5.3).

At this point, in order to provide us with a general framework in which to synthesize coherently these various insights and that also offers guidance with more specific educative indications, I shall take direct inspiration from the *Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture* (CoE 2018). In this context, 'democratic culture' is to be understood as a set of values, attitudes and practices shared by groups of individuals affecting and affected by communal decision making, without which democratic institution cannot exists.

More in detail, these values, attitudes and practices can be exemplified as: a commitment to the rule of law and democracy; a commit-

ment to peaceful conflict resolution; a willingness to express ones' own opinion in public venues; a respect to diversity; a commitment to majority decision but in recognition that the majority rule cannot abolish minority rights; a willingness to engage in intercultural dialogue; and a concern for sustainable well-being of human beings. Among these, it should be noted that the two mutually necessary principle in contemporary culturally plural societies are: the principle of democracy, i.e. giving equality, and the principle of intercultural dialogue, i.e. making one's own view understandable to citizens with different cultural affiliations, as well as understanding the views of these culturally different citizens (CoE 2018, 23-5).

In order to foster this kind of democratic culture, a set of 20 competences have been identified, understood in this context as specific psychological resources (specific values, attitudes, skills, knowledge and understanding) that are mobilized and deployed appropriately and effectively, often in clusters, to the demands, challenges and opportunities that are presented by various types of contexts. The selection and the activation, in an adaptive and dynamic manner, of these competences correspond to a broader democratic or intercultural competence, i.e. being able to positively cope with democratic and intercultural situations (32-3).

In what follows I will select and summarize some of those competences. As we will see in the next sections, referring to these competences will guide us in understanding how knowledge, perspectives and methods of the study of religion\s – and in particular of the study of Japanese and other East-Asian religions – may be conductive to educational outcomes proper to intercultural and citizenship education.

Differently from other competence schemes (cf. Portera 2013, 163-83) where values are usually implicitly treated as 'attitudes', the CoE framework, since it considers certain values as being at "the very heart of democratic living" (CoE 2018, 39), puts the adhesion to these values, in their explicit normative and prescriptive quality, as an essential prerequisite. In other words, giving value to certain ideas is treated as a required competence. The first value is human dignity and human rights, i.e. the value of considering every human being of equal worth and entitled to the same set of rights. The second value is cultural diversity, i.e. to consider the plurality of cultural affiliations and perspectives as positive assets for society. It is worth noting here that there is a tension between the universality of human rights and the particularity of cultural diversity. The third value is democracy, fairness and rule of law, i.e. the adhesion to certain principles on how society should operate, such as equal participation in decision making, decision by majority with protection of minority, and fairness through shared rules (38-41). Considering the previous discussion on equality, objectivity and freedom of and from religions, we need also to add, among these values, that of a secular society.

I think it is important, in reference to an overall educative framework for a RE, to explicitly put in the foreground these values. This operation is needed if we want these values to be readily recognized, referenced, and interiorized in any relevant teaching situation (especially in dealing with contemporary sensitive issues). This operation is also important in order to acknowledge how no teaching can be completely value-free, and how these values are historical constructs. The point is to avoid considering these values as metaphysical principles in the same manner of religious postulates.

Apart from values, another category of competences is 'attitudes', in the sense of 'overall mental orientation', consisting of both cognitive, emotional and behavioral aspects. The relevant ones for our discussion are the following: there is 'openness to cultural otherness', towards both different worldviews, values or practices and peoples who partake in them. It is not to be understood as a mere experiencing or consuming what is 'exotic', but entails being receptive towards cultural diversity and being willing to suspend judgment, which in turn implies questioning the notion of 'naturalness' or 'normality' of one's own cultural characterization. A second competence is 'respect', i.e. to judge something or someone to be of somewhat importance, and it is a better formulation than tolerance, which has an ambiguous, patronizing stance. Respect does not mean minimizing or ignoring difference, nor require agreement. Also, it is in tension and correlation with the issue of protecting the above-mentioned values (for example, the dilemma of respecting the freedom of manifesting those beliefs which, on the other hand, undermine the rights of others). The competences of 'civic mindedness' and 'responsibility' are relevant for us in their emphasis on being thoughtful of one's responsibility and duty in relation to an agreed set of values. They refer to a sense of belonging to a community and to the willingness to contribute to the common interest, be it that of local neighborhood or of the entire global society. Last, but not the least relevant attitude for our discussion is 'tolerance of ambiguity' in objects, persons, events or situations. It entails the recognition of the possibility of multiple perspectives, the acceptance of contradictions, the willingness to accept uncertainty and addressing them constructively (41-5).

A third category of competences is 'skills', understood as the capacity to carry out complex patterns of either thinking or acting. For our purposes, it is worth noting the "autonomous learning skill", especially in its aspect as judging the "reliability of a source of information, [and] assessing for possible bias or distortion" (46). "Analytical and critical thinking skills" – which have been often cited already – entail two important clusters of operations. The first consist of breaking down information in constitutive elements, examining and interpreting both themselves and in connection with others, identifying possible discrepancies and envisioning possible alter-

native relationships and synthesis. Critical thinking implies understanding preconceptions and assumptions, engaging with rhetorical purposes and hidden agendas, situating in historical context, and, most notably, recognizing one's own assumptions, preconceptions and the contingency of one's own position as dependent on cultural affiliations. A final skill worth mentioning is 'empathy', less in its emotional tones, than in the idea of being able to step outside one's own frame of reference to try to imagine oneself in the frame of reference of people from other cultural affiliations (46-52).

The last, but quite relevant, category of competences deals with 'knowledge and critical understanding', i.e. an active and reflective comprehension of a body of information. These competences differ from each other basically in their thematic area. The first of them is "knowledge and critical understanding of the self". This means knowledge and critical understanding of one's own cultural affiliations, of all those preconceptions, assumptions, cognitive and emotional biases that affect our perspective, and of the fact that our very perspective is contingent and dependent on our cultural affiliations. The next relevant area is 'culture and cultures', in the sense of the critical understanding that cultural groups are internally variable and contested, that they are evolving and changing in time and space through interaction with other factors such as economy or politics, and that there are power structures and discriminatory practices within and between cultural groups. This competence also entails the comprehension of the influence of cultural affiliation in people's thinking and behaviors. Apart from an understanding of the dynamics of culture, this competence also implies having a certain knowledge of all those specific beliefs, values, norms, practices, discourses and artifact that may be employed by people that we perceive as having this or that cultural affiliations (52-3, 55).

Interestingly enough, 'religion' is treated by the framework as a separate area (55) from culture. This could run the risk of essentialising and imposing an ethnocentric point of view (cf. above, § 2.1.5), thus undermining some of its very principles, namely the recognition of the cultural contingency of assumptions and preconceptions. However, I do not consider this as affecting the usefulness of the whole framework. Therefore, while I would argue for the need to treat religion and culture with the same parameters, this separation may be justified as 'provisional' or 'instrumental', due to the commonly held modern idea of religion as a separate dimension of society. At any rate, along with agreeable proposals as such promoting knowledge and understanding that the religious life of individuals is likely to differ from standard textbook representations, or promoting knowledge of the internal diversity of religious groups, their evolution and change (just like any other cultural phenomenon), there are some proposals in need of revision. These are the suggestions to focus on key texts and doctrines,

and on key features of beliefs and experiences of individuals. Similarly, the framework also seems to implicitly assume that individuals belong exclusively to only one religious tradition at the same time. I will address these issues, which I consider shortcomings, during my discussion on the epistemological dimension in the next section.

Concerning the other relevant area of history, The framework insists on the comprehension of the fact that interpretations of the past vary through time and across cultures, that there are various narratives, each coming from different perspectives, concerning the historical forces that shape the contemporary world. The method of historical investigation is considered a key competence, especially for what concerns the awareness of the process of selection and construction of historical narratives, and of the importance to access alternative, often marginalized, historical sources. This competence includes also the knowledge and understanding of how certain pivotal concepts, such as democracy and citizenship – and, I would argue, also other concepts such as religion or secularity – have evolved in different ways in different cultures over time. Lastly, one should know and understand how histories are often ethnocentric and discriminatory and how they can be a powerful tool that has led in some cases to crimes against humanity.

Mass and digital media represents another relevant area for our discussion, for the simple reason that different information and representations of religions comes through it. The framework promotes in fact knowledge and critical understanding of the process of selection and interpretation of information before transmission for public consumption, which would also entail the understanding of the notion of information as a kind of commodity in the context of a producer-consumer situation. This is functional to the understanding of how media affects judgments and behaviors of individuals, how political messages, propaganda and hate speech – I would add also the more subtle stereotypes and discriminating assumptions – are present in media communications and how individuals can guard themselves against the effect of these communications (55-6).

Other areas considered by the framework are politics, law, human rights, economics, the environment and sustainability. While on the surface these areas seem to have little or no connection with RE, we have already discussed on many occasions the various critiques of the concept of religion as separate dimension of society. The framework too observes that

> cultures are dynamic and change over time as a result of political, economic and historical events and developments. (30)

Therefore, I would include, among relevant competences, the promotion of

> knowledge and understanding of the connections between economic, social, political and environmental processes, especially when viewed from a global perspective. (57)

However, I would also add, among these processes, the factor 'culture', including, of course, religious phenomena.

5.3 The Epistemological Dimension

5.3.1 Recapitulation and Further Insights

As we have observed in various points of this work, English RE features quite multifarious epistemological approaches and relative theoretical conceptualizations (implicit or explicit) concerning the issue of 'religion'. This may be explained also by the fact that the institutional reference documents do not explicitly dwell much in detail in this regard. Nonetheless, in ch. 4 we managed to highlight the different epistemologies of English RE in their key aspects, such as the fundamental postulates, concepts and theories, technical terms, typology of objects and methods of research.

We saw that the 2004 *Non-statutory National Framework for Religious Education* endorses implicitly a conception of religion which depicts it as a a highly coherent set of propositions dealing with key questions of meaning and truth, such as the origins of the universe, life after death, good and evil, beliefs about God and values such as justice, honesty and truthfulness. Accordingly, religions should be engaged as a sort of philosophical and moral systems, in the sense of 'resources' and 'guidance' for knowing and engaging the world from the point of view of certain 'ultimate questions'. This is what I termed as 'theological-philosophical-existential' approach (§ 4.2.2).

The 2013 *Review of Religious Education in England* does not move much further. It sticks to a conception and representation of religion which highlights propositional contents, i.e. beliefs and teaching. These are cherished as 'sources of wisdom' to be extracted from official texts, from historical figures or individuated in practices which – allegedly – express them. However, there is a stronger emphasis on diversity within religion. To engage religions also as social facts is in fact recommended, in the sense of exploring how beliefs, practices and forms of expression influence individuals and communities. In other words, there is an opening towards an approach from social sciences (§ 4.2.2).

The problematic aspects of this 'theological-philosophical-existential' approach has been explored more in detail in relation to the works of RE authors Wright, Barnes, Erricker and Hannam.

Wright's approach is grounded on a realistic position, i.e. one affirming that it is possible to "identify forms, structures and identities across many dimensions of reality" (Wright 2008, 7). And this is what is pursued not only by religious traditions, but by all worldviews, including secularist, agnostic or post-modern ones. In fact, in his opinion, any worldview cannot help but take a position over the nature of the transcendent order-of-things. Concerning more in details his theoretical conception of religions, he considers them consistent and homogeneous social facts, with a 'prototypical' nucleus not undermined by peripheral fuzzy contours. Religions provide answers to questions concerning ultimate reality and the way of behaving accordingly, utilizing a range of distinctive cultural symbols and expressing these answers in social practice which distinguish themselves as a specific way-of-being-in-the-world (§ 4.3.2).

Barnes identifies the key peculiarity of religions in being systems of beliefs concerned with unconditioned reality or beings. The distinctive account of such a transcendent reality is then integrated in other beliefs about human origins, personhood and human salvation, and in practices such as rituals and social organizations. The difference in these key beliefs is what justifies distinctions between the various religions. He admits nonetheless the possibility of inner variation and creativity within religions, also at the level of individuals. We have seen that both Wright and Barnes share a fundamental epistemological approach to religions which is grounded on philosophical and theological methods. That is, to study religion is to explore the different answers each religion offers concerning the ontological nature of ultimate reality and to gauge the rational coherence of their truth-claims (§§ 4.3.2 and 4.3.3).

We have critically highlighted how Wright and Barnes' approach is profoundly influenced by a Protestant-Christian paradigm of religion, with strong emphasis on the creedal dimension, doctrinal texts and discreteness between religious traditions, which are understood as coherent and rational systems of thought and practice exclusively focused on lofty metaphysical and ethical issues. Therefore, it is clearly incompatible with the complexity of the theme of Japanese and other Asian religions which, – we have seen in ch. 3 – have many traits that explicitly challenge the Protestant-Christian paradigm of religion (§ 4.3.4).

Differently from the previous authors, for Erricker it would not make much sense to propose a theory of religion, as it would be another grand narrative not different from those expounded by religious traditions themselves. He starts from the perspective of the educational values of RE. Among these values there is the importance for pupils to develop their own 'small narratives'. He thus proposes that the best way to conceive religions (as well as non-religious worldviews such as humanism) is to engage them as 'conceptual world-

views'. This means conceiving them as being made up of a web of specific concepts peculiar to that tradition, which can be nonetheless connected with generic concepts of human existence and with concepts common to many religions (these latter are casually drawn from the study of religion\s). These conceptual worldviews are conceived both as interpretative tools in order to make sense of the world, and at the same time as phenomena that have an impact on this world. In this latter sense, worldviews are subject to interpretation by internal branches, and should be historically and socially contextualized. By studying them, pupils construe also their own worldviews. The issues of how a religion should be actually inquired is not discussed in great detail. We have seen that his RE proposal includes a wide range of epistemological stances, theological, socio-anthropological and experiential-philosophical. The application of these latter, moreover, seems to depend on the object at hand, e.g. Hinduism and Buddhism are engaged especially under a experiential-philosophical lens (§§ 4.4.2 and 4.4.3).

A similar situation can be found within Hannam's proposal. She discusses in fact three different ways to conceptualize religions: as a believing stance to propositional truth-claims; as performance of a set of practices in accord to an authoritative rule; finally, as existential experience. This latter – and quite ambiguous – conceptualization presents religion as a kind of attitude towards a 'divine plane' which is neither totally transcendent nor capturable in a statement of beliefs or set of practices. It is possible to know/engage such a 'divine plane' by experientially (i.e. not necessarily in verbal-rational ways) living through the manifestations of it, which may often correspond to the immanent world itself and to one's own everyday life (§ 4.4.2). We have also seen (§ 4.4.3) how the modality of enquiry into religion is highly subordinated on her educational goal. Therefore, what she basically proposes is an existential engagement with religions, in the sense of exploring those elements in religions which help fostering an attentiveness of one's own existence and actions in the world in relation to the existence of others. A sort of 'mysticization' of the social and political consciousness of the pupil.

Erricker and Hannam's epistemological approach to religions have been criticized due to their excessively subordination to their educational goals (cf. above, § 5.2.1). Errickers's focus on conceptual elements, in order to provide pupils with 'building blocks' to both understand a religious worldview and to construe their own ones, actually results in representations of religions, especially East-Asian ones, as a sort of 'wisdom' or 'rarefied spirituality'. This clearly shows the influence of the long history of orientalist and self-orientalist representations of these traditions (cf. above, § 3.3), as well as the contemporary discourse on the superiority of 'spirituality' *versus* established religions (cf. above, § 3.2.4). This projection of emic concepts

and perspective onto foreign traditions is even more conspicuous in Hannam, who explicitly affirms that the existential mode of religiosity, represented by modern (and often Christian) philosophers such as Simone Weil, is the best way to address religions, especially Buddhism and Hinduism (§ 4.4.4).

We have also explored other facets of English RE which offer ideas and suggestions definitively more compatible, even insightful, for the SoR-based approach of the present work. The 2018 *Report on Religion and Worldviews: The Way Forward* represents a clear change from previous approaches and affirms an explicit endorsement for second-order analysis of religion and religions, informed by a wide range of academic disciplines – including, it has to be noted, theology. Here, religions are conceived as belonging to the larger cathegory of 'worldviews'. These latter are, strictly speaking, peculiar to any individual. Worldviews structure how a person understands the nature of the world and their place in it around fundamental questions of meaning and purpose. They have cognitive, emotional, social and behavioral dimensions. Worldviews that are shared and organized by certain groups and sometimes embedded in institutions are defined 'institutional worldviews'. Included in this group are what we normally call 'religions', as well as non-religious worldviews such as organized Humanism. Some traditions of institutional worldviews might be more concerned with doctrine and orthodoxy, while others might prioritize practices or orthopraxis. Individuals, at any rate, draw their ideas creatively from one or many of these worldviews. Both individuals and institutional worldviews adapt themselves to new times and cultures. Distinction between religious and non-religious worldviews is not clear-cut. In order to heuristically define the religious or non-religious nature of a worldview, the document limits itself to following the self-definition of adherents. However, it does not ignore the key issue of the historical weight, both past and present, of the discourses over the nature of religion. In fact, it states that understanding 'religion' as a category is central to the aims of the subject, and therefore also recommends a genealogical study of the concept of religion (§ 4.2.2).

Jackson adopts a fairly constructivist and nominalist take on religions, conceiving them as social and cultural constructs, the meaning of which has changed over time. The concept of 'religion' and 'religions' are also useful analytical categories in relation to sets of beliefs, practices, experiences and values dealing with fundamental existential questions, such as those of birth, identity and death. By using these categories, we can regroup various phenomena by means of family resemblance. However, he does posit a common element, which consists in having "some degree of transcendental reference" (Jackson 2008b, 21). Also, Jackson's concept of religion should be considered in the background of a larger, general conception of

cultures as having fuzzy edges, being internally diverse, negotiated and contested, whose adherents actually draw on a large pool of diversified cultural resources. As indicated by the very name of his approach, for Jackson the study of religion\s is fundamentally an interpretative activity. This entails creating meaningful connections between 'experience-near' and 'experience-far' concepts and interpreting the meaning of a web of mutually related elements, in which a single part illuminates the whole and vice versa. The subjectivity of the interpreters is not discarded, but the risk of appropriation, simplification and projection of biases is mitigated through the reflection on the act itself of interpretation (§ 4.5.2).

O'Grady engages religions through Smart's theories, i.e. conceiving them as having seven, mutually interrelated dimensions: doctrinal, mythological-narrative, ethical, experiential, ritual, institutional and material-artistic. While he distances himself from putting emphasis on personal experience or giving primacy to systems of beliefs, he nonetheless states that the distinctively religious or 'sacred' aspect of religions lies in their focus on transcendental realities and on the revelation of some 'truths' which answer to ethical and existential dilemmas (§ 4.5.2). O'Grady (2019) does not dwell on how religions should be inquired in general terms, but directly proposes that pupils should have a sort of "dialogue with difference"(represented both by material studied and peers) that makes them aware of their own backgrounds or assumption, and therefore foster a Gadamerian expansion of horizons (§ 4.5.3).

While we have acknowledged the epistemological potential of the 'interpretative-dialogical' approach exemplified by the three-layered matrix of representations, the idea of *constructive criticism* and the overall grounding in a social sciences' perspective, we also detected some problematic issue, namely the doubtful combination of this epistemological position with a strong emphasis on the personal development and involvement of the pupils through the encounter with religious diversity. However, since the issue of the personal development of pupils is linked with a discourse of motivation and active engagement of pupils in learning RE, I will return on these matters in the context of the learning dimension (cf. *infra*, § 5.5).

In the final analysis, these ambiguities inherent in English RE, which is supposed to also offer a detached, objective approach to religious traditions, can be ultimately related to the fundamental ambiguity, if not outright paradox, of pursuing the aim of 'learning about religion' together with the ambivalent aim of 'learning from religion' as proposed by institutional documents such as the 2004 or 2013 frameworks. Indeed, theories and representations employed to teach about religion vary (cf. Alberts 2007, 99-100) in accord to the possible interpretations of the aim of 'learning from religions', which range, as we have seen, from being trained to engage with rational

debate about the order-of-things to being able to create one's own spiritual worldview. This resonates with the observations of several scholars about English RE who ultimately consider it, together with other examples of integrative RE in Europe, as featuring aspects labeled "small-c(onfessional)" (Jensen, Kjeldsen 2013; Jensen 2017a) or "small i(ndoctrination)" (Alberts 2019). The latter means an

> unquestioned discursive hegemony of a particular (Christian) notion of religion as a frame of reference for almost all education about religion, which is, furthermore, often represented as if it constituted not a particular religious view of religion, but a kind of universal perspective on religion. (54)

Indeed, this is what we have encountered in the RE approaches above critiqued, even if, in this case, I would stress more the *modern* component above the *Christian* one.

Consequently, to avoid this implicit small indoctrination, Alberts proposes to decrease the ambiguity in the formulation 'learning from religion' by changing it into "*learning from* ***the study of religion\s***" (Alberts 2008, 320; italics and bold in original). I agree and interpret her suggestion as pointing to the functional connection between the educational/axiological dimension and the epistemological one. Therefore, having already discussed the former, I proceed to discuss the RE epistemological proposals of various SoR-base scholars before advancing my own proposal in the next section.

The choice of the academic study of religion\s as the epistemological base of our RE proposal gives us certain firm coordinates, at least on the methodological dimension.

We have seen in fact (§ 2.1.6) a cluster of interrelated, common meta-methods. The first is *classification*, which aims to give a heuristic order among various phenomena, but it must be constantly retooled on the basis of a new theoretical framework and, importantly, on the grounds of comparison with new data. *Comparison*, indeed, is crucial as it is a common *modus operandi* of the human mind but also as a precise method in the study of religion\s. Apart from helping in building new classifications, it is also a key operation to illuminate previous hidden sides of a phenomenon by juxtaposing it with another different and/or better-known phenomenon. To avoid simplistic generalization or reduction (a charge to past phenomenological comparativism), comparison must be accompanied by a thorough *contextualization* (historical, social, cultural, even environmental) and a careful and reasoned selection of the *tertium comparationis*. All these operations ultimately aim at reaching *interpretation*, *explanation*, and *description* of a certain phenomenon. *Interpretation* means to grasp the various elements in a meaningful way, while *explanation* should entail the disclosure of how things are causally connected. However,

strict, natural law-like causal connections are extremely difficult to find in social sciences. Therefore, *explanation* and *interpretation* are often seen as two sides of the same coin, in the sense that a phenomenon is explained when inserted in what (according to a certain theory or implicit common sense) is considered a meaningful account which includes other elements (interpreted as) relevant. All this then feeds in what is a *description* of a certain religious phenomenon. Here it is pivotal to distinguish between the different interpretive frameworks of the insider and of the outsider, and to take into account possible tensions with the insider, especially in the case of comparison with other traditions or when 'hermeneutics of suspicion' are applied.

However, things are not so simple. Concerning the issue of epistemological paradigm for a SoR-based RE, Meylan (2015) draws from Develay (1992) the idea of *matrice disciplinaire*, that is the existence, within a certain discipline, of contrasting approaches which favor certain theories, concepts, and ultimately certain values over others. A situation that may well led to different teaching objects (cf. also above, § 2.2.6). He identifies three possible disciplinary matrixes within the study of religion\s. The first is the *matrice disciplinaire phénoménologique*, which sets up a list of operative concepts (divinities, myth, rites, symbol, space, time, life/death, etc.) around the *sui generis* concept of 'sacred'. The shortcomings of this approach have been widely analyzed, as we have seen in ch. 1, by the deconstructionist approach, that represents the second disciplinary matrix, the *déconstructionniste* one. This latter puts "the implicit relation bewteen the historian of religions and Christianity" at the center of its approach (Meylan 2015, 89), which must be unfolded through the analysis of certain key aspects, arranged in three main categories: politics (e.g. colonialism, imperialism), ideology (religion, secularity, science), and epistemology (history of the disciplines, its concepts and categories). However, for Meylan this matrix remains somehow paradoxically Christian-centric, as it basically looks for Christianity lurking in every piece of scholarship about religion and, in its extreme version, is basically conductive to merely asserting the incapacity of translating other cultures in our native cultural idiom. As a solution he proposes the *matrice disciplinaire nominaliste*, according to which the concept of religion as well as other related concepts are heuristic categories aimed not at understanding what religion is, in the sense of its ontological essence, but at providing "an entry point (next to the ones of economy, of language, etc.)" (90), in order to make sense of certain human behaviors and interactions. More in detail, he explicitly cites the definition of religion by Lincoln (2003, 5-7) as an example of a disciplinary matrix articulated around the Foucauldian idea of discourse, which, in this case at hand, connects institutions, practices, communities around concerns that "transcend

the human, temporal, and contingent" (5).[1] For Meylan, this is the only matrix that can both exclude the apologetic dimension and give a factual knowledge of what are usually labeled 'religious traditions'.

Indeed, also for Jensen (2019, 45), the notion of 'religion' is an analytical tool made by scholars. Similarly, 'religions' are representations, analysis and explanations made by scholars. In a nutshell, he recommends always remembering that "map is not territory". Nonetheless, he also claims that

> there is something out there […] that despite whatever theoretical and methodological issues and complexities implied, can be identified, classified and studied as religion\s. (Jensen 2020, 195)

To identify it, he offers a very simple (operational) definition of religion as

> a cultural (sub-)system that differs from others by way of a reference to a postulated more than human and more than natural something. (201)

According to Jensen, RE should be a study-of-religion\s program in a mini-format. And for him a qualified (i.e. scientific) study of religion\s should involve both 'deconstructivist' or 'discourse theory' analyses as well as cognitivist, biological, and evolutionist approaches, in an interdisciplinary approach that combines cognitive sciences, biology, neurology, sociology, philology, and history (Jensen 2019, 39).

More in practice, RE should engage 'religion' and 'religions', past and present, majority and minority, collective and individual, in an analytical, critical, pluralistic and comparative way. This means that all religions are treated equally, analyzed with attention to their contexts through a framework (formed by conceptual tools such as rituals, myth, etc.) that does not refer to one or some particular religions but is the result of pluralistic, cross-cultural and comparative studies of the highest possible number of traditions. Religions and the notion of 'religion' are not to be taken at face value but interpreted and explained in historical and cultural contexts. The overarch-

1 Since another scholar, Jensen (personal communication; cf. also 2020, 202), endorses this definition for the construction of a RE, it is worth citing it in its entirely: "[Religion is] 1. *A discourse whose concerns transcend the human, temporal, and contingent, and that claims for itself a similarly transcendent status*. […] 2. *A set of practices whose goal is to produce a proper world and/or proper human subjects, as defined by a religious discourse to which these practices are connected*. […] 3. *A community whose members construct their identity with reference to a religious discourse and its attendant practices*. […] 4. *An institution that regulates religious discourse, practices, and community, reproducing them over time and modifying them as necessary, while asserting their eternal validity and transcendent value*" (Lincoln 2003, 5-7; italics in original).

ing questions, far from being existential questions such as "where do we come from?" or "where do we go after death?", should instead be

> about the origin, coming into being, function and use of religious ideas, practices and institutions. Why do humans and human societies have religion? (Jensen 2020, 197)

Also Frank (2016) proposes a well-defined epistemological matrix. She approaches religions as a communicative construct that can be seen as part of a more or less coherent, systemized set of symbols. Part of this symbolic inventory includes communications that refer to transcendence. Actors in the communication of these symbols appropriate and (re)produce them, and the most educated or specialized actors systematize and institutionalize the symbols again and again. Furthermore, as these specialists are also representatives of communities, they socialize individuals – in the sense of introducing these individuals into the objective world regulated by these symbols – giving them the opportunity to participate. For these socialized individuals, the symbolic content has a collectively binding validity, and has to be passed on from generation to generation. In order to define a certain element of communication (a story, a ritual, etc.) as religious, Frank defines two criteria: a collective basis of validity and the reference to a transcendent dimension. It is not a clear-cut division, and grey areas are expected. Furthermore, one must take into account the full spectrum of religion-related communications, including those in negative or restrictive terms, e.g. atheistic, or humanistic positions.

Alberts (2007, 31-41, 373-6) proposes a theorical background in which the concept of religion should be to delineate with a "dynamic polycentrism of aspects" (373), thus avoiding the question of the 'essence' of religion. The first two are functional aspects (cf. above, § 2.1.2): religions provide 'orientation', in the sense of enabling human beings to find their ways in life and world by referring them to a framework that provides meaning and a way to better cope with the sense of human contingency, as other cultural systems (e.g. science or economy) may not be as effective in doing. The second aspect refers to the provision of normative frameworks on the grounds of certain interpretations of general/universal nature, for example, the idea, in Buddhism, that suffering is at the base of existence. The third aspect is descriptive, and refers to the multi-faced dimension of religion, such as the doctrinal, mythological, ethical, ritual, experiential, social and material-artistic ones. Finally, the issue of substantial aspect, i.e. the identification as a certain kind of transcendence as a minimal criterion to be defined as religion, is taken into account. However, it is dismissed, in order to have a concept of religion that can be broad enough to include not only phenomena outside the so

called 'world religions', but also phenomena in which the distinction religious/non-religious is blurred: secular worldviews like scientism, humanism, certain ideas on market economy, implicit or civic religion, and so on. On a more practical level, Alberts proposes a multi-perspective approach, so these various aspects may be addressed, and to adopt the following methodological key points: not conceiving religion as *sui generis* phenomenon and essentially incommensurable with other socio-cultural phenomena; not universalizing features of individual religions; not only overemphasizing certain aspects of religions. Finally, the definitions and operational concepts are to be open to modification upon confrontation with materials coming from multiple and diverse religious phenomena.

5.3.2 Discussion and Proposal

We have seen (§ 2.2.3) that, in the transposition from *savoir savant* to *savoir scolaire*, a key passage is the individuation of pivotal and indispensable elements such as postulates, fundamental theories and key distinguishing concepts, technical terms, research methodology, as well as the historical development of the discipline. However, both Develay (1992; cf. also above, § 2.2.6) and Meylan (2015; cf. also above, § 5.3.1) warn us that various disciplinary matrixes can be possible. Let us try, then, to identify certain common traits. In case we find ourselves in a situation in which we have to choose among different options, we will identify those principles or arguments in order to ground and justify the said choice.

A preliminary, probably redundant, but nonetheless necessary observation is that the very defining epistemological trait of the study of religion\s lies in approaching its object as a completely human phenomenon, without resorting to any supernatural explanation nor adopting the perspective of any religious traditions. The necessity of reiterating this seemingly obvious statement is justified by the consideration that this discipline has inescapable Christian roots, often concealed behind apparent neutral approaches, and in the concept of religion itself (cf. above, §§ 2.1.3, 2.1.5 and 2.1.8).

Accordingly, as a first step, we may say that from all the various discussions engaged in ch. 1, and from the individual proposals by various SoR scholars dealing with RE, there is a wide consensus for a baseline nominalist approach for what concerns the definitions and conceptual formulations of 'religion' and 'religions'. In other words, our RE has its first foundations in an elucidative, interpretative strategy that consciously uses the history-laden terms 'religion' and 'religions' as stipulative tools to make sense of various phenomena among which we identify family resemblances (§§ 2.1.2, 2.1.4 and 2.1.7). This choice of a heuristic and elucidative approach, instead of an ontolog-

ical approach that seeks equivalence between object and definitions, is also preferable for other reasons. On the axiological/educational level, the heuristic and elucidative stance implies an awareness of the empirical complexities of cultural realities and of the necessity to tolerate degrees of ambiguity, that is the possibility of diverse perspective and the acceptance of provisional determination. Ultimately, this epistemological choice is a way to address complexity in a constructive way and to strive for further improvements. Also, it is an approach that has its ground in the acknowledgment of the genealogies and the uses of the concept of 'religion' (§ 2.1.5).

Notwithstanding the scholarly consensus concerning the avoidance of identifying a certain univocal essence, we have seen also the necessity for certain criteria to be set in order to distinguish our object of interest from other phenomena, that is a substantialist criterion. Many examples of this latter can be listed, from a general reference to a certain transcendent dimension, to more defined postulation of counter-intuitive superhuman beings (§§ 2.1.4 and 2.1.7). Alberts (2007; cf. also above, § 5.3.1), on this regard, explicitly reject the reference to transcendence in order to include grey areas such as civil religion. I would not go as far as she does, and I think instead that a good compromise between creating certain epistemological boundaries and addressing at the same time family resemblances in grey areas can be found in Schilibrack's proposal (2013). We have seen that he takes, as substantialist criterion, the reference to 'super-empirical realities', i.e. non-empirical realities treated as existing independently from empirical sources (cf. also above, § 2.1.2). For example, if people treat some non-empirical realities, such as justice or the idea of nation, as a given entities independent of human creation, then we may speak of religion – in this case at hand, more specifically of a form of civil religion. In summary, we can posit a starting, minimal definition of religion, somehow akin to Jensen's operational definition (2020, 201; cf. above, § 5.3.1), to which we also add Smith's indication that a "map is not a territory", i.e. the awareness of the very concept of religion as an analytical tool of the scholar. This definition runs like this: *the scholarly and heuristic use of the term 'religion' refers to a cultural (sub-)system that differs from others by way of a reference to super-empirical realities.*

With this first step we establish two key elements of the epistemology of the study of religion\s: its heuristic, elucidative aim and a very simple delineation of its research object. However, when we delve more deeply into the epistemological structure and tackle the issue of theoretical conceptualization of religion\s, we find (as we have already seen) that more and more differences emerge between all the various theories and more complex definitions (§§ 2.1.4 and 2.1.7). Also, we must take into consideration the two fundamental approaches, the 'constructive' and 'deconstructive', within the study of religion\s

(§ 2.1.1). I take here as guiding criterion the didactic principle of *essentialization* (§ 2.2.3), i.e. to address all the possible epistemological articulations in the most efficient way, that is the different ways to inquiry into a certain object. Secondly, I refer to the *historicization* principle, i.e. to address the dialectics between old theories and new perspectives within the inevitable historical development of the discipline. Accordingly, and following the proposal of Alberts (2017a; cf. also above, § 2.1.1) both the 'constructionist' and 'deconstructionist' sides should be taken into consideration.

On this background, I propose a more detailed definition of religion, which should be taken primarily as a reference for teachers, in the sense of a kind of mnemonic device to see various key points in one single gaze. I do not suggest that this definition should be engaged directly by pupils – especially younger ones – without any adaptation. Instead, it should be a guidance for the planning of teaching and learning activities. This definition implicitly contains a certain theoretical approach to religion, which will be explained next. It runs like this:

> The term 'religion' refers to a seemingly unproblematic and universal phenomenon. However, it has a distinct genealogy, its meanings and uses have changed through history and places. The reason why it seems unproblematic and universal is related to the modern pretension of universality by Euro-American cultures.
>
> With this in mind, the scholarly and heuristic use of the terms 'religion', 'religious' and 'religions' stipulatively refers to phenomena in which communities and individuals create, use, change, select and transmit various type of cultural resources which, interacting with human biological make-up and referring to superempirical realities, support cognitively, emotionally and bodily these communities and individuals in 'making homes', in 'crossing' and in 'creating boundaries'.

The first phrase is basically the explanation of the need to have a heuristic and elucidative approach which does not postulate any 'essences'. It is also a reference to the critical/deconstructive strand in the study of religion\s. Another reference to this strand is implicit in the words 'creating boundaries', in the sense that religions are also

> a potent manner by which humans construct maps […] through which they defend and contest issues of social power and privilege. (McCutcheon 2000, 173)

This observation is not limited to phenomena in which social groups are distinguished or separated on the base, e.g. of religious affiliation, but includes also the ways in which the very concept of religion

has been used as universal yardstick to classify people and cultures (cf. above, §§ 2.1.5 and 2.1.8).

'Religion' is a noun used collectively to refer to phenomena in general sense, and to the conceptual tool created by scholars. 'Religious' is an adjective used to indicate that certain phenomena present aspects indicated by the concept of 'religion'. 'Religions' is a noun used to indicate those phenomena that have a common conceptual point of reference in 'religion' but present historical or structural continuities or discontinuities in such a way that, from a heuristic perspective, makes sense to separate (hence speaking of two or more religions) or unite (hence speaking of one religion). 'Religions' is a useful term in the dyad 'religion/religions' to indicate empirical phenomena defined as religious and to distinguish them from the theoretical concept. However, I think it would be easier to distinguish between different 'religions' if they were approached in their being 'traditions', that is, in being complex processes of power, agency, authority, rhetoric, ideology, community, temporality, memory, continuity, innovation and identity, in which resources are selectively and creatively handed down to the following generation, without implying a dichotomy and contrast with 'modernity'. For the sake of brevity, however, 'religions' can still be used while being carefully mindful of this characterization.

This insistence of this scrupulous, almost tentative use or establishment of terms should not be considered as a mere reproduction of seemingly rhetorical practices often employed in academic writing, but as abiding to the principle of *historicization* in the sense of avoiding presenting an impersonal, a-temporal and intimidating 'monumental' knowledge to pupils. Instead, these 'doubts' and 'qualms' are proof that the discipline is lively, constantly rethinking itself, and not an inert body of knowledge whose rationale may have perished in time (§§ 2.2.2 and 2.2.3). If the pupils are introduced in the dynamic and multifarious nature of the discipline, they will be able to find their suitable observation point. This is a way of reminding of the past errors within the discipline, whose historical retracing is an activity analogous to that of the scholar itself (§ 2.2.3). We have seen that Meylan (2015; cf. also above, § 5.3.1) dismisses the deconstructive disciplinary matrix because ultimately it is still Christian-centered. However, if this may be a reasonable critique in a research context, in an educative context this centeredness on Christianity – better, on Euro-American modernity – is instead functional to the development of the intercultural competence of knowledge and critical understanding of the self (cf. § 5.2.2). That is, the awareness of how our perspective is contingent and dependent on our cultural affiliations and historical backgrounds. It also helps to identify and correct certain uncritical views that affect even our main reference for the educational/axiological framework, that is the above cited competence

of knowledge and critical understanding of religion from the 2018 CoE framework, which treats religion as a separate area from culture to be addressed in terms of texts, doctrines and beliefs (§ 5.2.2).

Since one of the fixed components of our discussion on epistemology is the topic of Japanese and other East-Asian religions, in what follows I want to highlight that the combination of this very topic with the genealogical critique of Euro-American modernity, which is typical of the deconstructive approach, is functional and conductive to the intercultural educational aims we have set above (§ 5.2.2).

As we have seen in § 3.2, by looking at several examples of Japanese and other East-Asian religions, a host of elements that may be unquestioningly treated as central to the conceptualization of religion – a case in which even the 2018 CoE framework shows little self-criticism – are instead unveiled as being not so pivotal or even misleading. In my view, this may fruitfully lead to the development of 'openness to cultural otherness', in the sense of questioning the notion of 'naturalness' or 'normality' of one's own cultural characterization, in this case, of religion. For example, to be aware that the notion of exclusive religious belonging is misleading may help enhancing the consciousness of the complexity of cultural phenomena, i.e. that multiple affiliations are possible. Moreover, this awareness should lead to more tolerance towards the ambiguity of a person whose religious behavior may sometimes be explained in Buddhist terms, for example, and sometimes not. To acknowledge the possibility of different frames of reference, in this case concerning what may count as 'religion', may be conductive to be 'respectful' without ignoring differences nor being necessarily in agreement, and explaining disagreement on the base of the difference between frames of reference. The fact that what we may expect from a certain encounter with other religious traditions may prove inexistent or scarcely meaningful (such as the holding of a precise set of beliefs), can be conductive, in my opinion, to two processes of intercultural value. First, the identification of those aspects that we unquestioningly posit as having universal relevance; second, a self-critical analysis of the reasons why we posit in the first place such elements as universally meaningful.

This last process is connected basically to what we have explored in § 3.3, i.e. the impact of the modern concept of religion in the development of East-Asian religions and the dialectics of hetero- and self-representations entangled around this concept. Explaining the cultural-historical reasons for the apparent naturality of certain widespread, but partial, representations (e.g. the focus on inner and 'loftier' aspects such as meditation or philosophical analysis, with the implicit or explicit dismissal of other aspects as 'degeneration') can be considered part of an educative agenda aimed at the "decolonization of knowledge" (Nye 2019, 8). Of course, this does not mean that any phenomenon that actually correspond to said partial repre-

sentations should be labeled 'inauthentic' or dismissed because of being 'products of colonialism'. As observed also in § 3.3, in a very important sense the focus on Euro-American modernity is actually functional for a better understanding of the modern development of East-Asian religions and the modern self- and hetero-representations of them. In this way the critical understanding of the self is intertwined with the critical understanding of cultures and histories, especially when power structures, discriminatory practices and political agenda are to be highlighted. To look at how Japanese and other East-Asian traditions had to cope with the concept of religion shows that ideas such as 'religion' or 'secularity' have evolved in different ways in different cultures over time, thus also implying the necessity of considering other historical narratives. At the same time, these neglected historical narratives may as well highlight other aspects of ourselves. In fact, as Miyake observes,

> Orientalism, as a process of contrastive and explicit othering, has contributed in modern age to shape, by binary opposition, Euro-American identity, enabling the very idea of 'West' *to remain in many cases implicit or unmarked as the universal norm*. (Miyake 2015, 97; italics added)

An example of an unmarked universal norm, which we have instead criticized, is the ambiguous use of the concept of spirituality. This is especially relevant in connection with East-Asian religions, as we have seen above in § 3.2.4 and in our critiques to the experiential-instrumental approach (§ 4.4.4). There is also a consonance between the above discussed educative aim of fostering critical thinking (§ 5.2.2) and the observations we have just made. The reason is that all these observations imply the activation of skills such as: understanding preconception and assumptions; engaging with rhetorical purposes and hidden agendas; situating in historical contexts; gauging the reliability of a source of information; and assessing for possible bias or distortion.

However, limiting ourselves to introducing pupils to the roots of misunderstanding is not enough. The above-mentioned competence of tolerance towards ambiguity implies also dealing constructively with complexity, while the competence of 'civic mindedness and responsibility' (§ 5.2.2) entails also making decisions and being accountable for them. To put it bluntly, if we expect future citizens to be able to discuss what should count as religion or not in legal documents, for example, equipping them only with critical perspectives will not help. What is needed is also a way to foster the competence of empathy, i.e. the capacity to grasp the frames of reference of others and put them in comparison with our frames of reference, making responsible decisions about what may be negotiable or not. This

latter operation is linked also with our considerations about the necessity of foregrounding the value frames of reference (§ 5.2.2).

On the background of these observations, I have taken inspiration, for the 'constructive' part of our approach to religion, from Tweed's theoretical ideas (2006; cf. also above, § 2.1.7). The reason is that it is a bottom-up approach aimed at offering a flexible way of 'travelling' among these phenomena called 'religions', in an illuminative way, instead of explaining them on well-defined grounds, such as in the case of cognitive sciences-based theories. Indeed, the aim is not to put pupils in the condition of actually making new discoveries or breakthroughs in the discipline, but to somehow fictionally recreate the largest possible variety of situations experienced by researchers. In order to do this, I found Tweed's work useful especially in his elegant metaphors of "crossing and dwelling", even if these have been criticized for being too broad, which for us is instead an advantage. Tweed nonetheless includes mentions of more recent, more hard science-based approaches, such as those based on cognitive science or evolutionist perspective, because they are a major innovation in the study of religion\s and therefore it is worth taking them into consideration. In summary, it responds aptly to the principle of *essentialization*. Apart from the addition of 'making boundaries' and of reference to 'super-empirical realities', already explained above, I have made some other changes to Tweed's definition. More in particular, his phrase "confluences of organic-cultural flows that intensify joy and confront suffering" (Tweed 2006, 54) aptly condenses many insights. However, it does so in a way that is, in my view, excessively abstract. Therefore, I prefer to replace it with a more detailed wording, which runs like this:

> phenomena in which communities and individuals create, use, change, select and transmit various type of cultural resources which, interacting with human biological make-up […] support cognitively, emotionally and bodily.

The rationale behind this sentence is to highlight the importance of selecting certain aspects that may be used as analytical elements – which are nothing but tools to be constantly re-evaluated. The intention is also to make a functional connection with the educational aim of fostering analytical skills, that is breaking down information in its constitutive elements to be examined and interpreted both in themselves and in connection with others, identifying possible discrepancies and envisioning possible alternative relationships and synthesis. The wording 'cultural resources' is inspired by Campany's (2003) definition of religions as "repertoires of resources" and works well with the idea from Chau (2011) of considering practitioners as being able to draw and creatively use elements from multiple

religious traditions (cf. above, § 3.2.1.3). I have added a stress on the bodily dimension in order to curb possible excessive focus on the inner (cognitive or emotional) dimension, and to avoid overlooking all those instances of religious treatment of the body, both as physical component and as a concept or metaphor (§ 3.2.3). Tweed's metaphors of 'making home' and 'crossing boundaries' are simple yet flexible enough to accommodate also those phenomena which, as we have seen, may represent a challenge to Euro-centric epistemologies. For example, the focus on worldly benefits by e.g. contemporary Japanese religiosity could be labelled under 'making home'. On the other side, we may as well interpret all those examples of tantric religiosity, both in terms of symbols and physical practices, as 'crossing boundaries'. We have seen, in fact, how these latter entail a commitment to reaching superior/secret knowledge or powers, and how, in order to gain such powers, unnatural and even dangerous – such as consumption of sexual fluids – 'crossings' of the social or physiological norms of body had taken place (§ 3.2.3.2).

5.4 The Teaching Dimension

5.4.1 Recapitulation and Further Insights

As observed above in § 2.2.4, with this section we enter in a very practical dimension, which basically refers to the actual activity, on the side of the teachers, of planning and implementing their work in class. According to the soft notion of model explained at the start of this chapter, I will refrain to sort out any precise method of teaching Japanese and other East-Asian religions, but I will focus on certain topics whose discussion may provide useful guidelines. This is also a way to acknowledge the fact that each single phenomenon of teacher planning activities, and performing them in class, is highly specific to that teacher and his/her context (Clerc, Minder, Roduit 2006, 2; cf. also above, § 2.2.1).

For the discussion of the first topic, let us recall Chevallard's notions of 'chronogenesis' and'topogenesis'. The former indicates the evolution of the knowledge planned by the teacher, while the latter indicates the ways in which the teacher, in the actual performance, exploits her/his mastery of the various aspects of the subject matter in order to ensure that it is learned by the pupils, an action that does not have to strictly follow the chronogenesis. I take inspiration from these notions and translate them in our context as *narratives* and *representations*. The first concept refers to the issue of which sequence of information should we engage the pupils with. To give a simple example, should we start teaching about Shintō according to its chronological evolution, or may there be alternative or comple-

mentary ways? The second concept refers to the issue of which aspects should we take into account when engaging a certain object with the pupils, according to the situation at hand. Resorting again to the example of Shintō, when and how should its narrative start? From archeological evidence prior to the arrival of Buddhism? From the establishment of the Jingikan? From the ideas of Yoshida Kanetomo? Or even from the Meiji restauration (§ 3.2.2.3)? While the first or second choice may sound more customary, the other more controversial options can be fruitful adopted if the teacher aims at focusing on the issues of discontinuity and evolution within religious traditions, and wants to show how to establish certain parameters or not when dealing with a religious tradition (e.g. must a religious tradition be self-consciously aware of itself as a discrete social group?) deeply affects the way it can be studied and represented.

Narratives and representations should also take into account the didactic principle of *problematization*, i.e. the individuation of those knots or foundational nuclei, the engagement with which stimulates the application of the mindset proper of the discipline. This is then connected with the didactic principle of *balance*. This means thinking about narratives and representations that provide chances to uniformly address the various epistemological aspects of a certain discipline, i.e. the conceptual-theorical ones, the terminological ones, the contents-related, and the methodological ones. In a few words, to discuss the topic of *narratives* and *representations* means dealing with the question "which contents should the teacher privilege and in which form?".

The second topic concerns the didactic principle of *controllability*, which basically consists of the issue of individuating and formulating both general and specific learning objectives. These latter, together with our educational axioms and aims, are important points of reference for effective planning and implementation. In a few words: which are the short and medium objectives which should guide our planning and assessment of teaching actions?

The third topic is the most fuzzy and difficult to incapsulate in few words, because it pertains to what is called 'didactic engineering', i.e. all the various techniques and tools teachers can apply in their actual performance. Under this topic I also include any other ideas concerning the planification, organization and implementation of an actual activity or set of activities. In a few words: what should teachers do practically in class? This is a complex topic to deal with in this context, given the theoretical approach and the soft notion of model adopted in this study. Are there any teaching methods or didactic mediators better suited to teach and learn Japanese and East-Asian religions? Theoretically, nothing prevents any methods to be effective. Nonetheless, I will provide some reasonable observations from a pragmatical point of view.

It should be observed that we have divided these three topics only for analytic purposes, but they are actually closely related. For example, if a certain narrative starts from a theoretical introduction to the concept of religion and other related analytical terms, this automatically translates into the objective of the acquisition of the relevant terminology and conceptual apparatus of the discipline. This, conversely, may well influence the way the teaching actually takes place, for example, by having pupil focusing on applying terms and concepts such as 'rites' or 'sacred places' to certain case studies, instead of, for example, memorizing a narrative of the doctrinal evolutions of a religion.

Having restricted our scope of interest to these three topics, we proceed now to recapitulate what the RE scholars discussed in this study have proposed in this regard. In this section we will focus mainly on contributions which have a constructive relevance and that are consistent with what we have established as our axiological and epistemological dimension. This means we will refrain from considering practices whose foundations we have already criticized and dismissed as not relevant or even detrimental. These are, for example, the representations of religions by the 'theological-rational' approach and by the 'instrumental-existential' approach. Similarly, we will not deal with the 2004 or 2013 frameworks, given their fundamental ambiguity in their 'learning from religion' proposal.

Starting our recapitulation from the CoRe 2018 report on RE, we have seen (§ 4.2.2) how it represents an innovation in the conceptualization of religions and also, consequently, the way in which they should be represented. In fact, this report stresses the need to show how religions and worldviews are not only diverse and internally complex, but are also dynamic, in the sense that they develop in interaction with each other, through overlapping, cross-fertilization and adaptation to new times and socio-cultural contexts. It warns us not to merely focus on beliefs and practices, but also on narratives, interactions, social norms, artistic expressions and other forms of cultural expression.

Furthermore, this deeper understanding of the complex, diverse and plural nature of the individual traditions should go beyond the limitation of the six 'major world faiths'. Attention should be given to the structural differences among, but also within, worldviews, in the sense that, depending on contexts (even within the same tradition) practitioners may give more weight to doctrine and orthodoxy, while others in other contexts might prioritize practices or orthopraxis.

Turning to Jackson's work, we have seen (§ 4.5.2) his proposal of a matrix on three 'levels': of the individual, of the membership group(s) and of the tradition at large. The dialectical interplay, including power-related dynamics, between these three levels is meant to elucidate the internal diversity, complexity and fuzziness of both inter-

nal and external borders of a given tradition. We also have seen that his approach tends to adopt a fairly equilibrated representation of the various aspects of religious traditions, without excessive focus on the 'usual suspects' such as doctrines and texts. What is peculiar to Jackson is his pupil-centered approach, which translates into a focus on the topics of potential interest and motivation for children, such as festivals and food. This focus is reflected also in the strategy of representing voices of actual insider children, of including aspects of their religious life in the narratives. Such care in providing living portraits of insiders sometimes involves the choice of using categories or divisions germane to that religious traditions, with themes such as 'joining', 'prayer and praise', 'the Bible', 'living as a Christian', and 'sharing and caring for others'.

As for O'Grady, he limits himself to adopting Smart's idea of the seven dimensions of religion already cited above. Additionally, he suggests showing how modalities and degrees of interaction between dimensions vary among religions, and engaging with media portrayals of religion, making pupils reflect on how these could affect their views.

Concerning what should guide the actual teacher practice, Jackson's proposal of activities focuses mainly on the interpretative competence of pupils, in the sense of having them able to move between the parts and the whole of the phenomena/'text' studied. That is, to relate the material drawn from one of the three 'levels' – individual, membership group, tradition – with the material drawn from another level, so that each piece of information shades light on the other ones. While doing so, pupils should be guided in 'building bridges', i.e. trying to approach experience-far concepts by using experience-near ones.

O'Grady proposes a highly child-centered methodology, with the teacher acting as mediator and the children as co-planners of their own learning. However, since this is highly connected with the issue of motivation, as O'Grady himself tells us (2019, 26-8), I will address his ideas in the learning dimension in § 5.5.

Shifting from English RE to SoR-based scholars, Frank's proposal on narratives, representations and objectives is closely tied with her epistemological take on religion, already explained above (§ 5.3.1). When religions are engaged, the following aspects should be taken into account: the personal aspect, i.e. the features of individual religiosity; the social aspect, i.e. the dynamics of the various religious groups and communities; the cultural aspect, i.e. the features of the religious systems of symbols; the exchange processes between these three aspects; finally, the way in which all these aspects of religion work in relation to other spheres of society such as politics, media, art, medicine, etc. For Frank, the focus should be on what people do with religions. This means, for example, that religious systems of symbols (e.g. texts, doctrines) are only learned insofar as they have something to do with the above-mentioned aspects and the ex-

change processes (Franck 2013, 92-7). Another key point for Frank is the distinction between self-portrayals of religious communities and religious individuals, and representations of religions by outsiders such as the media, politicians, individuals, artists, tourists, etc. (Franck 2016, 26).

Concerning the planning of concrete lessons, therefore, it is necessary to generate contents based on situations that all children, adolescents and adults encounter and have to deal with in their environment and in the everyday world. This means avoiding any preference for content that may be relevant only to certain pupils, especially those belonging to certain religions. Similarly, contents should not be chosen on the base of their relevance to the life-worlds of the pupils (cf. also above, § 1.1). The knowledge of the religious systems of symbols is important only insofar as they deal with religious communities, individuals, and public religious images that are addressed in the classroom. The religions of groups and individuals should be tackled in a comparative way through cross-cutting themes. Concerning the choice of the religious traditions to be engaged, a selection is inevitable, which can and should be varied according to the context of the school. Attention should be paid to the relevance of the item for the respective age groups. Similarly, the need for variations or adaptations to the actual contexts should be taken in consideration. In any case, Frank suggests that the interest in the subject is expected to increase if those aspects and dimensions of 'religion' that children and adolescents encounter in their everyday lives are addressed. Accordingly, it is less likely that such aspects and dimension are represented by the Bible, the Qur'an, Hindu idols, a bar mitzvah or, any more general, beliefs and doctrines. More often pupils encounter 'religion' on the street, in newspapers, on the Internet, in literature, in films and in advertising (Franck 2016, 19-25).

Frank operationalizes her ideas for RE in a model of competences (25-30). A first set is called 'contextualization competences' and refer to the ability to describe sources or data, to contextualize them in time, space and socio-cultural contexts, and, especially, to discern whether they pertain to self-representations or to external representations.

The second set is 'research competences' which basically involves the capacity to come up with questions suitable to certain objects (persons, ideas, material objects) and, conversely, to search for objects suitable to the posed questions. The rationale behind this precise set of competences is that the study of religion\s is not a matter of reproducing religious or theological teachings, but is rather a matter of describing the empirically ascertainable plural reception of these teachings by individuals and communities, and the representations of religions in the media, politics, etc. This requires an investigative attitude towards the subject matter.

A third set is 'theoretical competences' and refers to the ability of understanding theories, terms and concepts such as 'religion', 'ritual', 'cultural memory', 'modern society', 'integration', and of applying these theoretical tools to empirical observations.

A fourth set is 'communication competences' and involves the ability to communicate information and scholarly findings in an understandable way, taking into account the specificity of the addressees, mediating between those involved in different discourse (i.e. scientific and religious), and acting appropriately in various situations (e.g. conflictual ones), also in accord with scholarly findings. The rationale for these competences lies in the fact that at the root of the problem of coexistence there are often dissonances between religious-based behaviors and their representations by external groups. Finally, the set of 'evaluation competences' involves being able to confront together external representations, self-representations and scientific representations, addressing especially the issue of generalized and prejudiced representations in certain media, which should be evaluated using explicit criteria.

Turning our attention to Alberts (2007, 376-82), we have already seen above how she endorses a concept of religion which is fuzzy enough that narratives and representations of religion in class may include all those phenomena in which the distinction 'religious' *versus* 'non-religious' is blurred. The point is to show pupils the ambivalence of the concept of religion, and not only the positive, domesticated aspects. She recommends an equal treatment for all religions, avoiding the temptation of addressing, for example, primary existential topics in Christianity, while focusing on the 'exotic' sides in Asian religions, or on the 'ancient' side in Greek polytheism. Representations must avoid any kind of universal theology of religions. Instead, both similarities and contrasts should be shown from the perspective of methodological agnosticism. This means that there is no room for any discussions on the issue of truth-claims. A focus on contemporary phenomena is preferable, but an historical perspective is nonetheless needed in order to contextualize them. Pupils should be engaged with a variety of sources: oral, written, visual, material and multimedia, in which the distinction between insiders' representations, outsiders' representations and 'grey' representations (e.g. stereotyped ones) is explicit. Religious traditions should be engaged in comparison with others as well as in themselves, represented in their full complexity: majority-minorities relationships, dynamics of change, fuzzy border of traditions, power relations, small and great narratives inside the tradition. Those aspects considered 'negative' in contemporary contexts must not be ignored but contextualized, taking into account the insider's perspective, while being critically examined on the base of the explicit axiological and educative framework. On a more general-theoretical level, there is first of all the need of developing a me-

ta-language, informed by the theoretical study of religion\s, in order to talk about religion in general. Furthermore, among pivotal component to be considered in the construction of narratives, there are also the dynamics of generation and negotiation of various kind of representations of religions, for example, those involved in the processes of otherization such as Orientalism and Occidentalism.

Concerning this latter point, Alberts (2017b) is particularly critical of the concept of 'world religions' (cf. above, §§ 2.1.5 and 2.1.8). She asks herself: what is the value of a brief overview of the 'usual' five religions to be narrated in their basic aspects? Who decides which are these basic aspects? On which grounds? What kind of idea of religion would this brief overview provide? In this way she highlights the dilemma of a teaching about religions which also aims at providing a critical perspective. In other words, if we want to foster theoretical and ideological criticism on religious data, we are unable to do so without first providing these very data, which are already theoretically and ideologically laden, especially by the paradigm of world religion.

She then suggests a practical solution, which, it should be noted, refers to a university context. However, this does not mean that it should be dismissed as not relevant to our purposes. She proposes having students start from basic competences on theory, methods and issues of perspective/representation within the discipline of the study of religion\s. Only afterwards different introductory accounts of a same religion are engaged, and compared, in order to show that there are different ways to select and present "basic facts, data and terms" (Alberts 2017b, 447) of the same religion. Students are invited to look at the implicit or explicit reasons for these different selections. Next, they replicate the same process, this time addressing more traditions, in order to see if there are differences between the selection of basic facts of a certain religion in respect to others, and what are the possible theoretical and ideological reasons behind. In summary, rather than presenting students with an already selected set of data, Alberts proposes to train the students to reflect on the process of selection itself, an approach which permits the acquisition of the said data at the same time.

Saggioro and Giorda (2011; 2012) basically side with Alberts' suggestions, emphasizing the issue of conflicting narratives, the issue of representation, in particular the discriminating elements and the stereotypization processes, including those present within the religious traditions. Given their proposal of the discipline of the history of religions as the epistemological base for RE, they suggest focusing on geographical and diachronic development of important religious-related phenomena in human history, e.g. the development of Christian churches, Judaism and Islamic migration, or even atheism in modern Euro-American regions. In this regard, they acknowl-

edge the impossibility of avoiding privileging the historical development of religious traditions relevant to the contexts in which RE takes place (i.e. Europe or, more in general, Euro-American regions), but this does not mean neglecting the contemporary global spread of other Asian traditions. At any rate, "the challenge lies in dealing with Christianity in the same way as we would deal with other religions" (Giorda 2012, 112).

These ideas are operationalized in objectives such as the knowledge of the above-mentioned aspects, as well as the acquisition of all those theoretical and methodological tools – which are to be included in the teaching narratives. Such tools are meant to equip pupils with various competences, so that they may be able to organize the knowledge relative to the history of religion, applying theoretical principles to actual cases, and even re-elaborating this very knowledge. More in detail, they suggest aiming at the development of a common meta-language in order to oust Christian-centric terminology and to address, from a comprehensive point of view, the differences between the various technical terms used by insiders. Secondly, they cite the ability of understanding and interpreting religious texts, religious symbols, religious language and terminology, and, notably, forms of interreligious dialogue too.

The last author to be quickly cited as relevant to our discourse is Jensen, which does not dwell much in detail on the topics of this section, but he states that one of the most prominent tasks of RE in school is, in a few words,

> to deconstruct dominant 'folk categories', dominant, normative, stereotypical ways of thinking about religion. It is a must in order to make students familiar with a study-of-religion\s approach and to de-familiarize them with religion, not least 'their own'. (Jensen 2020, 196)

5.4.2 Discussion and Proposal

Let us start with the issue of the narratives, i.e. the logical sequence of information pupils are expected to deal with. Employing narratives, as the very word indicates, may well evoke a certain sense of plot in the mind of the pupils (cf. on this Ryan 1992, esp. 376-8) and facilitate an essentialized understanding of religious traditions, which is, furthermore, highly probable given the pervasiveness of the world religions paradigm (cf. *infra*, § 5.5.1). Therefore, I would propose to address first the issues in a basic epistemological nature. In other words, any RE course should start with the explicitation that what will be explored in class are 'maps', and that "maps are not territories" (cf. above, § 2.1.3) but mere tools. A move which is consist-

ent with the nominalist epistemological approach proposed above (§ 2.1.8). This should also be applied to narratives regarding the exploration of abstract theoretical or methodological issues, and to narratives regarding particular religious phenomena.

Keeping on with the metaphors of the map, since there may be various kind of maps (physical, political, road map, etc.), the uses and purposes of the various narratives or representations used by the teachers should be made explicit as well. This is also consistent with Hattie's recommendation (Hattie 2009, cf. also above, § 2.2.4) that clear and detailed objectives of activities should be shared with the pupils.

This proposal of mine is a kind of elaboration of Alberts proposal of critical work with the various representations of world religions. From this latter I maintain the focus of critical awareness of the non-neutrality of representations, without involving an excessive intellectual burden on the side of the pupils, especially the younger ones. By doing so, i.e. justifying and explaining beforehand the choice of narration and representations, a teacher may well use in certain contexts the term 'Shintō' as a meaningful term, while in other contexts s/he may instead problematize it.

Concerning our peculiar objective in framing the theme of Japanese and other East-Asian religions within RE, a first, general recommendation, consistently again with our epistemological stance, is that narratives and representations of these traditions should have two main 'faces': a 'deconstructive' and a 'constructive' one.

The first 'face' should address the issue of the stereotyped/partial representations regarding both religion in general, and Japanese and other East-Asian religions in particular. We have discussed the former in §§ 2.1.5, 2.1.8, and introductory sections in 4.2; the latter in §§ 3.3.2, 3.3.3 and 3.3.4. In this regard, we should keep in mind the already mentioned principles of *problematization* and *historicization*. In other words, pupils should not only learn the stereotyped or partial nature of certain representations, but, especially, the reasons why, and the contexts in which, these representations rose and became pervasive. These topics are, basically, the foundational nuclei of the critical/deconstructive approach. In this way we put the historical development – and errors – of the discipline in the foreground. As we have seen, these issues are intimately connected with broad topics, notably colonization, imperialism, the development of social sciences, and so on, which are closely tied with modernity and the construction of the identity of Euro-American regions *vis-à-vis* the other parts of the worlds. As such, these topics should be highlighted in our narratives and representations. This is not only meant to explore the interdisciplinary borders of RE (especially with history), but it is also functional to our intercultural aims of fostering competences such as critical understanding of the self, the awareness of

one's own biases, and the knowledge of the possible historical causes of these biases (§ 5.2.2).

From the point of view of the construction of narratives, which content should we give priority to? Data from religion or theoretical tools? In reality, this is a kind of false question, as we have already seen that any data are theory-laden (§§ 2.1.2 and 2.1.4). On the base of the above observations, we can say that the choice of deconstructive narratives may offer a way to follow the principle of *balance* between contents, concepts and terminology. Indeed, since deconstructive narratives start from the inadequacy of theoretical paradigms, they permit a dialectical exploration among conceptual elements, terminology (albeit in a critical way) and data from religions.

Deconstructive narratives and representations of Japanese and other East-Asian religions are, from a certain point of view, easier to design and plan because we can rely upon, as points of reference, those partial or stereotyped notions we want to criticize. Indeed, starting from the misconceptions of the pupils (§ 2.2.5; cf. also *infra*, § 5.5), especially when, as Frank suggests, these relate to their everyday experience, and may be functional and effective. However, we have already stated in our discussion of the epistemological dimension that the deconstructive side is not enough. Indeed, from a practical perspective, a deconstructive narrative based on stereotypes may well provide pupils with critical awareness and deep knowledge of certain, specific aspects of Japanese and other East-Asian religions, but this may also fail to provide them with the general picture when framing and contextualizing other specific aspects of these traditions.

How should we construe our positive narratives and representations, then? In my view, Jackson may provide us with fruitful insights thanks to his proposal of a three-layered matrix of representations, which addresses the dimension of the tradition at large, various membership-groups, and the individual. With the caveat, as discussed above, that each of these layers is explicitly presented as a sort of map with different scale, focus and purposes. In addition, in order to be consistent with our critique of the paradigm of religious traditions as discrete, separate entities, we should also add to our scheme other ideas. For example, Chau (2011) suggests focusing on the modalities of practices crosscutting traditions; the 2018 report on English RE invites us to take into account cross-fertilization and the dynamics of change within and between religions; Frank recommends not to forget the relation of religions with other spheres of society and the interplay between self-portrayals of religious communities/individuals and representations by outsiders. Concerning this latter aspect, we have seen (§ 3.3.), in fact, how the interplay of self- and hetero-representations is pivotal in understanding the contemporary situation of East-Asian religions.

This means that, if a teacher is carrying on a lesson using the example of the religious life of individual practitioners, pupils should be given the opportunity – if the example permits – to frame it not only within the layer of membership groups and/or tradition at large, but also within the layers of multiple traditions/membership group through the analytic concept of the modality of practice. These actual practices, then, should be seen in relation to other socio-cultural contexts and should be also analyzed in their different ways of being represented, and the reason why they are so.

Concerning the issue of narratives or 'maps' addressing the layer of religious traditions at large, I agree with Frank's recommendation of avoiding the temptation to give a mere account of theological doctrines. Similarly, I understand Jackson's point that an abstract and brief account of a religious tradition may not be so appealing for pupils in comparison to an account of the religious life of their peers. Nonetheless, due to the deep stratification of orientalist self- and hetero-representations that characterizes East-Asian traditions (§ 3.3), I think that it is, in any case, recommendable to provide pupils with general narratives of these religious traditions. By using 'large scale maps' or narratives in which the religious traditions are *heuristically* essentialized as the 'characters' of a certain 'story', it is possible, for example, to give a general account of historical transformations, including the doctrinal ones. Furthermore, in consideration of the pervasiveness of the paradigm of 'world religions' not only in the starting knowledge of the pupils, but also in the contemporary self-understanding and self-representation of many religious traditions, I suggest that this paradigm should be at least initially exploited – always as a tool – in order to be criticized and amended at a second time.

Of course, there cannot be one single, absolutely right, general narrative of, e.g. 'Buddhism' – not to mention the possible critique that we should instead talk of 'Buddhisms'. On this regard, I think that it is a matter of practical *phronesis* to be applied by the teachers. That is, they should act on the base of their situation, considering that the narratives/maps on traditions at large should be also designed in function of narratives and aspects concerning other layers: membership groups or individual experiences. As a practical general principle, we may say that these general narratives should be construed in a manner that characterizations are flexible enough[2] to accommodate the large possible number of aspects. Several examples

2 For example, we have seen in §§ 3.2.1.1 and 3.2.2.3 that is possible to speak of *kami* as a flexible concept of superhuman being or to make a heuristic use of the term 'Shintō' in order to show how a nowadays self-conscious tradition, whose antecedents can be traced back even to continental ideas, have historically developed in connection with other religious phenomena like Buddhism, Confucianism and political historical phenomena such as Japanese nationalism.

of these aspects have been already, and aptly, individuated by various SoR-based RE scholars above (§ 5.4.1), which are also relevant for the design of narratives concerning membership groups and individual experiences.

Another general principle to be followed in the creation of constructive narratives and aspects – concerning any kind of layer – is that of *problematization*, which in this case may be translated in the general guideline of envisioning narratives and selecting aspects which permit the activation, by the pupils, of the meta-methods of the study of religion\s (§ 2.1.6 and synopsis in § 5.3.1).

We may also observe that even constructive 'maps' may have critical or deconstructive effects, especially if they revolve around themes and topics which go beyond the stereotypical Christian-centric paradigm, as the already cited idea of acknowledging the possibility of multiple religious adhesions. However, this does not mean that aspects that may also be analyzable under Christian-centric paradigm should be dismissed, for e.g. the role of the rivalry of Daoism and Confucianism against Buddhism in the renowned persecution of 845 in China, or the sectarian development in Tokugawa Buddhism (§ 3.2.1.1).

Similarly, I would recommend, concerning the positive narratives and representations, especially of traditions at large, to be wary of a common mistake which has its roots in the reception of East-Asian religions (and in the Protestant influence as well) (§ 3.3.2). That is, the excessive focus on the 'birth of tradition', on the figure of the founder or on the foundational texts (e.g. the historical Buddha, texts such as *Kojiki*, *Daodejing*, *Zhuangzi*, *Veda* and *Upaniṣad*). Usually, brief general narratives tend to mainly explore the beginnings of a certain traditions, presented as its 'immutable foundations', while addressing further historical development only in a sketchy way, until the moment in which the 'fracture' brought by modernity (e.g. encounter with 'Westerners') takes place. In this way there is the risk of portraying the idea of 'tradition' as still and immutable *versus* the idea of dynamism and change of modernity. However, this does not mean that the important developments brought by modernity should be neglected. On the contrary, given their impact, their complexities, historical span and entanglements should be given much more space to be explored.

On this regard Nye (2019, 13-14) makes a bold proposal, i.e. to use the post-colonial present as "the entry into our engagement with the material. That is, to teach from the present backwards". It is a quite innovative and interesting proposal. To gauge its actual effectiveness, however, it should be experimented in classroom, which adequate planning and with all the necessary scaffolding through various types of resources – our 'maps' – to allow pupils to engage with a narrative that, indeed, goes against a logic of historical development.

It may well be an instance of a narrative which is both constructive and deconstructive in the senses explored above.

Continuing our discussion of narratives and representations of modern and contemporary Japanese and other East-Asian religions – including the development of these traditions in Euro-American contexts –, another important recommendation is to avoid what we have already hinted as the 'antiquarian' trap. That is, to treat the huge historical change in religions brought by modernization and nationalistic agenda as 'inauthentic' or irrelevant. As a matter of fact, this would betray an attitude similar to that of the first orientalists who despised the coeval situation of Asian traditions as superstitious degeneration of the doctrines and texts belonging to a foregone golden era. It is recommended, instead, to highlight the dynamics of modernization and acculturation of East-Asian religions (as we did in § 3.3) in order to avoid, above all, that those aspects which in reality appeal to Euro-American deep-seated assumptions (e.g. emphasis on individuality or psychological dimension) may come to be paradoxically understood as the supposed 'essence' of Asian spirituality. These dynamics should be engaged, on one side, as the present-day examples of normal expansion and acculturation, typical of any religious tradition, to be compared with similar process in the past. On the other side, especially concerning those phenomena which can be framed under the umbrella term of 'spirituality', these dynamics can be addressed as results of much more faster movements of people and information (such as Internet), and of the pervasiveness of neoliberal economical thinking, which fosters processes of commoditization (religious objects and materials becoming commodities) and commodification (non-things, such as persons and religious values becoming commodities/objects for profit) (cf. Carrette 2016). In other words, in our RE proposal, Japanese and other East-Asian traditions should also be observed in their 'dispersed', or 'consumed' form, without preliminary judgment on the issues of 'ethics' or 'authenticity' of said forms.[3] If feelings of discomfort should rise on these issues, a self-critical analysis should ensue to see on which grounds, on which assumptions, on which explicit or implicit values these discomforts arise. This kind of discussion should be addressed within a framework of intercultural and citizenship education, especially in regard to the key issue of negotiable or non-negotiable values (cf. above, § 5.2.2).

3 As Carrette interestingly observes, there are examples of Asian religious phenomena in which the dimensions of legitimate commoditization and morally disputable commodification are indeed blurred (Carrette 2016, 201, 749-50), an observation consistent with our examination of e.g. contemporary religions of Japan, or of traditional tantrism as provider of 'technical devices' for rulers (cf. above, § 3.2.3.4).

At this point, I think I should make two things clear, which will lead us to other practical observations. First, are these modalities of creating narratives valid or relevant only for Japanese and other East-Asian traditions? Absolutely not. My primary aim is to provide guidance for handling these traditions in RE contexts in such a way that their complexity and their entanglements with Euro-American cultural history can be taken adequately into account. Moreover, I think that a fruitful challenge for RE should not only be, as Giorda says, "dealing with Christianity in the same way as we would deal with other religions" (Giorda 2012, 112), but it should also consist in engaging Christianity, or the religious history of Europe and America in general, as 'exotic traditions'. That is, looking for and highlight in 'our religions' also those aspects that we found conspicuous in our review of East-Asian religions, such as beliefs and practices concerning practical benefits, the corporeal dimension, the manipulative practices, the esoteric aspects, the creative combination of elements from multiple traditions, and so on. Should feeling of puzzlement rise concerning this unusual focus on aspects that one could instinctively label as 'superstitious', this would represent a fruitful occasion to critically and genealogically ask why we instinctively tend to give such judgments.

The second point is that I do not consider these 'tools' of narratives and aspects merely as the contents of frontal lesson in which the teachers provide information to passive pupils. Narratives and aspects may as well be 'discovered' or even 'recreated' by pupils through various didactic methods and adequate preparation of context and resources. Since the relevance of the topic of Japanese and other East-Asian religions is linked to the foregrounding of one's biased views, an active involvement of the pupils and of their starting knowledge, is a logical and effective choice. As observed above, no teaching methods are, in theory, inadequate for the topic of East-Asian traditions. However, from a pragmatic point of view, we should consider the stratified history of deep-seated modern interpretations, self- and hetero-representations of these religions as possible hurdles for free exploratory activities. In other words, individual or group research done through Internet browsing, or through reading certain publications which may appear to be consistent with academic standards, could be instead detrimental if done without any guidance. These observations also lead us to the importance of carefully selecting, presenting, or even creating adequate resources. This is a recommendation proper to any didactic contexts, but in our issue at hand it should be done keeping in mind the indications concerning narratives and aspects discussed up to this point. For example, Jackson's proposal of using the real voices of children as a kind of peer-informants for the pupils-'anthropologists' is a fruitful idea, provided that these voices represent a fairly variegated spectrum of young

practitioners. In Jackson's case, since the fieldwork to collect these voices has been carried out in UK, variety may well not be assured, or modernist aspects of traditions may be overrepresented.[4]

As already observed in § 2.2.4, the individuation of learning objectives is a device meant to ease the planning and the implementation of teaching activities. In what follows, I try to synthetize the issues discussed up to this point by relying on the taxonomy of Anderson et al. (2001). That is, I will indicate in general terms what kind of *factual*, *conceptual*, *procedural*, and *metacognitive knowledge* we may expect pupils to *remember*, *understand*, *apply*, *analyze*, *evaluate* and *create*.

- *Factual Knowledge*:
  - 'Maps' for each of the three layers (traditions at large, membership group, individual).[5]
  - 'Maps' of self- and hetero-representations and the dynamics of their historical entanglements.
  - 'Maps' of the interrelationship between the various layers and processes.
  - Variety and complexity of aspects: oral, written, visual, material and multimedia sources, dynamics of change, fuzzy borders between traditions, power relations, relationship to other spheres of society such as politics, economy, and so on.
  - Technical terms of religious traditions.
  - Technical terms of the study of religion\s.
- *Conceptual Knowledge*:
  - Theoretical concepts and approaches to the study of religion\s.
  - Concepts of Orientalism and Occidentalism.
  - Conceptual understanding of cultural and intercultural complexities and dynamics: cultures as pool of resources of individual identity; cultural groups as internally contested, mutually influencing and changing in time and space; dynamics of power.
- *Procedural Knowledge*:
  - Baseline research methods: developing questions suitable for objects/searching object suitable for posed questions.
  - Meta-methods of *description*, *comparison*, *explanation*, *interpretation classification* and *contextualization*.
  - Preparation, communication and mediating scholarly findings according to type of addressees.

4 Cf. the example chosen by Jackson and cited above § 4.5.3. I found worth noting that it deals with "a rural English Thai Forest Hermitage monastery" (2008a, 174), which is an example of modernist development in Theravada (cf. Crosby 2014, 147 ff).

5 N.B.: in this case the 'individual' is to be considered capable to draw from, or to belong to, different religious traditions at the same time. In other words, for the level of individual Chau's (2011) ideas of modality of doing religions should also be implied.

- *Metacognitive Knowledge*:
  - Methodological agnosticism.
  - Baseline epistemological awareness of the impossibility of a completely neutral or omnicomprehensive perspective and of the heuristic value of 'maps'.
  - Drawing on research findings to act appropriately in situation (e.g. of conflict).
  - Critical understanding of one's own cultural position. In particular, being able to deconstruct and de-familiarize from dominant 'folk categories' and from dominant, normative, stereotypical ways of thinking about religion.

Let us rely on a practical example to see how these objectives on the knowledge-axis can be articulated in the procedural axis of to *remember*, *understand*, *apply*, *analyze*, *evaluate* and *create*.

A teacher may want to introduce pupils, already acquainted with general knowledge on Buddhism and theories of religions, to the case of two persons dealing with Zen Buddhism (may be real persons or fictitious ones). One lives in Japan and resorts to Zen Buddhism for requests of practical benefits and for funerary rites, while addresses his existential problems with a local female shaman, who allow him to get in touch with his deceased father. The other person lives in Europe, is fond of meditation and Buddhist philosophy, and thinks Buddhism should get rid of irrational superstitions. The teacher provides pupils with adequate information and resources among which there are 'maps' of modern developments of Buddhism, information of different cultural-religious context, and so on.

By giving pupils the task of identifying similarities and differences between the two practitioners, the teacher may set the following learning objectives, which will require specific arrangements in the lesson(s): *remembering* and *understanding* 'maps' of modern development of Buddhism both at the 'tradition' and 'individual' level; *applying* theories of religious studies such as ritual communication, self-cultivation or theological elaboration concerning super-empirical entities through the *analysis* of these two cases; *remembering* and *understanding* the concept of internal differences and of contested boundaries within a same tradition; *applying* the meta-methods of comparison and contextualization, interpreting and explaining the differences. The teacher may also set a metacognitive learning objective of *applying* critical self-understanding by having pupils reflect on which kind of practitioner they would instinctively see as more 'authentic', and why.

5.5 The Learning Dimension

5.5.1 Recapitulation, Further Insights and Discussion

In this last section I want to resume those topics discussed in § 2.2.5. We have seen the idea of 'didactic contract' which, among other things, refers to the implicit expectations of the pupils. These are strongly dependent on their own personal experience concerning the nature of the school in general or of one subject in particular. For example, pupils may think of school as the place in which a 'perfect', 'all-rounded' 'truth' about the state of affairs of the world is bestowed upon them. The youngest pupils, especially, may well think that teachers or adults not only 'know best', but even 'know all', which is conductive to the idea of monumental, a-temporal knowledge to be acquired and replicated as-it-is. Similarly, pupils may – predictably – have a limited view on the subject, and we have seen how, in the case of the study of religion\s, and even more in the case of Japanese and other East-Asian religions, there are plenty of reasons (cf. above, §§ 2.1.5, 2.1.8 and 3.3) to expect a certain biased or partial view on the subject.

We also have touched the issue of the creation of 'models', i.e. a stratification of mental images which, upon several inputs, became so elaborated and strong to resist further updates, thus subsuming any new inputs. This model may emerge at the right moment and in accordance with the teacher plan, or, conversely it could consolidate itself in the mind of the pupils before any chance of being further expanded, therefore causing cognitive conflict and hindering future learning. This is linked to the notion of epistemological obstacles, i.e. those knowledges which, in the evolution of key concepts within a discipline, have been useful or effective in that particular moment, but that are of no use when conceptualizing more advanced information. This is the case, for example, with the intuitive notion of the 'sacred' common to any religion that we found in the phenomenological phase of the study of religion\s. Brusseau (2002) warns us about the likelihood that pupils will probably face hindrances similar to those encountered in the historical evolution of the discipline.

On the background of these observations, we have discussed (cf. above, §§ 4.5.3 and 4.5.4) Jackson's idea of *reflexivity*. We observed how *reflexivity*'s elements of *constructive criticism* and *edification* are highly consistent with the educational and instructional aims of our proposal of RE. They are clearly pivotal in the development of critical self-reflection on the dominant ideas concerning religion in general and Asian religions in particular, especially for what concerns the exploration of: 1) those aspects of Japanese and East-Asian religions that go against the grain of Euro-centric ideas of religions; and

2) the historical-cultural reasons for current representations of East-Asian religions. Therefore, even if it is a learning process in which teachers cannot but devolve towards the learner (cf. above, § 2.2.1), teaching arrangements should be carefully crafted in particular to ease these two pivotal processes.

However, we found problematic the attempt of the 'interpretative-dialogical' approach to treat *reflexivity* as eminently "personal to the student" (Jackson 2008, 175), and to combine critical reflection on epistemological, ethical and political issues, with personal issues of religious/existential/identity-related nature. We stressed that pupils' needs, interests, reasons for motivation and, above all, models of understanding 'religion' and, especially, East-Asian religions, will be likely informed by a modern and orientalist understanding of them. Therefore, this somehow runs against our ideas of exploring those aspects of Japanese and other Asian religions in order to deconstruct this very contemporary understanding and opening space for intercultural and self-critical reflections.

I suspect that the numerous discussions about personal/spiritual/existential/identity issues, that constantly pop up in the various English RE approaches and institutional frameworks, point more or less to the classic 'elephant in the room' of RE. That is, the fact that RE teachers are expected to teach about religions in a situation where it is highly probable that pupils have already a well-defined, and very diversified idea, not only of what religion is, but also of what it *ought* to be: Christianity, Islam, an irrational behavior to be suppressed, spirituality outside corrupted institutions, and so on. Various factors may be behind this variety of ideas: family acculturation, personal choices, the process of building one's own cultural, social or ethnic identity, and so on.

As in the case of 'life questions pedagogy' in Swedish RE (cf. above, § 4.5.4), this emphasis on – supposedly neutral – existential issues may have been considered to be a kind of strategy to address simultaneously religious, a-religious and anti-religious pupils. Another way of tackling this issue is that of the theological-rational approach, which aims to equip pupils with philosophical skills in order to enable them to assess, defend (or even change) on rational grounds their own position, be it a religious one, one relative to a precise tradition, or an atheist one. This is an operation which, we have seen, comes at the cost of permitting only limited and problematic representations of religion (§ 5.3.2).

The perspective of the SoR-based RE scholars in this regard is quite straightforward, and refers to one of the methodological pillars of the study of religion\s, which is methodological agnosticism, i.e. approaching religions *etsi deus non daretur*, as phenomena totally explicable as a human creation. Jensen, for example, quite explicitly affirms that

> the pupils/students, when entering the classroom enter as pupils and students (not as, for example, atheists, 'nones', Christians, Muslims, or Buddhists). (Jensen 2019, 44)

I do agree without hesitation to this key principle, and indeed I have indicated methodological agnosticism (cf. above) as a metacognitive knowledge that pupils need to acquire when dealing with RE. Probably, *methodological atheism* would be a more logically coherent term, as it indicates to consider any super-empirical cause as not existent.

However, in order to cause less tension among pupils with attitude towards supernatural realities, I pragmatically suggest using the wording 'methodological agnosticism'. This term should highlight the fact that in RE we are playing a different (language) game, whose rules are not affected by the fact that super-empirical realities exist or not. Meylan (2015) too is aware of possible tension and cognitive conflicts that may afflict some pupils. These latter may indeed find themselves in a situation in which they are supposed to keep their beliefs about the existence of super-empirical realities, while, at the same time, accept the idea that religions that speak of these realities are exclusively men-made. Indeed, although he draws on Lincoln's approach to religion, he nonetheless thinks that Lincoln's famous statement: "Reverence is a religious, and not a scholarly virtue. When good manners and good conscience cannot be reconciled, the demands of the latter ought to prevail" (Lincoln 1996, 226), "must obviously be nuanced in the context of compulsory schooling" (Meylan 2015, 91). His solution is consonant with our discussion concerning the use of 'maps'. He proposes emphasizing the fact that concepts used in the study of religion\s are heuristic and of secondary order, i.e. centered around a theoretical object which is superordinated in regard to the various historical, contingent forms of religions. In this way pupils understand the difference between the uses of their native, commonsense and particular usage of religion (and related concept) from the use of the second-order, theoretical concepts about religion. Consequently, "the student's experience must therefore be subordinated to the constructed concept, a concept that can in no way correspond exactly to any experience" (92). The study of religion\s approach, then, would prevent pupils to engage in this subject through the exploration of the issue of truth-claims, which is instead a key point in the theological-rational approach, and it is not explicitly excluded in the interpretative approach. Indeed, for Jackson the question of truth and value should be left open to be pursued as a part of religious education (Jackson 1997, 122), while for O'Grady it should not be excluded but instead addressed through critical and philosophical tools (O'Grady 2019, 193).

Nonetheles, while the importance of methodological agnosticism in a SoR-based RE remains undiscussed, I think it is wise, from a pragmatic point of view, to consider that there is a high probability

that young pupils will engage in RE also with a personal, intimate interest. Judging from the strong emphasis on the personal dimension that characterize many varieties of RE, and not only English RE, I am doubtful that this issue can be dismissed very easily by merely upholding the necessity of a scientific approach. Even a strong advocate of an objective and detached approach as Jensen concedes that:

> If not for a more than 'purely' scientific fascination when reading the Homeric epics and the works of scholars like V. Grønbech and M. Eliade, I had never become a scholar of religion. Some religious texts and scholarly works, […] may happen to open eyes and bodies for alternative ways of seeing and living. This cannot and ought not to be totally avoided when discussing RE. (Jensen 2008, 136)

Similarly, we have already seen (§ 5.2.1) that Giorda and Saggioro go even further and affirm that the theme of personal development of the pupils, included their own quest for meaning, should not be completely dismissed from the horizon of RE's aims (Giorda, Saggioro 2011, 143). Indeed, Nigris (2013, 60-1) observes how any kind of knowledge contains 'aesthetics' and 'emotive' dimensions which inevitably enter in the personal construction of the pupil's meaning. I would argue that this is even more the case of a subject such as RE.

How do these observations relate with our topic at hand, i.e. teaching Japanese and other East-Asian religions? In addition to what we have examined in § 3.3, I would remind *en passant* of the existence of a vast body of publications and information in general, both scholarly and not scholarly ones, devoted to the exploration of the intellectual, psychological, 'spiritual' aspects of East-Asian traditions, often in comparison or dialogue with Euro-American philosophical and theological thinking. Therefore, I suspect that the topic of Japanese and other East-Asian traditions would surely draw the interest of pupils looking for resource in order to build their own worldview, with or without reference to super-empirical realities. On a personal note, this is what I, a convinced agnostic, have experienced while studying Buddhism for the first time. Indeed, especially for Buddhism, we should consider the fact that the notion that 'Buddhism is a philosophy, not a religion' is "undoubtedly the most widespread idea relating to Buddhism, even among academics" (Faure 2009, 27). Moreover, we should also take into account the contemporary *milieu* regarding 'spirituality', especially in its dimension of syncretic, free creation of highly personal religious worldviews, which often are not even considered 'religious' by their very creators. We have also seen how it is very common for East-Asian religions to be considered and creatively interpreted in such modalities (cf. above, §§ 3.2.4 and 3.3).

In other words, we may not be wrong in expecting that some pupils will be personally interested in Japanese and other East-Asian reli-

gions, especially as alternatives to Christianity, or even to 'religion' *tout-court*. Similarly, we should also consider the fact that even pupils already practicing or adhering to certain religions may have analogous interests. This can be especially expected for what concerns those aspects of Asian traditions which may be easily understood as 'techniques' freely transferable, e.g. meditation (§ 3.3.4). How should a teacher deal with the expectations and motivations of pupils? If s/he hastily dismissed them, it would be detrimental for the motivations of pupils, who would not see acknowledged their own personal experience coming from outside the school context. Secondly, we would miss the opportunity to stimulate pivotal metacognitive functions, such as the reconfiguration of previous knowledge in relation to new inputs (§ 2.2.5). I will try to deal with these issues in my proposal.

5.5.2 Proposal

Consistently with our nominalist epistemological approach, and with our idea of RE as provider of 'maps' to help pupils navigate the various religious traditions, I would recommend that teachers devote some time, especially at the onset of the course, to explicitly explain and discuss the 'didactic contract' that pupils may have in mind, even unconsciously. That is, to discuss what RE is supposed to be or not supposed to be. For example, it should be clarified that it is not an intellectual venue in which religious traditions are compared in evaluative terms, i.e. deciding on rational, ethical or whatever ground, which one has the best or more compelling truth-claims or ethical norms. I do not intend with this that in RE evaluative judgment cannot be made, but these must be done in tandem with the explicitation and discussion of the underlying value framework (§ 5.2). Furthermore, this kind of evaluative discussion should be done on specific, empirical cases, not to abstract issues such as 'the concept of Dao' or 'the value of meditation', as it would risk the essentialization of traditions. Secondly, coherence should be sought with the principle of avoiding the representation of the scholarly subject (in this case the study of religion\s), as a sort of monumental knowledge. Therefore, RE should be presented, in the didactic contract, not as the real 'Truth' about all the various traditions – as it would mean to treat it as a sort of 'meta-religion' – but as a knowledge that permits pupil to interpret and respond to this phenomenon in the most neutral way possible. Similarly, RE should not be considered in competition with insiders' interpretations for what concerns the issue of super-empirical realities. At the same time, however, the possibility of tensions on empirical grounds must be acknowledged (cf above the TWB factors in § 2.1.6).

While this propaedeutical operation may be useful to clarify or curb possible initial misinterpretation of RE, it is reasonable to think

that teachers cannot completely envision and preemptively dealt with all the possible expectations, misconceptions and epistemological obstacles of the pupils. This is why a certain degree of *phronesis* or practical wisdoms is required on the part of the teacher. S/he should be constantly aware of these key issues in the learning process of the pupils. In this regard, the constant feedback from pupils, e.g. those gained through the use of logs or interviews as done by O'Grady (§ 4.5.3), may support teachers in individuating what pupils expect, what may motivate them, and which misconceptions should be tackled and how. Let us hypothesize that one of the 'misconceptions' of the pupils consist of their expectation of learning Buddhism or Daoism as coherent systems of thought and ethics, characterized by clearly identifiable doctrinal points. Systems from which these pupils hope to gain precise existential or philosophical guidance for their lives. Should these interests remain half-satisfied because, as Frank suggests, doctrines should be dealt with only insofar they are relevant to interpreting and explaining social phenomena? Should these aspirations be completely dismissed, because they are based on essentialist and orientalist readings?

Before answering, I would lay out first some pros and cons in this regard. As we have just observed, this personal kind of reading runs the risk of replicating and strengthening orientalist stereotypes and, from a practical point of view, also reduces the time to explore other aspects, which may thus end up being interpreted as less relevant. However, there are some factors that go against a straightforward dismissal of this kind of personal interest by the pupils. These are the followings: an increase in motivation fueled by personal involvement and by seeing acknowledged, albeit partially, one's own starting perspective; the occasion to reflect on pupils' misconceptions and update them into feasible knowledge; the observation that, in a perspective of balanced treatment of Japanese and other East-Asian religious traditions, there is no reason to overlook those aspects which can be analyzed from a philosophical, ethical or 'existential' perspective; lastly, the fact that also this latter kind of operation may have an inherent intercultural value.

On the basis of these factors, my answer to the question "should we allow pupils to *learn from* East-Asian religious traditions?" is a qualified "yes", and this qualification lies in the skill and experience of the teacher to gauge, on the basis of his/her actual context, whether or not the choice of having pupils learning *from religion*, instead of learning *from the study of religion\s*, is more detrimental or advantageous. For example, how much this kind of approach would draw resources (time, energy, attention) from other aspects of RE? As a rule of the thumb, I would recommend teachers not to proactively encourage this kind of approach. Should the teacher decide also to explore these territories, maybe in cooperation with a colleague who is

teaching ethics or philosophy, I would propose some observations and recommendations. These are nothing but a rough sketch of a discussion that would deserve much more space. However, they also imply a gradual shift in the fuzzy border between epistemological frames, from the frame of the study of religion\s to the frames of comparative intellectual history and of comparative or intercultural philosophy.[6] Therefore, I will limit myself to just a few practical remarks.

In principle, there is no reason to avoid dealing with very specific examples (e.g. the idea of *shikantaza*, 'just sitting', of Sōtō founder Dōgen, 1200-1253) or very broad generalizations (e.g. the concepts of *dao* or *michi* in China and in Japan) of what a religious tradition may feature in terms of ethical, metaphysical, epistemological, ontological questions and answers. However, especially if these features are extrapolated out of their cultural, social, and historical contexts to be compared, analyzed and discussed in a different context, the 'artificiality' and the purposes of the whole operation must be explicit. This means that pupils must be conscious that we have chosen and created *ad hoc* these particular examples or broad generalizations because they are relevant to interests which are different from the interests of the study of religion\s. If these latter may be roughly stated as "how can we make sense of these phenomena that historically have been defined as religions?", the aims of this new operation may be: "what can we learn of relevant to our present needs from these phenomena?". This means, furthermore, that pupils must be conscious that both specific examples and broad generalizations cannot be valid in the whole tradition and throughout its entire historical development. This applies even more to the interpretations of these specific examples or broad generalizations that might take place in class.

Let us recall the example from Erricker (§ 4.4.3), in which a pupil interprets an image of *Śiva naṭarāja* as "a symbol to show that my life is always changing" (Erricker 2010, 104). If a pupil were to ask whether this statement is 'Hinduist' or not, the teacher should refrain from giving an answer, explaining that it is not the scholar's job to attest to the 'authenticity' or orthodoxy of a tradition; Then instead the teacher should take the occasion to engage a discussion on the dynamics of change, development and definition of what is orthodoxy and heterodoxy within a tradition. Keeping on with the same example, I propose that, differently from Erricker, a similar statement from a pupil is relevant to RE's purposes only insofar as it shows how religious ideas can change and evolve, and how the historical-cultural contexts strongly influence this process. In the example at hand, the various layers of meaning of *Śiva naṭarāja* (cosmological, mythi-

6 On this regards cf., among others, Kasulis 2002; Pasqualotto 2008; Ghilardi 2012; Ma, Van Brakel 2016.

cal, eschatological, artistic) are 'modernized', de-mythologized and translated to a personal plane of reference ("my life is always changing"), a process consistent with many other contemporary developments in religions. Similarly, questions and discussions concerning metaphysical issues such as the existence or not of super-empirical realities are not proper, as they will involve a breach of the principle of methodological agnosticism.

Specific examples or broad generalization may well be compared with others coming from other historical and cultural contexts. The more the lessons shift towards these kind of topics, the more it should be emphasized that we are moving from a study of socio-cultural phenomena, such as the study of religion\s, to a comparative study of intellectual history or, even more abstractly, to a practice of intercultural philosophy, which has its own presuppositions, methods, aims and limitations, even if fruitful links can be made with the study of religion\s. Concerning the topic of East-Asian religious traditions, and their philosophical relevance, I would recommend taking insights from the ideas of Kasulis (2002) as a possible example of theoretical and methodological guidance. I choose this author in particular because of his relevance in terms of intercultural education.[7] To substantiate my claim I need to give a sketchy account of his study.

Kasulis' basic assumptions and argumentation are as follows: every human being can relate with the world in a variety of ways, but only certain ones come to be acknowledged as rational or persuasive, not because of an intrinsic degree of truth or correctness, but because of cultural, social and historical contexts, and it is the persistence through inter-generational transmissions of these ways of relating to the world that sanctions their cogency. Changes of paradigms, of course, may well happen, but are long processes. How many modalities of relation with the world may exist? We cannot know. Kasulis, throughout his career as a scholar of Japanese thought, identifies a recurring pattern that he calls "intimacy". In this pattern of thinking, things and humans exist in a situation of internal relationship, that is, the existence of one term of the relation ontologically influences the other term. On the basis of this elementary scheme, a coherent series of epistemological, metaphysical, aesthetical, political and ethical approaches emerges. In the case of epistemology, to know an object from the point of view of intimacy implies being in a relation of intimate relationship with it. For instance, in order to know what clay is, one should become a potter, not a geologist. It implies practical apprenticeship under a master, not study from books. To gauge whether a certain potter knows adequately about clay, one has to be a potter himself. It is, therefore, an esoteric form of knowl-

7 For a discussion of Kasulis's intercultural relevance see Lapis 2015.

edge, limited only to those who have undergone similar training and similar experiences. Kasulis tries to explain the difficulties and that feeling of puzzlement we may experience in trying to make sense of different ways of behaving or reasoning, such as those we can find in Japanese culture, by pointing to the fact that our (modern, Euro-American) pattern of thinking of reference, which he calls "integrity", is based on very different premise. In this pattern of thinking, things are instead externally related and thus mutually independent. From an integrity perspective, then, it is the geologist who knows best clay, and his knowledge can be publicly verified by means of e.g. empirical experiment, performed by whatever person, provided that s/he has the right instructions.

Notwithstanding the declared heuristic and construed nature of the two devices of intimacy and integrity, Kasulis's approach has its shortcomings, as it runs the risk of excessive simplification, essentialization and de-historification of Japan and of the too general notion of 'modern West', as he calls it. However, I think that it is still highly valuable, because Kasulis does not simply equate Japan with intimacy and 'modern West' with integrity, but instead he affirms that these two patterns can be found in both regions. The difference is that those patters are alternatively foregrounded or put in the background, in terms of recognized importance, accordingly to cultural contexts. That is, also a 'modern westerner' may reason from a perspective of intimacy, but for highly relevant matter s/he probably would resort to the integrity perspective. As a matter of fact, when Kasulis explains the pattern of intimacy with practical examples, he does not resort to images of 'mystical', 'oriental' masters initiating their disciple through esoteric devices, but uses examples common to our (modern, Euro-American) experience. For instance, a panel of judges evaluating an athletic or artistic performance. We may do not know how they reached their verdict, since we do not have the intimate knowledge of that discipline, but we usually consider the agreement among different and experienced judges, if not 100% objective, at least reliable.

Why Kasulis's approach is relevant to our discussion? I think that he offers a general framework for intercultural comparison between traditions of thought – but not limited to this – highly consistent with what we have discussed so far. In a situation when pupils confront themselves with 'exotic' ways of thinking and behaving such as those of East-Asian traditions, there are two fundamental risks. First, to look for an *ex oriente lux* which, we have seen in § 3.3, may well reveal itself as modern Euro-American influences veiled by an 'oriental' aura. Secondly, they may essentialize East-Asian religious traditions as the completely opposite of Euro-American religious traditions. As a matter of fact, we explored in § 3.2 how certain aspects of East-Asian traditions may represent a challenge to modern, Christiano-centric

paradigms. However, Kasulis's approach reminds us to look back to our own cultural and historical background and see if and how similar topics – multiple religious affiliations, the body, esoteric knowledge, quest for practical benefits – can be found also in our cultural history and ask ourselves how and why these came to be seen as being not relevant compared to other aspects.

In a few words, Kasulis approach may help us in understanding the cultural 'Other' while at the same time shading different light on ourselves. This means recognizing the implicit, often unconscious, assumptions and paradigms. It means also addressing the complexities, the differences, and the similarities, along with the acknowledgment not only of the possibilities, but also of the limitations of intercultural interactions, which may be engendered by the difficulties of harmonizing opposite implicit basic assumptions such as those of *intimacy* and *integrity*.

5.6 Final Conclusions

In the introduction of the present work we hypothesized that the theme of Japanese and other East-Asian religious traditions could be relevant in analyzing established non-confessional RE, such as the English one, in order to reveal possible hidden spots, unquestioned assumptions and problematic areas. Consequently, this work would represent also a contribution to the field of SoR-based RE, especially for what concerns normative research, as the arguments provided would further corroborate the underlying principles of SoR-based RE, discussing in detail its aims and adding new perspectives.

By employing certain topics of Japanese and other East-Asian religious traditions as a sort of litmus test, we found that English RE, in its various articulations (general frameworks, single approaches) still present several shortcomings that, from the point of view of the study of religion\s, hinder a well-rounded understanding of the complex phenomena called religions. These problems pertain to various levels: theoretical-conceptual, content-related and educational. At the theoretical level, there are still concepts of religion leaning too much towards a modern-Protestant idea of religions as coherent set of beliefs and practices, as in the case of the rational-theological approach. Such beliefs and practices are still taken as main indicators of the peculiar 'essence' of that religious tradition. We have seen, for example, that the existential-instrumental approach still cannot avoid treating East-Asian religious traditions as essentially existential/philosophical, while other traditions are treated as more bent towards 'doctrine' or 'practice'. This, of course, is reflected also in the choice of contents or the ways of representing the religious traditions. Consequently, in the case of East-Asian traditions, these

do not go beyond a clichéd focus on doctrinal issues such as *karma*, *saṃsāra*, *trimūrti* or practices such as meditation, ignoring many other important aspects of East-Asian religions or anything that cannot be framed within the world religious paradigm, such as the close interrelationship between Shintō and Buddhism, both historically and in terms of contemporary practice. What is completely ignored, in terms of contents – a shortcoming which indeed can explain a good deal of this situation – are all those historical and cultural dynamics that brought 'religion' to be uncritically considered a universal trait of mankind. We have seen how East-Asian religions have been directly involved in these same cultural dynamics.

A process which, furthermore, greatly influenced the way in which these traditions have been hetero- and self-represented in modern and contemporary times. The paradigm of religion as mainly an individual, inner, intellectual or existential issue – and the supposed universality thereof – influences RE not only at the level of contents, but even in its educational perspective. We have seen how the spiritual/personal development of the pupil, the so-called 'learning from religion', is unproblematically taken as an aim of RE. Once scrutinized through the lens of contemporary research on religions, and East-Asian religions in particular, this educational aim shows its shortcomings and its non-universal genealogy, revealing how it would elicit instead a perpetuation of orientalist stereotypes.

With this I do not intend that nothing valuable can be learn from English RE. We have seen how certain ideas from the interpretative approach, such as the three-layered matrix of representation or the insight that exploring others' worldviews may open new perspectives on one's own worldview, are extremely relevant to our purposes. Similarly, the emphasis on personal involvement of the pupils warns us that RE probably will not works properly if engaged as a totally distant, 'cold' discipline.

The conclusions on English RE that we reached, through the lens of Japanese and other East-Asian religions, are, as we have seen, mostly critical. Thus, it clearly seems that the main contribution that this 'lens' can offer to the construction of a SoR-based RE can be defined as a 'critical/deconstructionist corrective'. That is, the relevance of the theme of Japanese and other East-Asian religions consists in assuring that, in a SoR-based RE, all the complexities, the theoretical problems and the historical entanglements which are necessarily involved in dealing with 'religion' and 'religions' are duly considered. This theme of East-Asian traditions provides several interesting examples through which we can fruitfully explore all those topics coming from the critical/deconstructionist trend of the study of religion\s: the Protestant paradigm of religion, the importance of those aspects obscured by this paradigm (multiple affiliations, the corporeal dimension, the issues of power), and other pivotal issues such as the his-

torical-intellectual relationships between religion, colonialism, Orientalism, and Occidentalism.

At the same time, the topic of Japanese and other East-Asian religions offers an occasion to reflect on how we may deal constructively with religion in RE, and how we may think of an approach as inclusive as possible of all those complexities and problems highlighted by the 'deconstructive' approach. Moreover, this topic has revealed an interesting relevance and usefulness to intercultural educational aims. The model discussed in this chapter, basically, tries to give a practical form to all these observations. Let us summarize it in its key points.

The axiological/educational framework, i.e. the choice concerning which values, and which dimensions of social and cultural life should pupils be introduced to, is characterized as intercultural and citizenship education. This means that learning *about religions*, *from the study of religion\s*, and, in some case, also *from religions*, is meant to foster in pupils the competences of understanding cultural complexities, of developing a constructive attitude to it, and of being critically self-conscious of both other culture and one's own cultural background. This latter competence also entails being vigilant on one's own cultural positioning, biases and various dynamics of representations of both self and others. Concerning the competence of critical understanding of the self, a key point here is the capacity of foregrounding one's own underlying value framework that should form the conscious ground on which cultural negotiation should take place. A key reference for this axiological/educational aspect of the model is the 2018 CoE *Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture*.

The epistemological dimension of the model aligns itself with the axiological/educational framework by emphasizing the cultural positionality of the model itself, which works on self-conscious modern and Euro-American assumptions. On the base of these latter, in fact, 'religion' is explicitly adopted as a problematic concept and as a heuristic tool. The 'genealogical/deconstructive' epistemological side of this model aims at highlighting the cultural and historical entanglements of the concept of religion, which are considered an important component of the knowledge represented by study of religion\s. The 'constructive' epistemological dimension aims at offering an open-ended definition of 'religion' and of related terms, of which it tries to grasp the specificity while leaving at the same time the possibility of embracing the highest empirical variety possible. Both sides push to go beyond the limitations of a modern-Protestant paradigm. The 'genealogical/deconstructive' side is related, among other things, to the educational aim of fostering critical skill of understanding of the self. The 'constructive' side is related to the educational aim of providing tools to deal with cultural complexities.

The above-mentioned two dimensions can be articulated in actual practice following some general guidelines. For example, pupils

should be aware that they will not be provided with 'complete, absolute knowledge' but with 'maps' which help them to navigate between 'religion' and 'religions'. The narratives and representations provided by these maps should feature aspects useful to deconstruct partial or stereotypical images of religions, and permit the construction of a well-rounded, reasonable idea of how religion, religions and representations of religions work at various levels: of the individual, of the membership group(s), and of traditions at large. Enough space should be allowed to modern and contemporary contexts, avoiding the 'antiquarian trap' of focusing on the beginning or of despising those creative elaborations which take place e.g. within contemporary spirituality. Any kind of teaching methodology can be fruitfully applied. The only possible caveat is to avoid excessively free (i.e not-guided) explorative activities but to provide instead guidance and well-selected or crafted resources. The reason for this is that the possibility of encountering partial or stereotypical information, especially on East-Asian religions, is high, even from supposedly reliable sources.

Concerning the learning dimension of the model, I have focused on the possible implicit expectations and misconceptions that pupils may have. These can be linked to stereotyped ideas of what 'religion' is and what 'religions' are. Furthermore, these expectations and 'misconceptions' may also be connected with the personal attitude of the pupil, which may be religiously or anti-religiously connotated. For this reason, the importance of propaedeutically discussing the principle of methodological agnosticism is stressed. A slightly similar issue is the expectations and motivations about learning from religion, especially when exotic and appealing topics such as Japanese and other East-Asian religions are involved. I have suggested that to straightforwardly dismiss these expectations may be more detrimental than useful, and suggested that a careful approach, based on the methods of intercultural philosophy, may be taken into consideration. In particular, the work of Kasulis (2002) is suggested as it is highly consistent with the intercultural aims of this model.

There are some aspects of this study that should have deserved much more attention, while other relevant topics have not been dealt with. This provides us with indication for future investigations. For example, a much more in-depth discussion of contemporary transformations of Japanese and other East-Asian religions would surely have benefited the general argument. How have these traditions taken roots in Euro-American contexts in terms of institutions? How is this affecting the way these traditions are represented and practiced? How are East-Asian religious institutions interacting with other traditions on topics of global relevance, such as economy or ecological crisis? In which ways do contemporary spiritual seekers draw creatively from the cultural resources represented by these religions? How is the knowledge of these traditions shared and negotiated, for

example through the Internet? More importantly, how may all of this affect the expectations and misconceptions of pupils in RE, and how could this situation be constructively exploited?

Other shortcomings refer to the limitation to the single case study of English RE. Analyzing the situation of other non-confessional RE would have brought further interesting insights. How is the 'life-questions pedagogy' of Swedish RE actually employed in regard to Japanese and other East-Asian religions? How does this affect the conceptualization and representation of religion in general and East-Asian traditions in particular? Which didactic and educational results are expected? Apart from Swedish RE and other non-confessional RE which are supposed to be based on the study of religion\s, such as the Danish or Estonian RE, there is also the interesting case of France. In this case there is no provision of a separate school subject, but the topic of the *faits religieux* is to be explored in other subjects, such as geography or history. How is or could be the topic of East-Asian religions engaged in such a situation? What would be the advantages or disadvantages? Another interesting venue of investigation is represented by RE-related discourses and practices at the European or even international level. This is particularly relevant from the perspective of a SoR-based RE, which aspire to go beyond the individual State-religions relationships and their repercussions even on non-confessional RE. In this case we do not have only supranational recommendations such as the *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools* of the OSCE/ODIHR (2007) or the *Signposts: Policy and Practice for Teaching about Religions and Non-religious Worldviews in Intercultural Education* of the CoE (2014). There are also a variety of individual, grass-roots practical initiatives or research projects funded by programs of the European Commission such as Erasmus+ or Horizon.[8] Outside Europe, interesting developments in RE are taking place in Quebec, the US and South Africa. Finally, other stimulating inquiry could involve the analysis of how Japanese and other East-Asian religions are engaged as a school subject in those contexts in which they do not represent a cultural 'other', but instead belong to what is perceived as the mainstream tradition, i.e. in Japan, in China or in India.

From the point of view of didactics, further insights would have been gained, especially for what concerns the teaching and learn-

8 On a side note, the Author has been actively involved in Erasmus + funded projects aimed at providing European upper-secondary school teachers with tools and resources to carry on lessons based on topics on study of religions, with the objective of improving intercultural competences. These projects are *IERS – Intercultural Education through Religious Studies* (`https://iers.unive.it/`) and *SORAPS – Study of Religions Against Prejudices & Stereotypes* (`https://soraps.unive.it/`). These projects would probably have been developed differently had the present research been carried out in advance.

ing dimensions, if the issue of docimology had also been considered, i.e. the study of the theory and practice of evaluation and assessment (tests, oral exams, collective project evaluation, etc.). However, this limitation is also due to the explicit theoretical approach of the present work, which indeed aims at providing the general framework in which elaborating and testing future practical developments. In this regard, a logical next step should be the assessment of the quality and feasibility of our model through the development of new syllabi, resources, activity plans, evaluation grids, and so on. These should be then tested in classroom, taking into consideration not only the age of pupils but – if applicable – the typology of the school and the connection with other subjects. Various types of data from pupils should be collected, such as interaction in class, interviews, performance, and so on. Issues such as expectations, motivations, personal evaluations should be considered. Cooperation with other teachers would be surely of importance, as it would help to shed light on another issue that has not been dealt with, i.e. which kind of training teachers should undergo to properly and fruitfully carry on SoR-based RE classes.

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This work addresses the theme of Japanese religions in order to rethink theories and practices pertaining to the field of Religious Education. Through an interdisciplinary framework that combines the study of religions, didactics and intercultural education, this book puts the case study of Religious Education in England in front of two 'challenges' in order to reveal hidden spots, tackle unquestioned assumptions and highlight problematic areas. These 'challenges', while focusing primarily on Japanese religions, are addressed within the wider contexts of other East Asian traditions and of the modern historical exchanges with the Euro-American societies. As result, a model for teaching Japanese and other East Asian religions is discussed and proposed in order to fruitfully engage issues such as orientalism, occidentalism, interculturality and critical thinking.

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